

Interview Ifeoma Charles-Monwuba, WaterAid, Abuja, Nigeria

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Ifeoma Charles-Monwuba is the head of Policy and Partnership at the nongovernmental organisation WaterAid in Nigeria. The organisation helps communities to improve their sanitation situation as well as raising awareness about the issue among decision makers.

Studies have shown that women place a higher value on water and toilets than men. Can you explain why this is?

Well, women place more emphasis on water and sanitation than men – one because they bear the greater burden when there is no access to water and sanitation. They have to take care of the children, they do most chores in the house. And this requires having access to water. Say, for example, here in Nigeria, it's the woman that wakes up early in the morning to go fetch water. Along with her is her girl child. She probably would trek over an hour to go get this water and get back home.

And given the female physique, when the woman is having her menstrual cycle, she needs access to good sanitary facilities. And she needs her privacy, having her own toilet to provide for her. In Nigeria, in some schools, you have a ratio of about 500 pupils to one toilet. The girl child, when there is no adequate sanitary facility in her school, might have to miss schools on the days when her menstruation is happening. As a result of that, she will drop out of school at some point.

So most of the time, women are affected mostly when they don't have access to sanitation.

Why is sanitation not higher on the political agenda?

Well, sanitation is still treated as a household issue in some places. Especially in the part of the world where I come from. And so because it is an issue that affects women most of the time, it is not really within the political will or is also not being raised very highly on the agenda in the decision making process, because most of the decisions and the people making the decisions are still men, and because they don't suffer from this issue directly, they don't afford it the right priority. And because of that the situation is still perpetuated.

In this context, what is the role of NGOs like your own and civil society in general?

Well, the role of NGOs and civil society like "WaterAid" in promoting sanitation is to first of all understand the issue: how it impacts on women, doing studies into the economic, the social and health impact of not having access to sanitation. And then, from this study, engaging with the decision makers to disseminate these findings. And trying to help them understand the impact of not having access and help them understand the magnitude, the scope of this problem. And even to educate the masses.

And what is the scope of the problem? What is the sanitation situation like in Nigeria?

Well in Nigeria, the JMP data (Joint Monitoring Programme of WHO/UNICEF) is talking about 44 percent coverage for sanitation in Nigeria, "WaterAid" as an organisation has done some study in 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in six states here in Nigeria, and on the average, we are finding coverages as low as 5 percent in most of these rural communities. So there still is a high degree of open defecation going on in the rural communities here in Nigeria. And people that are in places of authority, policy makers, are not aware that the problem is that bad. Because in the cities people live in homes where they have access to toilets, without knowing that it's really so bad out in the rural communities.

Can you give an example on how you raise awareness of the issue?

In terms of raising awareness, "WaterAid" and some of the partners, that are part of the "End Water Poverty Campaign" we went to have audience with the National Assembly here in Nigeria. We met with the house committee on water resources and we enlightened the members on the sanitation situation in Nigeria and showed them a clip on a methodology called the Community Led Sanitation approach. That has been used to promote sanitation in the rural areas in Nigeria. And so such activities help to open the eyes of the decision makers.

How does the work you and your colleagues do impact on improving the situation?

Well, what we have done, this methodology I just mentioned, the Community Led Total Sanitation, we have implemented that in some of the states where we are working, in Benue, Chigawua, to be precise. And with record successes. We have had villages with predominant practice of open defecation been totally cleaned out. And there is now no single occasion of open defecation in these villages. Because this method is a method which takes the community through a changed process, where they absolutely realise that open defecation is not a healthy practice. And locks them in a circle of disease and poverty. And so coming to this realisation on their own, they move to clean up their environment and to change their behaviour. We have implemented this approach and we have also worked with the Federal Government of Nigeria to write this approach into a national document. The Government is working now to scale up this approach within the country.

Sanitation needs to be high on the national agenda. And that being said, what we need is a global plan for sanitation. Sanitation is closely related to economic development and so it's something that needs to be dealt with on a global level and in the country.