

WASH

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

3 chapters on safe access to WASH facilities, gender justice and menstrual health

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WOMEN ENGAGE for a Common Future

THREE CHAPTERS WITH RECOMMENDATIONS ON SAFE ACCESS TO WASH FACILITIES, GENDER JUSTICE IN THE WASH SECTOR AND MENSTRUAL POVERTY AND PRODUCTS

The recommendations contain information on actions promoting awareness empowerment and community involvement in ensuring equitable access to WASH facilities.
The information will be used for implementing mandatory lectures for action and improving the situation on WASH and Menstrual Health poverty for public sectors employees, students and different relevant stakeholders in the students and different relevant stakeholders in the Balkans and Eastern European region.



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Women Engage for a Common Future

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SAFE ACCESS TO WASH FACILITIES

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Introduction

Ensuring equitable access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities is fundamental to promoting public health, dignity, and gender equality worldwide. Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene not only improves individual well-being but also contributes to community development and economic prosperity. However, disparities in access to WASH facilities persist, particularly affecting marginalised groups. The global community has set itself the goal to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all as the sixth sustainable development goal (SDG). Moreover, initiatives such as the Water Framework Directive (WFD) focus on ensuring water and health for all wildlife and human needs, acting against pollution. The following action recommendations build on these global Goals, specifying enhancements to accessibility, inclusivity, and safety of public WASH facilities in the Balkan region. By advocating for infrastructure enhancements, awareness programs, community engagement initiatives, maintenance and cleanliness improvements, enhanced security measures, and improved lighting and visibility, we aim to create environments that cater to the diverse needs of all individuals, ensuring that no one is left behind in accessing essential WASH services.

Recommendations for action

Infrastructure enhancements

Infrastructural barriers are a significant obstacle to the accessibility of WASH facilities for all in each community. It is often overlooked that there are specific infrastructural barriers for various, especially marginalised, groups in society. Thus, one must look into the gender-specific, generational, and disability-specific needs of each community to ensure that WASH facilities are designed to address the unique needs and safety concerns of each community.

Overall, we first recommend doing thorough assessments of existing facilities to identify barriers and then fixing or even upgrading them for better accessibility.
Moreover, it is very important to construct the infrastructure in a manner that reduces the risk of natural disasters enhanced by climate change. In the Balkan region, such hazards include fires, floods and earthquakes.

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Gender-Specific infrastructural accessibility features

Women and gender minorities must be guaranteed privacy and security in WASH facilities. Furthermore, facilities should be gender-friendly. Women and girls in all their diversity will need WASH facilities for menstrual care and other procedures that put them in more vulnerable positions than men. **Overall, the placement, privacy, and security of the WASH facility must be evaluated and fixed correctly as soon as possible.** Specific strategies and more specific recommendations will follow in the next several paragraphs.

Accessibility features for people with disabilities

Since advancing accessibility for people with disabilities is, first and foremost, an infrastructural issue, the following aspects should be considered when enhancing the infrastructure of WASH facilities: **Install ramps, handrails, and wide doorways to accommodate individuals with disabilities and ensure overall easy access.** For example, ramps should not be too steep or unreachable. The following recommendations are more ways to ensure inclusivity for disabled people in WASH facilities.

Awareness Programs

Raising awareness in society about WASH facilities is crucial to their advancement. Moreover, awareness empowers people to advocate for their rights to safe and equitable access to WASH facilities. Such measures foster a culture of awareness and accountability towards gender equality.

1. Develop educational campaigns, such as community outreach, school programs, and media campaigns, to promote understanding of WASH rights.
2. Conduct educational campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of maintaining clean WASH facilities and proper hygiene practices.
3. Maintenance training for facility managers and staff on proper maintenance techniques and hygiene standards.

Educated communities are better equipped to take care of the facilities and ensure their sustainability. The training sessions also help to build local capacity and promote healthy hygiene practices.

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Best practices for awareness programs in the Balkan region:

Community Education and Training in Kosovo*: In Kosovo*, education and training sessions are provided to community members on the importance of WASH, facility maintenance, and hygiene practices. These sessions are led by trained local facilitators and aim to increase awareness and knowledge within the community [1].

Community engagement

Implementing these recommendations will allow each community to identify issues early on and adjust in a timely manner. Moreover, user satisfaction and facility effectiveness will improve. In addition, by implementing these community engagement initiatives, organizations in the Balkan region can ensure that WASH facilities are designed and managed to truly meet the community's needs. At the same time, ensuring that facilities are inclusive, culturally appropriate, and sustainable in the long term.

1. Involve communities in decision-making processes for improved facility design.
2. Inclusive planning and designing by involving community members, especially women and marginalized groups.
3. Feedback mechanisms of users to engage actively in bettering the facilities.
4. Organize regular community clean-up days to foster community awareness and engagement for maintenance and understanding of WASH facilities.
5. Organize topic-related activities during UN days such as MHM, World Environment Day, World Clean-up Day, Global Handwashing Day, World Toilet Day, and World Water Day.

Best practices for community engagement initiatives in the Balkan region:

Bosnia and Herzegovina's Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project: This project involves local communities in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of rural water supply and sanitation systems. Community members participate in identifying needs, designing solutions, and overseeing construction [1].

