



Interview with **Caroline Solik**, Gender and Livelihood Coordinator at CRIDF on the work of CRIDF's gender workstream

Caroline Solik, Gender and Livelihood Coordinator, discusses the CRIDF approach to gender mainstreaming. Through expert support, capacity strengthening and the development of practical tools and resources the initiative is helping its development partners to plan and implement gender-sensitive projects that meet the water infrastructure needs of women and men across Southern Africa.

Q: What are the main challenges women face accessing and managing water resources in Southern Africa?

A: The challenges are diverse across Southern African and stem from broader social structures, institutional issues and cultural nuances that differ country by country. However, from our experience working in rural and peri-urban areas, there are common themes. Often, for example, there is a disconnect between women being the primary managers and users of water but typically having less of a say when it comes to decision making. They also often lack access to related resources, such as land or finance, which can detrimentally affect their management of water resources, and their ability to engage in productive activities. All of this has a knock-on effect at household and community levels.

Q: The theme of International Women's Day 2020 is gender equality. What does gender equality mean in the context of water access and infrastructure?

A: We believe that gender is not just a women's issue. While we do see that women are often more disadvantaged than men in the communities we work in, it's not one-dimensional. So, mainstreaming gender is not just about empowering women, it's about trying to figure out the needs of all social groups, and the differing needs of individuals within these structures, and then creating appropriate platforms of engagement where they are all comfortable articulating their needs.

Q: It's often said that failing to take gender into consideration can result in unsuccessful development projects. From your experience why is this?

A: Given women are often the primary users and managers of water, if infrastructure has not been designed to address their needs, water infrastructure projects are at risk of failure. For example, latrines without locks or suitable lighting will simply not be used by women who feel unsafe, and will fall into disrepair. Women also need to be engaged early on in project preparation processes, to capitalize on their indigenous knowledge and deep understanding of community dynamics. Equally, we also need to engage men around gender issues to avoid delivering approaches and designs that disempower them or trigger unintended male resentment or even violence against women and girls.

Q: How does CRIDF mainstream gender considerations into water infrastructure projects?

A: In the most direct way, we conduct gender and social analyses as part of each of our project preparation cycles with the aim of enabling better access, control over, and use of water resources by all groups of society. We also work in partnership with other development agencies to provide support to SADC, river basin organisations and countries, helping them to draw up gender strategies and action plans. Our support has also extended to participating in capacity building workshops where we share our experiences and introduce CRIDF tools such as the Gender Equality Social Inclusion (GESI) Toolkit to help water practitioners integrate gender into their work.

Q: What is the GESI Toolkit and how did this resource come about?

A: One of the core mandates of CRIDF is to ensure that we design projects in a socially responsible and gender-sensitive manner. To adopt this approach in a systematic way we realised that we needed a fit-for-purpose toolkit that our own teams and partners could pick up and use. The GESI Toolkit builds on two SADC documents – the Handbook on Mainstreaming Gender in the Water Sector and the Gender Mainstreaming Resource Kit – to offer a practical resource specifically focused on the early stages of project preparation. It outlines recommended steps in three main stages: what you should do when you prepare to go into the field; what you should do when you're in the field; and what you should do when you get back from the field.

Q: You also have an upcoming gender-specific workshop in Zambia. Can you describe the aims of the workshop?

A: Through our involvement in regional gender workshops and dialogues over the past few years, we've noted a consistent message from water and gender practitioners for increased guidance, information dissemination and capacity development on the use of gender tools. We therefore decided to host a standalone workshop in Lusaka, focused on practically applying the GESI toolkit through groupwork exercises centred on Zambian project case studies, that participants could relate to. Zambia has a growing community of practice (CoP) on water and gender, including government, civil society, development partners and NGOs, so we worked with the Ministry of Water Development, Sanitation and Environmental Protection's Gender Focal Point to draw together these key stakeholders for this event in support of their national Gender Action Plan for the water sector. The participatory, interactive nature of the workshop was well-received by participants, and we concluded the two days with a commitment from the Water Ministry to advance and formalise Zambia's CoP. Building on the success of this workshop, we intend to facilitate similar engagements in other SADC countries.

Q: What are the key steps development partners should take to ensure water infrastructure reflects the needs of women and girls?

A: At project scoping and prefeasibility stages, it is critical that adequate effort is invested in preliminary research, analysis and targeted stakeholder engagement on GESI issues. Our sociologists typically conduct an extensive literature review and gather as much data as possible before going to the field, to get a better understanding of the social status quo. We also develop checklists of questions for different social groups, focused on understanding issues of access, participation and preference. Asking these questions through focus group discussions and key informant interviews can elicit critical project design information. For example, focus group discussions with adolescent girls in Mozambique informed a project design decision to include yard taps next to the school's female latrines, in a protected space for exclusive use by adolescent girls with handwashing and menstrual hygiene waste disposal facilities. Stakeholder feedback, the literature review and data analysis are then used to inform the development of a gender action plan for the subsequent phases of the project.



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