



## POLICY BRIEF

# The Power of Clean: Gender Equity in WASH for Sustainable Poverty Solutions



### Panelists

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- » Boluwaji Onabolu, Professor of Practice, University of Johannesburg
- » Elizabeth Ugoh, Director of Water Quality, Federal Ministry of Water Resources and Sanitation
- » John Makina, Country Director, Nigeria, Oxfam International
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### Moderator

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*Credits: Self Help Africa*







This Policy Brief was developed by the Policy Innovation Centre (PIC) of the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), drawing insights from discussions and outcomes of the Gender and Inclusion Summit 2024 (GS24). The content reflects evidence-based strategies, policy recommendations, and inclusive frameworks to advance gender equity and social inclusion in development initiatives.

## Session Objectives

1. *To analyse the intersection of gender equity and WASH in addressing multidimensional poverty.*
2. *To identify structural barriers to achieving gender-sensitive WASH services and propose actionable solutions.*
3. *To promote inclusive, multi-sectoral frameworks that enhance women's and girls' agency through equitable WASH service delivery.*

## Background

Access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) is foundational for poverty reduction and gender equity, especially in Nigeria, where over 48 million people engage in open defecation, and less than 20% of the population have access to safely managed sanitation services.<sup>246</sup> Women spend 200 million hours daily fetching water globally, far more than men and a large burden on their time.<sup>247</sup> Poor sanitation negatively impacts cognitive development, labour force productivity, and health and perpetuates cycles of poverty and exclusion.<sup>248</sup> Inadequate menstrual hygiene management (MHM) further curtails women's agency, affecting their biological needs and safety. This session discussed the disproportionately adverse impacts of inadequate WASH infrastructure on women and girls, particularly in rural and low-income areas. An intersectional and cross-sectoral approach is key to overcoming these barriers, to achieve gender equity and sustainable growth.

## Normative Issues and Challenges

01. **Cultural Norms and Gender Roles:** Deeply rooted socio-cultural norms assign primary responsibility such as water collection to women, reinforcing traditional domestic roles.<sup>249</sup> This disproportionately impacts women's opportunity costs e.g., having to walk long distances to fetch water at the expense of education, capacity-building, and income generation.
02. **Stigma Around Menstrual Hygiene:** Societal taboo and inadequate infrastructure for menstrual hygiene management create barriers to education and economic participation for girls and women, leading to increased school absenteeism and reduced productivity.<sup>250</sup>

## Non-normative Issues and Challenges

01. **Infrastructure Deficits:** WASH is gender specific, and infrastructure in rural and peri-urban areas often fails to account for gender-specific needs, creating unsafe and inadequate conditions for women, particularly during pregnancy and menstrual health management. This oversight exacerbates health risks and reinforces gender disparities in access to essential

services.<sup>251</sup>

02. **Limited Financial Resources for WASH Projects:** Insufficient and poorly targeted funding for WASH projects exacerbates gender inequities, as funding gaps prevent the construction of safe, gender-sensitive sanitation facilities.<sup>252</sup>
03. **Inadequate Legal Frameworks:** Weak enforcement of WASH-related regulations allows substandard implementation of gender-sensitive projects, leaving women and other vulnerable groups underserved.<sup>253</sup>
04. **Low Female Representation in Decision-Making:** Despite comprising a significant portion of WASH users, women are often underrepresented in governance structures. For instance, women's involvement in Water and Sanitation Committees (WASHCOMs) initiatives have been transformative, resulting in solutions that are tailored or gendered.<sup>254</sup>
05. **Low Awareness and Education:** Although general health awareness exists, specific gaps in WASH-related knowledge and its dissemination persist, particularly on MHM and sanitation.<sup>255</sup>

## Progress and Success Stories

**Female Leadership in WASH Programs:** By integrating women into WASHCOMs, Self Help Africa empowered them to participate in WASH decision-making, ensuring their needs are met in service planning and delivery.



## Policy Recommendations



01. **Implement Gender-Responsive WASH Policies:** Introduce affirmative action mandating at least 50% female representation in WASH governance structures, such as WASHCOMs.
02. **Legislate and Enforce Minimum Standards for WASH Infrastructure:** Ensure that every facility includes provisions for MHM, prioritising rural and marginalised communities.

03. **Foster Behavioural Change Communication:** Develop targeted campaigns to educate communities on WASH practices and address socio-cultural taboos around MHM.
04. **Increase Government Accountability and Transparency:** Introduce budget tracking and regular public reporting mechanisms to ensure transparent allocation of WASH resources. Leaders should be tasked with delivering on WASH commitments beyond mere political promises.

## Programmatic Recommendations



01. **Strengthen Community-Based WASH Models:** Engage local leaders and community members to design, implement, and monitor WASH services tailored to women's needs.
02. **Adopt a Total Market Approach:** Facilitate multi-sectoral coordination and Public-Private partnerships. Leverage pooled funding and system strengthening projects to improve policy and WASH implementation at all levels. Incentivise these investments in water and sanitation facilities targeting women.

03. **Develop Quick Reference Tools:** Create concise policy briefs summarising expectations, strategies, and anticipated outcomes to ensure clear dissemination of WASH goals to all.
04. **Monitor and Evaluate Effectively:** Strengthen monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress and refine or adapt strategies for short, mid, and long-term interventions

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Poor sanitation affects the cognitive development of children and the quality of Nigeria's workforce

- Dr. Boluwaji Onabolu



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The ministry of water resources and sanitation has a mandate to ensure the provision of sustainable and equitable access to safe water and sanitation to Nigerians, including the women and vulnerable, in such a way to improve their cultural and social economic needs and also the public health reducing poverty.