[1[based on the project partners experience

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North Macedonian participatory design workshops: In North Macedonia, participatory design workshops were conducted in several municipalities (Veles, Kumanovo, Kisela Voda, Resen and Tetovo) to involve community members in the planning and design of new WASH facilities. These workshops included activities such as mapping, model building, and prioritisation exercises [1].

Feedback Mechanisms in Albania: In Albania, feedback mechanisms such as suggestion boxes, community meetings, and digital platforms have been implemented to gather input from users about the functionality and safety of WASH facilities. These mechanisms allow for continuous community input and timely adjustments [1].

Integrated and transboundary river basin cooperation in Ukraine and Moldova: The Water Cooperation for the Dniester River showcases the crucial role of civil society and feminist organisations in water diplomacy [1].

Maintenance and cleanliness improvements

Regular maintenance is crucial for ensuring the cleanliness and functionality of public WASH facilities, especially in the long term. Emphasising the importance of consistent upkeep not only enhances hygiene standards but also promotes a positive user experience, contributing to overall satisfaction and well-being.

1. Emphasise the importance of regular maintenance for cleanliness.
2. Invest in durable materials and long-lasting infrastructure to ensure less maintenance effort
3. Conduct regular inspections and cleaning to ensure facilities are clean, safe, and well-maintained by:
4. Establishing routine schedules (a checklist with maintenance tasks)
5. Hiring professional cleaning services
6. Ensuring the availability of hygiene supplies such as soap, toilet paper, hand sanitiser, and menstrual hygiene products, especially in schools and municipal and public buildings.
7. Ensure that facilities are stocked with essential hygiene supplies such as soap, toilet paper, and menstrual hygiene products.

8. Develop an emergency response plan to quickly address urgent issues such as plumbing failures or sanitation hazards.
9. Install user feedback mechanisms as a WASH facility monitoring system.

Best practices for maintenance and cleanliness improvements in the Balkan region:

WSSP program in the Balkans: This program, which takes place in many rural schools in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, has advocated for the improvement of WASH facilities. One aspect they emphasise is the implementation of supplies such as soap, toilet paper and menstrual hygiene products [2].

Enhanced security measures

Advocating for increased security features like surveillance cameras and emergency systems.

Best practices for enhanced security measures in the Balkan region:

Unfortunately, we were not able to find best practice examples for the security measures recommendation.

Existing initiatives and programs on a global scale

The following initiatives combat the issue of accessibility on a global scale or in regions outside the Balkans. These can be seen as further examples that can inspire solution design and implementation in the Balkan region. Although the focus might differ due to the region's specific community needs, it is necessary to examine other best practices as well to ensure the smooth implementation of one's activities. Especially when it comes to WASH facilities, it is essential to keep in mind that one place's best solution might not be that of another place; this is the case when comparing the Balkan region to others, but also when comparing different places within the Balkans. When examining best practices, rather than copying them to your region, look for how other regions implemented the solutions best suited to your situation and community.

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1. Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Campaign) - India: Launched in 2014, this initiative focuses on improving sanitation and cleanliness, including access to public toilets. It has led to the construction of millions of toilets across the country, significantly enhancing sanitation facilities [3].
2. Water For Women Fund - Australia: This program supports projects that aim to improve water, sanitation, and hygiene practices, mainly focusing on gender equality and social inclusion. It has funded various initiatives promoting safe access to WASH facilities in the Asia-Pacific region [4].
3. UNICEF's WASH Strategy involves communities in designing water supply systems tailored to local needs and promotes gender equality by integrating menstrual hygiene management in school WASH programs. Moreover, it works on capacity building for the government and other stakeholders on WASH rights and sustainability [5].
4. UNICEF WASH in Schools Program in Madagascar supported WASH programs at five pilot schools with the participation of 1,315 female students. Furthermore, provided training to teachers and students on water conservation, environmental education, and menstrual health/hygiene [6].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recommendations outlined in this letter document are essential steps towards increasing safe access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) facilities for non-male genders all, with a focus on gender-based solutions for disabled people and minors' needs. By focusing on infrastructure enhancements, awareness programs, community engagement initiatives, maintenance and cleanliness improvements, enhanced security measures, and improved lighting and visibility, we can create inclusive and secure environments that cater to the diverse needs of women and marginalized groups. These actions not only address the physical infrastructure requirements but also promote awareness, empowerment, and community involvement in ensuring equitable access to WASH facilities. By advocating for gender-sensitive facility design, educational campaigns on WASH rights, community-led decision-making processes, regular maintenance practices, enhanced security features, and improved lighting conditions, we can foster a culture of inclusivity and safety for all individuals using public WASH facilities.

[3]https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/swachh-bharat-abhiyan-clean-india-mission
[4] https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/index.aspx
[5]https://www.unicef.org/documents/unicef-strategy-water-sanitation-and-hygiene-2016-2030
[6]https://www.unicef.org/madagascar/en/programme/wash

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GENDER JUSTICE IN THE WASH SECTOR

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Introduction

In the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector, gender equity is not just a moral imperative but a practical necessity for promoting inclusivity, equality, and empowerment for all. Recognising the pivotal role of gender equality in fostering a sustainable and impactful WASH sector, it is essential to prioritise inclusivity and equality across all levels and facets of the workplace. By championing initiatives that promote diversity, respect, and fairness, we can cultivate a working environment that not only advances gender equality but also drives positive social change and improves the overall effectiveness of WASH programs.

