



## KENYA

# Women in Water Leadership Circle

GENDER  
IN WATER



Priscillah Oluoch (left) receiving her certificate from Dr. Patricia Murugami on graduation of the Women in Water Leadership Circle. Photo credit: Davasha

### CONTEXT

**Women are an untapped pool of talent for the water sector. A World Bank report on women in utilities demonstrates a significantly lower percentage of female workers in the sector compared to men. Only 18 percent of water sector workers, or less than one in five, are women.<sup>1</sup>**

The IDA19 theme on ‘Gender and Development’ also points out the **significant gender gaps that affect earning capacity and perpetuate inequality**. This is in respect to paid employment, women’s ownership and access to physical and financial assets, and use of technology,<sup>2</sup> while also depriving women and girls of influence and agency. Therefore, there is an **urgent need to close these gender gaps and increase gender diversity among the water sector workforce** to strengthen water utilities’ financial performance, innovative capacity, operating efficiency and customer relations. To meet the increasing demands for Water Supply and Sanitation (WSS) service delivery, utilities need stronger work forces that draw on all available talent, including women.

### Genesis of the Women in Water Leadership Circle

In Kenya, women engaged in water utility services — a largely male-dominated world — face barriers in accessing equal employment opportunities throughout their career trajectory. This is due to entrenched social norms, biased

hiring processes and limited training and networking opportunities. They have very few female role models who hold middle or senior management positions, and suffer from the lack of voice, agency and representation, despite being employed in the sector for decades. To strengthen the leadership potential of women working in Kenyan Water Service Providers (WSPs), the **Water and Sanitation Development Project (WSDP)<sup>3</sup>** launched the **Women in Water (WIW) Leadership Circle**, a leadership training program for female decision makers. WSDP is a \$300m investment project providing water and sanitation investments in seven WSPs in the North Eastern and Coastal part of Kenya. The WSDP project is using the Utility Turnaround Framework (UTF) as a systematic way of strengthening the institutional capacity of WSPs. Through the UTF, assessments for each of the WSPs were undertaken, and improvement actions per the WSPs were identified. The WIW Circle deepened the understanding of the WSDP for its clients and demonstrated how improving their leadership opportunities for women would lead to the improved

## AVERAGE SHARE OF WOMEN IN A UTILITY

18%

of all utility workers are women.



23%

of engineers are women.



23%

of managers are women.



performance of the project. The Circle ran from October 2019 to February 2020, and the cohort included 28 women participants from the seven WSPs and one Water Works Development Agency.

### Implementing the WIW Leadership Circle

The training was led by a leadership development expert, Dr. Patricia Murugami, who argues that **women's professional advancement towards becoming transformational leaders is impacted principally by the internal barriers they face.** The Circle guided its participants on how to address these barriers and raise their leadership potential by getting used to solving challenges in their WSPs. **The training covered topics such as work-life integration, power and influence, negotiation styles, and strategic networking, among others.** Using presentations, readings and discussions, the participants worked in teams to identify improvements they can make in their own WSPs. The cohort graduated on February 21, 2020, where they shared their learning journeys and their proposed solutions with their Managing Directors.

### Moving Forward

Having just began a transformational journey of finding themselves and discovering their capabilities, the women who participated in the Circle, are poised to bring change not only in their respective workplaces, but in their surrounding communities as well. **The Circle demonstrated a deep connection between personal and professional growth.** It enabled and empowered its participants to gain self-confidence, shed self-doubt and assert themselves in applying the Circle's

lessons into implementation, while sharing their constructive learnings with their colleagues. While one group envisioned a shift from a reactive to a proactive customer care program (some WSPs have not done this in years), another group looked at the **under-representation of women in the water sector** and explored how to increase their numbers, particularly in middle and senior management roles by establishing mentorship programs. They found that out of the 88 WSPs in Kenya, only four are headed by women Managing Directors. The Circle participants have remained in a group where they are providing periodic updates of their activities. The effectiveness of the Circle will be evaluated in two years' time to document the lessons of the initiative.

### Executing Lessons from the WIW Leadership Circle: A Personal Snapshot

Eng. Priscillah Oluoch the deputy technical manager at the Malindi WSP, has translated its learnings into tangible outcomes. She independently **wrote and submitted a proposal** for a sanitation levy for fecal sludge management under the **African Sanitation Innovation Challenge**, which has been accepted for funding. Representing her utility at the **Equal Aqua Platform\***, Priscillah also wants to motivate, train and mentor a new cadre of women in water utilities. She is working with the CEO of the Kenya Water and Sanitation Providers Association (WASPA) to **establish a Women in Water Leadership Mentoring Program** for Kenyan women working in utilities. WASPA is mobilizing support from their partners for the establishment of the Program and has presented this concept to the Bank for possible support. Inspired by the positive outcome of the Leadership Circle, the management of WSPs have initiated initiatives to enhance the roles of women in their utilities. In Kilifi County, the WSP has allocated a budget for training women; the Mombasa County's WSP and Coast Water Works Development Agency (CWWDA) participants formed a book club. The book club discussions have deepened the discussions and bonding between Mombasa and CWWDA to now include informal mentoring between the finance specialists of both teams.

Exposing women in utilities to innovative programs like the WIW Leadership Circle, which address both personal and professional growth, can unlock their leadership potential in their current roles as they implement Bank operations through their respective WSPs. The Circle demonstrates that water institutions can implement such improvements gradually, and thus achieve greater female representation in leadership positions in the sector.

#### Sources and additional information:

- <sup>1</sup> Women in Water Utilities: Breaking Barriers (World Bank, 2019)
- <sup>2</sup> IDA19
- <sup>3</sup> Project Appraisal Document (P156634)

Note prepared by Christine Ochieng and Anjali Sah with inputs from Priscillah Oluoch.

The Leadership Circle is a product of Breakthrough Leadership Transformation.

\*Equal Aqua is a partnership platform for gender diversity in water sector jobs.