- Dr. Elizabeth Ugoh



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I believe in what we call the total market approach, we're talking about the government, the development partners, the implementing partners, the NGOs, the private sector

- Dennis Aizobu



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Multisectoral coordination is the foundation; then we will be looking at pool funding, accountability, transparency, budget tracking and other things

- Joy Aderele



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## Key Priorities, Action Steps, and Responsibilities

### Policy Recommendation: Implement Gender-Responsive WASH Policies

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Water Resources and Sanitation	» - Introduce affirmative action mandating at least 50% female representation in WASH governance structures, such as WASHCOMs, by Q4 2025.  » Ensure 70% of new WASH policies address gender-specific needs by 2026.	International Development Agencies, UN Women	» Facilitate policy dialogue workshops with 100 stakeholders by Q3 2025  » Support drafting gender-inclusive WASH policy frameworks in 10 states by Q2 2026.	Advocacy Organizations	» Fund gender-sensitive WASH policy campaigns in 5 rural regions by Q4 2025.  » Provide technical expertise to integrate gender equity in corporate WASH strategies by Q1 2026.

### Policy Recommendation: Legislate and Enforce Minimum Standards for WASH Infrastructure

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
National Assembly, Ministry of Justice	» Enact legislation mandating menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities in 90% of public institutions by Q3 2025.  » Develop and enforce inspection protocols for rural WASH facilities by 2026.	CSOs, NGOs	» Conduct 300 facility audits to identify gaps in gender-sensitive WASH infrastructure by Q4 2025.  » Provide technical support for upgrading 200 WASH facilities in underserved areas by Q1 2026.	Infrastructure Companies	» Design and construct 50 gender-sensitive WASH facilities annually starting Q3 2025.  » Partner with government to pilot innovative MHM solutions by Q2 2026.

### Policy Recommendation: Foster Behaviour Change Communication

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Information and Culture	» Launch 10 nationwide multimedia campaigns addressing menstrual hygiene taboos by Q3 2025.  » Train 1,500 community health workers on WASH practices by Q4 2025.	UNICEF, WHO	» Develop and distribute 500,000 educational materials on WASH and MHM by Q2 2026.  » Conduct behavioural impact studies in 50 communities by Q3 2025.	Media and Marketing Firms	» Produce culturally tailored WASH public service announcements.  » Engage influencers to promote WASH best practices via social media campaigns by Q2 2026.

#### Policy Recommendation: Increase Government Accountability and Transparency

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Finance, Auditor General's Office	» Implement budget tracking systems for WASH projects by 2027.	Transparency International, Local NGOs	» Conduct bi-annual public forums to review WASH budget allocations.	Audit Firms	» Offer pro bono auditing services for small-scale WASH projects.
	» Publish annual WASH project performance reports starting Q1 2026.		» Train 300 community monitors on WASH project tracking by 2026.		» Partner with NGOs to create transparent WASH funding reports.

#### Programmatic Recommendation: Strengthen Community-Based WASH Models

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Community Development	» Establish 500 community-managed WASH facilities by Q3 2026.	Development Partners, INGOs	» Fund community-driven WASH projects in 100 rural areas by 2025.	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives	» Sponsor 50 water infrastructure projects annually starting Q2 2025.
	» Train 2,000 local leaders on gender-sensitive WASH management by 2025.		» Provide technical support for the formation of 300 WASH Committees.		» Develop co-financing schemes with communities for sustainable WASH services by 2026.

#### Programmatic Recommendation: Adopt a Total Market Approach

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Trade and Industry	» Facilitate partnerships between public and private sectors for WASH services.	Donor Agencies, PPP Facilitators	» Mobilize \$5 million in pooled funding for WASH projects by 2025.	Private Enterprises	» Develop and market affordable, eco-friendly sanitation products targeting women by Q3 2025.
	» Create tax incentives for companies investing in gender-sensitive WASH solutions by Q1 2026.		» Conduct quarterly stakeholder coordination meetings to strengthen WASH market systems by Q2 2026.		» Invest in sustainable water treatment technologies by Q1 2026.

#### Programmatic Recommendation: Develop Quick Reference Tools

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
Ministry of Health	» Publish 1,000 quick reference guides on WASH standards for health workers	International NGOs	» - Develop policy briefs for local governments on WASH implementation strategies	Educational Publishers	» Create simplified WASH handbooks for schools by 2025.
	» Distribute toolkits for menstrual hygiene management in 200 schools.		» Print and disseminate 500,000 hygiene promotion leaflets.		» Partner with NGOs to deliver WASH training materials to 1,000 community centres by Q2 2026.



Programmatic Recommendation: Monitor and Evaluate Effectively

Government Sector Driven		Development Sector Driven		Private Sector Driven	
Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps	Responsibility	Action Steps
National Bureau of Statistics	» Develop a national WASH M&E framework by Q2 2025.	World Bank, Research Institutes	» Fund longitudinal studies on WASH impact in 20 States.	Tech Companies	» Develop 6 WASH monitoring apps by 2028, for each geo-political zone.
	» Conduct annual WASH performance reviews in all 36 states starting 2027		» Provide technical assistance for real-time data collection systems by 2025.		» Deploy 500 smart sensors to track water quality in rural areas by 2026.





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