Gender disparities in the WASH sector can significantly impact the accessibility and quality of services provided, especially for women and girls who often bear the brunt of inadequate WASH facilities. [1] Ensuring gender equity involves addressing systemic barriers, empowering women in leadership roles, and integrating gender perspectives into all WASH policies and practices. By doing so, we not only enhance the sector's operational efficiency but also contribute to broader developmental goals such as health, education, and economic growth.

To achieve gender justice in the WASH sector, comprehensive strategies must be implemented, including targeted actions, continuous monitoring, and a commitment to ongoing learning and adaptation. This document outlines key recommendations for fostering gender equality and creating a more inclusive and effective WASH sector for all.

Current state assessment

- Primary sectors and professions represented in the WASH field

These sectors and professions collaborate to address challenges related to safe drinking water, hygiene, and sanitation. Their collective efforts are particularly crucial in the Balkan region, where they focus on improving access to these necessities in rural areas and other underserved communities.

  - Engineering: Professionals in engineering play a crucial role in designing, constructing, and maintaining water and sanitation infrastructure. They ensure access to clean water and proper sanitation by developing innovative solutions to meet the needs of various communities, especially in challenging environments.

[1] based on partner's experience

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- **Service providers:** Individuals working directly in service provision are responsible for the operation and maintenance of water supply systems, sanitation facilities, and hygiene services. They ensure the consistent delivery of these essential services to communities, addressing both urban and rural needs.
- **Education and Training:** Educators and trainers are essential in raising awareness about proper hygiene practices, sanitation, and the importance of clean water. They develop and deliver educational programs and materials to communities, schools, and other institutions to promote sustainable WASH practices.
- **Policy-Making and Governance:** Policy-makers within governmental departments and organisations contribute to shaping regulations, policies, and initiatives that promote water safety, sanitation, and hygiene practices. Their work ensures that WASH strategies are integrated into broader development goals and that there is adequate funding and support for WASH projects.
- **Community Engagement and advocacy:** Professionals in this sector work closely with local communities to understand their needs and preferences, ensuring that WASH initiatives are culturally appropriate and community-driven. They also advocate for the rights to clean water and sanitation at local, national, and international levels.
- **Health and Social Sciences:** Experts in health and social sciences research the impacts of WASH conditions on public health and social well-being. They provide evidence-based recommendations to improve WASH services and address issues such as waterborne diseases and the social implications of inadequate sanitation.

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- **Distribution of gender identities among employees**

The available data indicate that the region is characterised by patriarchal gender norms, which historically have led to disparities in employment opportunities between men and women [1]. Despite efforts made to promote gender equality, challenges persist in changing traditional mentalities towards gender roles. The response rate of recent surveys inquiring about the gender identity of employees in Albania and Serbia indicated that 82%-92% of the participants were male [2]. This shows that the WASH sector remains highly male-dominated. In North Macedonia, the survey showed a smaller disparity between genders in participation, with 52% of the participants being female and 48% being male [2]. Moreover, 68% of participants in Albania admitted that they had not received any training on gender justice, indicating the need for knowledge sharing [2].

- **Gender disparities across different roles**

The available data highlights significant gender disparities across different roles in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) jobs in the Balkan region. Women face considerable challenges in accessing paid work due to traditional norms and a lack of care services, contributing to a regional gender gap in labour force participation of 22.5 percentage points. Women predominantly bear the burden of unpaid work in households, which impacts their participation in paid employment. Cultural norms that promote a traditional division of labour further exacerbate these disparities. Although there has been some progress in female representation in legislative branches and private-sector management, women's participation in executive decision-making roles remains significantly lower than men's across regional economies. Recent surveys indicate that the small proportion of women working in the WASH sector (10-20%) highlights unequal structures and opportunities [2]. In the case of Albania's survey, this figure goes up to 43%, highlighting an increasing trend [2]. Specifically, around 10% of female participants regularly experience discrimination, and approximately 20% report a lack of inclusive decision-making in their organisations [2]. Moreover, 43% of Albanian participants admit that there are no gender justice policies [2].

[2] Based on this project's conducted survey in the Balkan Region

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These disparities underscore the need for targeted efforts to address gender inequalities and promote inclusivity within the WASH sector in the Balkan region. By implementing strategies that challenge traditional gender norms, provide support for unpaid care work, and promote female representation in decision-making roles, we can work towards a more equitable and inclusive WASH sector. The following recommendations will provide guidance for these changes.

Recommendations for action

Organisational policies and culture

Leadership representation

Ensuring balanced representation across genders at both the general employee level and in leadership roles involves assessing gender distribution to identify any disparities and promote equality. This evaluation is crucial for creating a diverse and inclusive work environment that reflects the broader society and provides equal opportunities for all individuals.
Balanced representation across genders fosters diversity of thought, enhances decision-making processes, and promotes a more inclusive organisational culture. It helps prevent biases, encourages innovation, and reflects a fair and equitable workplace environment.

1. Organisations can conduct regular gender audits to analyse the gender composition of their workforce at all levels, including leadership positions.
2. Organisations should set binding targets for gender balance and implement strategies to address any imbalances, such as targeted recruitment efforts or leadership development programs for underrepresented genders.
3. Organisations can work towards achieving a more equitable representation across all roles.

