

water + = Empowered Women



What is water +

Water+ is about linking water to other interventions so that we can make the biggest impact possible. It is about sanitation and hygiene, but also about water for agriculture, for livelihoods, for nutrition, for keeping girls in schools, for helping women to be leaders and more. Water+ helps us achieve more with less and respond to the complex, inter-related needs of the people we work with.

There are many reasons to pay attention to the links between water+ and women. CARE's household surveys in Ethiopia on women's experiences of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) showed us that simple improvements in WASH created marked changes for women in such areas as their sense of security, control over household resources and feelings of dignity (CARE, 2010). Doing further research in Ghana showed us that when we took deliberate steps to address gender equity, along with water, sanitation and hygiene and livelihoods needs, waterpoints and latrines were more likely to be functional (CARE, 2015). Our research on women's experiences of WASH in Ethiopia and other countries also shows us that depending on age, marital status, disability, whether or not they have children, and a number of other social markers, women may experience the effects of WASH interventions very differently. This means that we cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to our programs.

From our research and experiences, we have confirmed our views that gender concerns are inextricably linked with water+ and that they must be addressed in a proactive way. We strive to incorporate this focus from the start of our programs through gender analysis, and throughout, by addressing unfair gender norms, by encouraging men to be advocates of changes

in gender roles and by giving women the tools and skills they need to thrive and challenge restrictive practices and beliefs. These tools may include leadership training or economic empowerment through savings and loans mechanisms, or simply the chance to discuss issues and tackle problems jointly with other women through affinity groups.

As we listen to the feedback of the people we work with, we are struck by how seemingly small, bold actions—for example, a man that chooses to fetch water and do “women’s” household chores—can bring down seemingly formidable social barriers. And though the best drivers of change in social and gender norms are the people with whom we work, our work in water+ provides us with ample opportunities to facilitate those early conversations that help communities re-examine their beliefs about gender.

There is no final stopping point in the study of how gender issues and water+ are linked, as every place and every challenge will be different. However, we can conclude that the tools and experiences we have gained will better help us address both water+ needs and the gender and social injustices that are inseparably intertwined with them.