

Gender & Social Inclusion in Strategic Social Accountability Approaches: Lessons from the Water Sector in Tajikistan

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SUMMARY



Together with the [Water Global Practice](#), Social Inclusion Global Solutions Group and the [Governance Global Practice](#), the [Global Partnership for Social Accountability \(GPSA\)](#) held a Brown Bag Lunch (BBL) discussion about gender and social inclusion in strategic social accountability approaches. Using the [GPSA Water Project in Tajikistan](#) as a case study, participants discussed lessons learned from the process to date, and explored additional insights from other projects that have tried to address the same challenges using recommendations given by the Water Global Practice Gender Toolkit.

In the last decade, the Government of Tajikistan has taken steps to improve water supply and sanitation, but problems persist with regard to access to service, uneven water quality and frequent service interruptions. Since 2014, [Oxfam Tajikistan](#) and the [Consumer Union of Tajikistan](#), supported by a GPSA grant, have been operating the [TWISA project](#) in five districts of the country and the capital city of Dushanbe, working to strengthen the capacity of citizens to develop performance standards and indicators, as well as monitor service provision and engage with service providers in order to improve transparency and accountability.

The water context in Tajikistan illustrates the challenge of implementing social accountability approaches. Approximately 70% of the rural population relies on agriculture and remittances, where only 48% have access to piped water, over 60% of the pipelines do not meet sanitary requirements, and about 20% rely on irrigation canals. The remaining get water from springs, rivers and hand pumps. The privatization of water supply systems is prohibited, coupled with aging infrastructure. Finally, there is a single tariff for the delivery of water, irrespective of the [natural and economic factors](#).



Overall, women are the primary users of household water ranging from cooking, to caregiving, to housecleaning, giving them a major stake in water matters. According to a study undertaken by [UNDP](#) in Muminabad and Rudaki districts, women and girls under the age of 14 spend four to six hours daily fetching water, resulting in them

missing school. In addition to the household duties and caretaking, women and girls are also involved in the implementation of the heavy seasonal field work, yet they are not often included in the decision-making process. The difference in the social status of women and men, and the lack of gender justice is traditionally explained by “cultural factors” and perceptions. Furthermore, as intergenerational families live in one household, inequality in chores sharing and power dynamics exacerbate the situation further.

Given that problems within the water sector often have a disproportionate effect on women, their meaningful participation is emphasized throughout the TWISA process. The project mainstreamed a gender focus through specific interventions such as the collective analysis of local water provision issues through gender lenses, and public sensitization on the importance of women’s participation in social accountability activities in the target districts. The project takes into account potential barriers such as the severe household work burdens faced by women, and restrictive social and cultural norms preventing women’s participation, and it works towards improving gender relations.

The TWISA project embarked on an ambitious mission to revise and set realistic and specific gender sensitive service performance standards. While it was challenging to adopt a gender approach within this process due to the technical nature of the indicators and norms, TWISA began inclusive consultations to begin finding answers: *What are the indicators of a good service according to women?*

This resulted in the creation of Community Advisory Boards (CABs), comprised of representatives from the community, local authorities and water operator. CABs specifically included local women, thus providing a perfect platform of credibility to discuss gender inclusive water issues. At a policy level, the stakeholders used the information to review existing indicators and standards in order to formulate policy and plans for the years ahead. Public awareness activities resulted in formulating recommendations from both women and men to improve governance and promote the role of women in CABs.



At this intersectional BBL, many dimensions of the project were addressed, notably poverty, water, gender, governance, civil society, government, donors, and corporate social responsibility (private sector perspective). Absent due to the distance were the beneficiaries, which will later be included in the [ECA Regional Forum](#). From the governance angle, [Asmeen Khan](#), a Practice Manager in the Governance Global Practice at the World Bank, astutely noted how the project showed the need for creating a new institution (the CABs) that are purposely set up to be inclusive of women, rather than seeking their participation in existing institutions which were too fundamentally skewed towards men. From the social inclusion perspective, while women bear the burden of the household, the project showed that they too often have a certain level of agency and power in water management, having a

voice about water use in the household and the community, noted [Maitreyi Das](#), the Global Lead for Social Inclusion in the Water Global Practice at the World Bank.

[Madina Aliberdieva](#), the Former Deputy Country Director of Oxfam Tajikistan, explained how Oxfam had already cultivated relationships and established trust in the rural areas through Oxfam's prior work, which together with their power analysis enabled them to develop informal, new institutions that had impact. The most difficult aspect of women's participation, their reluctance to engage in the community meetings, was resolved by tapping into women's interest in hygiene and children. This resulted in having more women participate and helped create a dynamic whereby the more outspoken women would urge other, less-outspoken women to speak up.

In thinking about gender-sensitive service standards, [Paul Prettitore](#), a Senior Public Specialist in the Governance Global Practice, explained the interrelatedness between poverty and gender. He underlined how assessing impact on women is often oversimplified to focus only on the percentage of beneficiaries affected, without delving into the crux of the issues related to poverty, such as the percentage of women giving up educational opportunities because of the burden of fetching water. Finally, [Inka Schomer](#), an Operations Officer in the Gender Cross Cutting Solutions Area at the World Bank, highlighted how this work has parallels to many other sectors, particularly the energy and agriculture sector, where female beneficiaries are faced with similar challenges related to literacy, outages, quality, service level, bill collection, among other issues.

The TWISA project revealed how women are not a monolithic group, and sometimes cultural differences, among other factors, play a larger role than gender differences. Women's needs for water and sanitation and the impact on women of water strategies should be viewed as the starting point of all activities in the water sector. A challenge that remains is that not all stakeholders know how to integrate a gender approach in the assessment of service performance as an entry point.

Watch the recording of the BBL here: <http://www.thegpsa.org/sa/event/bbl-gender-social-inclusion-strategic-social-accountability-approaches-lessons-water-sector>