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Inclusive Policies and Practices

In order to reach gender equality in employment, and especially in WASH jobs, it is crucial to establish and maintain policies and practices that are inclusive. These policies and practices will ensure that the needs, safety and equal opportunity of all employees will be met.

- Flexible Work Arrangements: Offering flexible work hours, remote work options, and part-time opportunities to accommodate diverse needs, especially for those with caregiving responsibilities.
- Parental Leave: Implementing equitable parental leave policies that support all parents, regardless of gender, to balance work and family responsibilities.
- Anti-Discrimination Policies: Enforce strict anti-discrimination policies and create a safe environment where employees can report discrimination or harassment without fear of retaliation.
- Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs: Developing mentorship and sponsorship programs to support the career advancement of underrepresented genders and provide them with opportunities to develop leadership skills.
- Training and Development: Providing regular training on unconscious bias, diversity, and inclusion to educate employees and leaders about the importance of gender equality and how to contribute to a supportive workplace culture.

Cultural Change and Advocacy

Equality can only be truly achieved if the culture of a society values inclusivity and diversity. This can be achieved by continuously implementing advocacy for equality and against discrimination. Employers and organisations can implement the following recommendations and foster a supportive environment that not only advances gender equality but also enhances overall organisational performance and employee satisfaction.

1. **Celebrate Diversity:** Recognise and celebrate diverse cultural and gender-related events to foster a sense of belonging and appreciation among employees.
2. **Employee Resource Groups:** Support the formation of employee resource groups (ERGs) that provide a platform for underrepresented genders to connect, share experiences, and advocate for their needs.
3. **Transparent Communication:** Maintain open and transparent communication about gender equality initiatives and progress to build trust and accountability within the organisation.

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Career advancement opportunities

Ensuring equal opportunities for career growth not only promotes fairness and diversity but also maximises talent retention, engagement, and organisational success. It fosters a culture of inclusivity where individuals are recognised and rewarded based on their skills, performance, and potential rather than gender.

1. **Equal pay:** advancement in career should be paid at the same rate for all genders based on qualifications and merit.
2. **Barriers & Biases:** Identify and address any systemic barriers or biases that may hinder certain genders from progressing in their careers.
3. **Career Growth:** Investigate if all genders have equal opportunities for career growth by examining factors such as promotion rates, access to training and development programs, and mentorship opportunities to ensure fairness and equality in advancement prospects, by:
    a. conducting regular reviews of promotion processes.
    b. providing equal access to training for skill development.
    c. establishing clear pathways for advancement based on performance.
4. **Environment:** Promote a more inclusive and merit-based work environment.
5. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Develop structured mentorship and sponsorship programs that connect employees with experienced leaders who can provide guidance, support, and advocacy. Ensure these programs are accessible to all employees, with a focus on underrepresented genders.
6. **Bias-Free Promotion Processes:** Regularly review promotion criteria and processes to ensure they are transparent, objective, and bias-free. Implement checks and balances to monitor and address any disparities in promotion rates across different genders.
7. **Equal Access to Training and Development:** Provide all employees with equal access to training and development programs. To support continuous skill enhancement and career growth, offer various learning opportunities, including workshops, online courses, and leadership development programs.
8. **Clear Career Pathways:** Establish clear and well-communicated pathways for career advancement within the organisation. Ensure these pathways are based on performance, skills, and potential rather than gender or other non-merit-based factors.
9. **Regular Assessments and Feedback:** Conduct regular assessments of career progression opportunities and solicit feedback from employees on their experiences. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and implement changes to create a more equitable workplace.

10. **Supportive Policies:** Implement policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and parental leave.
11. Diversity and Inclusion Training: Provide ongoing diversity and inclusion training for all employees, particularly those in leadership roles. Educate staff on the importance of gender equality and how to actively contribute to a supportive and equitable workplace.
12. **Monitoring and Reporting:** Establish metrics to monitor the progress of gender equality initiatives related to career advancement. Regularly report on these metrics to maintain transparency and accountability, and to demonstrate the organization's commitment to fostering an inclusive environment.

By implementing these strategies, organizations can create a more inclusive and equitable environment that supports the career advancement of all employees, regardless of gender. This approach not only enhances individual growth and satisfaction but also drives organizational success through a more diverse and engaged workforce.

Workplace culture

Fostering an inclusive workplace culture is essential for a just and productive workspace. Integrating gender justice is essential to create a supportive and equitable environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered. A culture that prioritises inclusivity not only enhances employee morale and engagement but also contributes to organisational success by leveraging diverse perspectives and talents.

1. **Diversity:** Celebrate diversity through events, recognition programs, and communication campaigns to highlight the contributions of all genders.
2. **Safe spaces:** Create safe spaces and forums for open dialogue on gender issues, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected.
3. **Anonymous Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish anonymous surveys, suggestion boxes, and focus groups to regularly gather employee feedback on workplace culture, inclusivity, and gender equality. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and track progress over time.
4. **Unconscious Bias Training:** Implement regular training sessions on unconscious bias, diversity awareness, and inclusive leadership practices. These programs can help employees recognise and address their biases, fostering a more inclusive and respectful work environment.
5. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Encourage inclusive decision-making processes by ensuring diverse representation in leadership and decision-making bodies. Actively seek and consider diverse perspectives when making organisational decisions.

