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## **Creating equitable workplaces by challenging gender norms: a Nigerian State Water Corporation study**

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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:  
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

**Creating equitable workplaces by challenging gender norms: a Nigerian State Water Corporation study**

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**Introduction**

Periods don't stop in a pandemic. Gender representation matters. These were key themes guiding the USAID Effective Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene program, implemented by RTI International. In Nigeria, because women are disproportionately affected by the water crisis (time collecting water, missed school days, and gender-based violence); it is imperative that women are in water service delivery leadership roles. At the Niger State Water and Sanitation Corporation (NISWASEC), women only make up 14% of the labor force, and are primarily in administrative roles. Therefore, the program championed the Engendering Utilities approach to create a more equitable workplace for female utility workers.

**Methodology**

We proposed to evaluate NISWASEC's potential acceptance of engendering utility approaches and pilots. The program reviewed institutional policies, conducted quantitative workforce staff assessment and qualitative gender assessment, and observed office toilet facility. This mixed methods study was effective to solicit information and opinions on new gender mainstreaming practices from staff from all levels including leadership and to triangulate data from multiple sources. From the results of the assessment, RTI and NISWASEC piloted a Gender Inclusive Roadmap and nominated Gender Focal People (GFP) to lead efforts.

**Analysis and results**

Through the assessment and pilots, the program found that many male NISWASEC staff expressed concerns on the necessity of gender mainstreaming and its potential impact to ignore men; and female NISWASEC staff did not feel they had career growth opportunities.

RTI responded to these concerns through bespoke gender and social inclusion trainings. Through facilitated and open discussions, NISWASEC staff addressed and acknowledged both uncious and conscious biases around gender. Additionally, the program advocated for a NISWASEC staff member to serve as a GFP to institutionalize the topic by developing a Gender Policy to guide the institution.

As part of the corporatization efforts, the program then worked with the NISWASEC leadership team to review its organizational structure and to set gender equality hiring goals. From this review, NISWASEC appointed four qualified female staff members to lead new technical departments and units.

Through our mentorship program, the GFP finalized the Gender Policy, developed a female mentorship and safe space program, and facilitated sector wide Women in WASH groups. Leveraging the effects of COVID-19, the program also supported NISWASEC to provide childcare facilities for staff as schools closed. NISWASEC has also taken these initiatives to communities to improve service delivery through community engagement events on menstrual health promotion and ensuring affordable water services to female headed households.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Creating an equitable workplace requires patience, continuous safe space discussions, and a shared vision for where all staff want to see their organization grow. In doing so, NISWASEC challenged gender norms amongst staff, promoted qualified female staff to leadership positions, advocated for improved sanitary and hygiene conditions in the workplace and in communities, and have developed a Gender Policy to sustain these efforts. RTI is currently using the lessons learned to implement similar programs in other states. As these are innovative changes for the Nigerian context, we recommend complete buy-in from the utility management staff to set the corporate culture for institutional changes and continued mentorship to individuals to foster the next generation of women in science and technology.

## **Contact details**

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