6. **Promote a Collaborative Culture:** Foster a culture of collaboration where diverse viewpoints are valued and respected. Encourage teamwork and open communication to build a more cohesive and inclusive workplace.
7. **Visible Commitment from Leadership:** Ensure that organisational leaders visibly commit to and advocate for gender equality and inclusivity. Leadership should model inclusive behaviour and support initiatives that promote gender justice.
8. **Recognition and Rewards:** Recognise and reward employees who actively contribute to fostering an inclusive workplace culture. Highlighting and celebrating efforts to promote gender justice can motivate others to engage in similar initiatives.
9. **Support Networks and ERGs:** Establish employee resource groups (ERGs) and support networks that provide a platform for underrepresented genders to connect, share experiences, and advocate for their needs. These groups can also offer mentorship and professional development opportunities.
10. **Transparency and Accountability:** Maintain transparency in the organisation's efforts to promote gender equality by regularly reporting on initiatives, progress, and outcomes. Hold individuals and teams accountable for contributing to a more inclusive workplace.
11. **Cultural Celebrations:** Recognise and celebrate diverse cultural and gender-related events. This can foster a sense of belonging and appreciation among employees and promote a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

Training, support, and facilities

Training on gender justice

Providing training programs related to gender justice involves educating employees on topics such as gender equality, unconscious bias, inclusive language, and creating a respectful work environment for all genders. This training is essential to raise awareness, promote understanding, and foster a culture of respect and equality within the workplace. It helps combat stereotypes, biases, and discrimination, promoting diversity and gender equality in the workplace.

1. Organising workshops or seminars on gender sensitivity, diversity inclusion, and unconscious bias training can help employees recognise and address gender-related issues.
2. Providing resources, such as online modules or educational materials.

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Work-life balance support

Ensuring work-life balance support involves assessing the effectiveness of current policies and identifying areas for improvement to better support the diverse needs of all genders. This process aims to ensure that policies are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to the varying work-life demands faced by employees. By creating an environment that supports work-life balance, organisations can improve employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being.

1. **Regular Feedback and Assessment:** Conduct regular surveys, focus groups, and feedback sessions to understand employee needs and assess the effectiveness of existing work-life balance policies. Use this feedback to make data-driven improvements.
2. **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Offer flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting, flextime, compressed workweeks, and job-sharing. Ensure that these options are available to all employees, regardless of gender or role.
3. **Childcare Support:** Provide on-site childcare facilities or partner with local childcare providers to offer subsidised childcare services. Additionally, consider offering childcare vouchers or financial assistance to help employees manage caregiving responsibilities.
4. **Parental Leave Policies:** Implement equitable parental leave policies that support all parents, including extended maternity, paternity, and adoption leave. Encourage a culture where taking parental leave is normalised and supported.
5. **Wellness Programs:** Develop wellness programs that address physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Offer resources such as stress management workshops, fitness classes, mental health support, and counselling services.
6. **Encourage Work-Life Boundaries:** Promote a culture where employees feel comfortable setting boundaries between work and personal life. Encourage practices such as avoiding after-hours emails and respecting time off.
7. **Support for Caregivers:** Recognise the diverse caregiving responsibilities employees may have, including care for elders and caregiving for family members with disabilities. Offer support programs, such as caregiving leave and flexible schedules, to accommodate these responsibilities.
8. **Training for Managers:** Provide training for managers on the importance of work-life balance and how to support their team members in achieving it. Equip managers with the skills to recognise signs of burnout and address work-life balance concerns effectively.

9. **Clear Communication of Policies:** Ensure that all employees are aware of the available work-life balance policies and how to access them. Communicate these policies clearly during onboarding and through regular internal communications.
10 **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Continuously monitor and evaluate the impact of work-life balance initiatives. Use key performance indicators (KPIs) such as employee satisfaction, retention rates, and productivity to assess the success of these programs and identify areas for improvement.

Facilities accessibility

Evaluating workplace facilities for inclusivity involves assessing the accessibility and inclusivity of spaces like restrooms, changing rooms, and showers to ensure they cater to the needs of all genders. By ensuring facilities are inclusive and accessible, organizations foster a culture of equality, diversity, and acceptance that contributes to employee well-being and overall workplace satisfaction.

1. **Conduct Facility Audits:** Regularly audit workplace facilities to assess their inclusivity and accessibility. This includes restrooms, changing rooms, showers, and other private spaces.
2. **Implement Gender-Neutral and Options:** Provide gender-neutral restrooms and changing facilities, in addition to gender-specific ones. Ensure these spaces are well-marked, private, and comfortable for all users.
3. **Ensure Privacy and Safety:** Design facilities to offer maximum privacy and safety. For instance, ensure that stalls in restrooms and changing rooms are fully enclosed and secure.
4. **Clear Signage:** Use clear and inclusive signage to label all facilities. Avoid using gendered symbols and instead opt for neutral or descriptive signs.
5. **Regular Maintenance and Upkeep:** Maintain high standards of cleanliness and functionality in all facilities. Regularly check and promptly address any maintenance issues.
6. **Accessible Facilities:** Ensure that all facilities are accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes providing appropriate fixtures, ramps, and other necessary accommodations.
7. **Inclusive Design Considerations:** When designing or renovating facilities, consider the diverse needs of all employees. Engage with gender inclusivity experts and seek input from employees during the planning stages.
8. **Monitor and Review:** Continuously monitor the use and effectiveness of inclusive facilities. Conduct regular reviews to ensure they meet the evolving needs of the workforce and adjust as necessary.

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Facilities accessibility

Assessing the effectiveness of gender justice initiatives

Assessing the effectiveness of initiatives in fostering inclusivity involves evaluating their impact on promoting diversity, equality, and a supportive work environment. This assessment helps organisations understand what is working well and where improvements are needed to create a more inclusive workplace culture. It is important to ensure that efforts to promote inclusivity are yielding positive results and to identify areas for enhancement.

1. **Employee Surveys and Focus Groups:** Regularly conduct anonymous surveys and focus groups to collect feedback from employees on the effectiveness of gender justice initiatives. This feedback can highlight areas of success and identify where improvements are needed.
2. **Exit interviews:** Conduct exit interviews with departing employees to gather insights on gender-related issues that may have influenced their decision to leave.
3. **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Establish and monitor KPIs related to gender equality, such as gender representation at different levels, promotion rates, and employee satisfaction scores. These metrics provide quantifiable data to assess progress and impact.
4. **Diversity Audits:** Perform periodic diversity audits to evaluate the organisation's policies, practices, and workplace culture. These audits can identify systemic barriers to gender equality and recommend actionable steps for improvement.
5. **Impact Assessments:** Conduct impact assessments of specific initiatives, such as mentorship programs, flexible work arrangements, and diversity training. Evaluate how these initiatives have influenced workplace inclusivity and gender equality.
6. **Employee Resource Groups (ERGs):** Leverage insights from ERGs to understand the unique challenges faced by different gender groups and to gather suggestions for enhancing inclusivity efforts.
7. **Benchmarking:** Compare the organisation's gender equality metrics against industry benchmarks and best practices. This helps to identify gaps and areas where the organisation can learn from others.
8. **Leadership Reviews:** Conduct regular reviews with leadership to discuss the progress of gender equality initiatives and ensure they remain a priority. Leadership commitment is crucial for driving sustained change.

9. **Transparent Reporting:** Maintain transparency by regularly reporting on the progress and outcomes of gender justice initiatives. Share successes and challenges with all employees to foster a sense of collective responsibility and accountability.
10. **Continuous Improvement:** Use the insights gained from assessments to refine and improve gender justice initiatives continually. Adapt strategies based on feedback and changing organisational needs to ensure sustained progress.

Conclusion

Gender equality within the WASH sector is a multifaceted endeavour that requires a comprehensive approach to address the diverse needs and challenges faced by individuals of all genders. By integrating gender equality principles into policies, programs, and facilities, organisations can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that empowers women, men, and gender minorities alike. Prioritizing gender-responsiveness fosters greater participation, leadership, and decision-making opportunities for all individuals. This approach not only enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of WASH programs but also promotes social justice and equity.
Ultimately, by championing gender equality initiatives in the WASH sector, organisations can contribute to a more equitable, just, and thriving society for everyone. Embracing diversity and inclusivity within the WASH sector is not just a moral imperative but also a strategic advantage that drives innovation, improves service delivery, and strengthens community resilience.

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Women Engage for a Common Future
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MENSTRUAL POVERTY AND PRODUCTS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Introduction

Tackling menstrual poverty and promoting menstrual health and hygiene management (MHM) in the Balkans is particularly important as disparities in access to clean water and hygiene exacerbate the challenges women and girls face in managing their periods. Countries in the Balkans, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia, struggle with limited access to quality sanitation facilities and modern reproductive health services. Rural areas in the Balkans often face difficulties in accessing clean water, proper sanitation, and health facilities are burdened by perspectives on women's sexual and reproductive health that promote gender inequality. These factors contribute to inequalities in women's health and highlight the urgent need for comprehensive education, awareness campaigns and policy changes to effectively address reproductive poverty in the Balkan countries.

Current landscape

Menstrual health/hygiene management remains a significant challenge in the Balkans, particularly in rural areas where access to clean water and WASH facilities is limited. Many women and girls face difficulties in using affordable, accessible and quality menstrual products, often resorting to unhygienic alternatives [1]. According to our survey conducted in Albania, half of the respondents did not have access to clean, private, and safe sanitation facilities during their work period [2]. In comparison, 99% of the Albanian respondents have access at home. Disparities in economic status and limited knowledge about menstruation before menarche further exacerbate these issues [3]. The stigma surrounding menstruation and lack of comprehensive education on the topic of menstruation contribute to poor menstrual hygiene practices and negative experiences, such as stress, shame, and fear of leakage or odour both at home, work and school [4]. Half of the Albanian survey respondents reported that they have faced such stigma.

[1] https://borgenproject.org/period-poverty-in-the-balkans/
[2] based on this project's conducted surveys in the Balkan region
[3] ibid.; https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9245245/
[4] based on the partner organisation's experience

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Current landscape

In our recently conducted survey, 43% of the Albanian participants say that they face problems regarding their menstrual practices [2]. In the conducted survey, around 30% mentioned that they cannot freely speak about menstruation and 11% (Serbia) to 50% (Albania) feel stigmatised because of their menstruation [2]. Additionally, around 50% of North Macedonian respondents indicated they cannot access menstrual products during the day at school or work [2]. In North Macedonia, 32% of 567 respondents confirmed that they had used newspapers when menstruating because of a lack of access to proper products [2].
Efforts to combat period poverty in the region involve initiatives to enhance access to clean water, dismantle stigma through awareness campaigns, and advocate for systemic changes in health and education systems [4]. By addressing these challenges, we can improve menstrual health management and overall well-being for women and girls, who make up half of the Balkans' population.

Cost-benefit analysis

There are many different products menstruating people can use. However, they do not all contain the same benefits and risks. The table below describes key differences in using the various products [2].

In summary, reusable menstrual products such as menstrual cups, washable cloth pads, menstrual underwear, and menstrual sponges are environmentally friendly and cost-effective in the long run [2]. They offer comfort, maintain good hygiene with proper care, and contribute significantly less waste than disposable options such as sanitary pads and panty liners [2].

It is in the interest of each menstruating individual to use the healthiest and most comfortable product. However, each must make their own informed decision; we would like to support this by providing the overview below.

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Product / Criteria [5][6][7]	Comfort	Hygiene	Environmental Friendliness	Financial Costs
Menstrual pads (disposable)	Moderate to High	High	Low	Moderate
Tampons (disposable)	High	High	Low	Moderate
Menstrual cups (reusable)	Moderate to High	High	High	Low
Menstrual discs (reusable)	Moderate to High	High	High	Low
Menstrual discs (disposable)	Moderate to High	High	Low	Moderate to High
Washable cloth pads (reusable)	Moderate	Moderate to High	High	Low
Cloth (disposable)	Low to Moderate	Low to Moderate	Moderate	Very Low
Menstrual underwear (reusable)	High	High	High	Low to Moderate
Menstrual sponges (reusable)	Moderate	Moderate to High	High	Low
Toilet paper (disposable)	Low	Low	Low	Very Low
Panty liners (disposable)	Moderate to High	Moderate to High	Low	Low to Moderate
No products (free bleeding)	Low	Low	High	Very Low

[5] https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/whr.2021.0131
[6] https://iwaponline.com/washdev/article/13/7/494/95798/Building-a-business-case-for-workplace-menstrual
[7] https://www.globalwaters.org/sites/default/files/cba_learning_brief_3-15-2022.pdf

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Recommendations for action

Provide facilities and access for menstrual care and menstrual products

Providing access to menstrual care and products is an essential aspect of equity and inclusion of menstruating individuals in each society. It is important that adequate infrastructure and resources are in place to support menstruating individuals in managing their periods hygienically and comfortably. This point is crucial because lack of access to proper facilities can lead to health risks, discomfort, and social stigma for those experiencing menstruation. Moreover, initiatives should also focus on providing access to menstrual products.

1. Equipe facilities with clean and private restrooms, running water, disposal bins for sanitary products, soap, and supplies like pads or tampons.
2. Access to water, sanitation, and waste services
3. Ensure the availability of menstrual products in rural and remote areas through partnerships with local NGOs and community organizations, installing mobile health units to provide menstrual health services in underserved areas for example.
4. Provide menstrual care facilities, such as designated menstrual hygiene stations, in public places, schools and government offices.
5. Provide free menstrual products in schools, workplaces and public spaces.
6. Install adequate facilities in public spaces, for urgent menstrual care on the go and for homeless menstruation individuals.

Best practices in the Balkan region for facilities and access to menstrual care and menstrual products:

Journalists for Human Rights from North Macedonia supported two primary schools in Tetovo and Resen over the time span of two years by providing free access to menstrual products for all menstruating girls. In addition, they renovated 128 school toilets in accordance with MHM standards [2].

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Normalize menstruation and create supportive environments

Encouraging open dialogue about menstruation creates a supportive environment where individuals feel comfortable discussing their menstrual experiences, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusivity in society. In addition, providing educational materials on menstrual hygiene practices and promoting a culture of openness and understanding around menstruation can further support individuals in managing their periods with dignity and ease.

1. Encourage open and regular dialogue in the communities (e.g. schools, community centers, workplaces)
2. Launch public awareness campaigns to break the stigma around menstruation and promote menstrual health and hygiene.
3. Encourage open dialogues about menstruation to reduce stigma and improve understanding.
4. Advocate for workplace policies that support menstrual health, such as providing menstrual leave and ensuring access to menstrual products.
5. Include men and boys in menstrual health education to foster a supportive environment and reduce stigma.

Best practices in the Balkan region for normalizing menstruation and creating supportive environments:

As part of the campaign ‚Za naše dane u mjesecu“ (“For our days in the month”) the organization UNFPA enforces MHM education in the Canton Sarajevo of Bosnia and Herzegovina. All high schools can participate for at least one year. This fosters open dialogue on menstruation, normalizing the topic. This project also distributes free menstruation products, as part of the program [2].

Policy changes

Policy changes are needed in order to create overall and long-lasting change. The advantage of policy changes is that they benefit all menstruating people immediately. Policy changes will help alleviate the financial burden of MHM products, normalize menstruation in society, educate people on menstruation to name a few positive effects. In general policy change is necessary for the sustainability of any change in society.

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1. Reduce the financial burden of MHM products, especially for vulnerable groups:
    a. Governments and organizations can provide incentives or subsidies for purchasing sustainable menstrual products, making them more accessible and affordable for all.
    b. Policies to subsidize menstrual products for Low-Income Groups, such as implementing programs to provide free or heavily subsidized menstrual products to low-income individuals is especially important.
    c. Reduce taxes on MHM products or even remove VAT on menstrual products.
2. Advocacy for policies that increase access to menstrual hygiene products, safe menstrual management methods, and reproductive health education is crucial in combating period poverty.
3. Develop a National Menstrual Health Policy, by formulating a comprehensive national policy on menstrual health management that includes all aspects from education to facilities and product availability.
4. Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the effectiveness of MHM programs and strategies.

Best practices in the Balkan region for policy changes

North Macedonia successfully reduced the VAT of menstrual pads from 18 to 5 percent, after long efforts by the organization Journalists for Human Rights [2].

Education and awareness

This is fundamental to breaking taboos and dispelling myths surrounding menstruation and should be addressed to students at an early age. By promoting a better understanding of menstrual health, individuals can make informed choices about their hygiene practices, leading to improved overall well- being.

1. Develop educational programs and workshops to increase knowledge about:
    a. Menstrual hygiene management
    b. Health and environmental risks of some MHM products and their alternatives
    c. Menstrual and women's sexual and reproductive health

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2. Train healthcare providers to offer comprehensive menstrual health education and support.
3. Fund and promote research on menstrual health to better understand the needs and challenges faced by different genders.
4. Encourage and support local production of affordable and sustainable menstrual products, to reduce emissions and promote accessibility.
5. Promote proper disposal methods to minimize environmental impact.

Best practices in the Balkan region for Education and awareness :

North Macedonian NGO Journalists for Human Rights has multiple education programs and initiatives. JHR has conducted trainings on 5 modules for more than 1500 students in North Macedonia and reconstructed 26 toilets in 20 schools across North Macedonia [2].

The "Full STOP to Period Poverty" Initiative in March 2023, this campaign by ADRA Europe and the Seventh-day Adventist Church takes place throughout Europe and the Balkans. This initiative provides education and menstrual products, while fightinh the stigma on menstruation [2].

Sustainability, Environment and Health

MHM products, such as tampon applicators and back strips, requires large amounts of fossil fuels for their plastic components and contain micro-plastics and toxins, exacerbating the environmental impact and health risks. Improper disposal, including flushing these items down toilets, leads to pollution of waterways and beaches, and significant amounts end up in landfills where they take centuries to decompose. By encouraging the adoption of eco-friendly and toxic-free alternatives, we can reduce the environmental impact of disposable menstrual products, and the health risks associated with plastics and chemicals in some products. Switching to eco-friendly options such as menstrual cups, reusable pads and organic cotton products can significantly reduce the carbon footprint associated with menstrual care, which is estimated to be around 5.3kg of CO_2 equivalents per person per year according to Friends of the Earth.

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Tackling the environmental impact and health risks of some MHM products, especially disposable ones, leads to a more sustainable future for all.

1. Raise awareness about the environmental impact of disposable products and encourage eco-friendly alternatives.
2. Raise awareness about the health risks due to micro-plastics and toxins
3. Promote the use of sustainable menstrual products like cups and reusable pads.
4. Governments and organizations can establish collection and recycling programs for menstrual products to further minimize environmental impact and promote a circular economy.
5. Encourage and support local production of affordable and sustainable menstrual products, to reduce emissions and promote accessibility.
6. Promote proper disposal methods to minimize environmental impact.

Best practices in the Balkan region on Sustainability, Environment and Health:
Unfortunately we have not been able to find best practice examples for thiscategory in the balkans.

Best Practice on Global Scale

According to a Reuters article, Kenya became the first country in the world in 2004 to abolish VAT on menstrual products. Approximately seventeen other countries have followed its example, some abolishing it as well, others only reducing it [8].

Twenty-five percent of World Bank education projects included components that addressed menstrual hygiene management, the provision of sanitary and hygienic toilets, or separate toilets for girls and boys in their schools [9].

Scotland provides menstruating individuals with free menstruation products in public toilets. Legislation legally compels local governments and education institutions to provide free menstrual products, according to a Time analysis [10].

Conclusion

Addressing menstrual health/hygiene management (MHM) requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that ensures accessibility, affordability, and acceptance of menstrual products and care.

[8] https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/commodities/what-is-the-tampon-tax-and-which-countries-have-axed-it-idUSL1N33O24Z/
[9] https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/menstrual-health-and-hygiene-what-role-can-schools-play
[10] https://time.com/6206216/scotland-law-period-poverty/#:~:text=In%20January%202021%2C%20the%20U.K.,law

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Conclusion

Addressing menstrual health/hygiene management (MHM) requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that ensures accessibility, affordability, and acceptance of menstrual products and care. By promoting access to menstrual products and information, we can alleviate the financial burden and stigma associated with menstruation. Providing facilities for menstrual care in public spaces, schools, and workplaces ensures that menstruating individuals can manage their periods with dignity and safety.

Creating supportive environments, both socially and institutionally, is essential for allowing full participation in all aspects of life, from education to employment to sports. Normalizing menstruation through education and open dialogue helps to dismantle taboos and foster a culture of respect and understanding. Advocacy for policy changes at all levels can institutionalize these efforts, ensuring sustained and widespread impact.

By focusing on these key areas through collaborative efforts involving institutions, employers, policymakers, and communities, we can make significant strides in combating period poverty and promoting menstrual equity. Together, we can build a society where menstruation is no longer a barrier to anyone's potential and well-being.

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