



Gender without jargon – approaches to engineers

Ian Smout and Sue Coates, WEDC

ENGINEERS' WORK ON development programmes and projects has an important gender dimension, both in terms of the product of their work (e.g. basic infrastructure and services which are to be used by men, women and children) and the process (teams of male and female staff interacting with men and women in the community and other stakeholders). House (1998) describes how these issues are ignored in engineers' professional training and concludes that engineers working in development should receive focused training on gender and other social issues.

This perspective led to a Knowledge and Research project on *mainstreaming gender in water projects* with the specific target group of water sector engineers and managers, being undertaken by WEDC, Loughborough University, UK with collaborators in South Africa and India.

The main output of the project will be a *Practical Guide on Gender for Engineers and Managers in the Water Sector*. This guide will assist engineers, planners and managers to consider the needs and demands of both women and men in peri-urban and rural water supply, sanitation and irrigation projects and provide practical suggestions for implementing gender sensitive projects. It is intended that technical personnel from government, consultant organisations, external agencies and NGOs working in pursuit of sustainable development will benefit from using the guide.

Smout and Parry-Jones (1999) described the basis of the project and the preparation of the Draft Practical Guide. This paper describes the feedback we have received on this draft and the difficult process of deciding on a suitable approach to disseminate gender mainstreaming ideas to the target audience.

The project will only be successful if the intended target-audience values the outputs and wants to use them. An integral part of the process is the facilitation of field based consultation designed to gain valuable feedback so that the final research products are meaningful, accessible and appropriate to the end-user.

The draft practical guide

The Draft Practical Guide was prepared in 1999, comprising five chapters as follows:

- Chapter 1 provides an introduction and a quick reference to the guide;
- Chapter 2 explains in engineer-friendly language the meaning and importance of mainstreaming gender in water engineering and management and addresses com-

mon concerns and objections that technical personnel may have to the approach;

- Chapter 3 uses the project cycle to provide guidance on mainstreaming gender in everyday engineering tasks for water and sanitation projects;
- Chapter 4 summarises sector-specific issues for different types of project (e.g. hygiene promotion, irrigation, emergencies);
- Chapter 5 discusses capacity building measures to reinforce gender sensitive approaches in organisations.

Feedback at conferences

Two water engineers working on the research project presented papers at an international conference on Mainstreaming Gender in Policy and Planning (Parry-Jones et al, 1999) and at the 25th WEDC Conference (Smout and Parry-Jones, 1999). Both papers aroused considerable discussion, in particular on the inclusion of pragmatic arguments that taking account of gender improves project performance, rather than concentrating on rights and correcting inequity.

The project team's response has been that both the pragmatic arguments and the rights approach are valid, and should be included in the Practical Guide. The pragmatic arguments have the advantage that they relate directly to engineers' and project managers' prime responsibilities and objectives.

Consultations with the Project Review Group

A Review Group of water engineers, project managers and gender specialists with experience in multilateral and bilateral agencies, NGOs, and southern governments commented in mid-1999 on the detailed contents list and the draft of chapters 1 to 3. The review group comprised both women and men, from northern and southern countries.

There was general agreement with the proposed structure of the Guide, but some detailed comments on readability. Most reviewers thought that the large number of case studies broke up the text and made the Guide too long.

The Guide was redrafted in the light of these comments, in particular the chapter on mainstreaming gender was shortened and refocused to summarise the basis and principles of gender mainstreaming from an engineer's point of view.

In the light of the Review Group comments and WEDC research on dissemination strategies (Saywell and Cotton,

Table 1: Proposed Project Outputs

Output	Target Audience(s)
<p>5-10 page summary booklet It will effectively be an executive summary of the main practical guide. The aim of this short document will be to raise awareness amongst those may not have time or interest to read a long document and also to create demand for the main guide.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The "power brokers" i.e. senior government staff, donor advisors, senior NGO staff in North and South, senior managers in consulting firms
<p>The main Practical Guide This will be primary output to be used as a field guide and reference for practicing engineers and managers. It will take a similar form to the current draft guide but will be carefully designed to be attractive and user-friendly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interested and motivated individual engineers and managers working in the field NGOs and consultants Government staff
<p>Collected Case Studies selected useful and relevant case studies (annotated?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interested practitioners, also to be used for training material
<p>Appendix on Gender Tools</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engineers who need to understand more about tools for gender analysis
<p>Training material</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NGO staff Project staff, consultants Govt staff Students at WEDC etc

1999) it was also decided to package the material into focused outputs for specific target audiences, including a separate Summary Booklet for senior staff and a separate volume of Case Studies. The proposed outputs are summarised in Table 1.

Workshops in South Africa

In May 2000 two workshops were conducted in South Africa with the aim of pre-testing the concepts advocated in the draft guidelines and in particular the revised material in Chapter 2 – Mainstreaming Gender in Water Projects, an Engineer's Overview. Although engineers were invited to the workshops, their response was to pass the invitation to social development colleagues, presumably because the engineers thought that gender was not engineers' business. From this we concluded that we would get a larger target group audience by presentations at events which engineers routinely attend, rather than special events.

The consultation workshops themselves were largely attended by social development staff and showed that gender mainstreaming is a difficult concept to get over, not just to engineers but also to social development staff working at project and field level.

Workshops in India

In August 2000 the consultation exercise was also conducted in India. This account is based on the report of the consultation exercise by Coates and Archana (2000). The

process in India differed slightly to that of South Africa in order to focus on the specific perspective of Indian water sector engineers.

The participants were drawn from the Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran (MJP), formally the Maharashtra Water and Sewerage Board, that is responsible for the design and construction of significant rural water supply schemes prior to hand over to municipal or district councils.

The participants comprised 15 male and female engineers at various levels of project involvement and management from different State and district locations. The male engineers were in the majority and had considerably more field exposure than their mainly office based female counterparts. During the consultation exercise this fact served to demonstrate that with respect to gender and professional opportunities for female engineers, gender equity is as much an issue *within the institution* as it is in the field.

Many MJP engineers and staff have some gender awareness yet they rarely have dedicated time to reflect on the issues so that practical action can result in better water supplies for communities. The consultation exercise gave MJP participants the opportunity to deliberate on some of the practical aspects of gender mainstreaming in water projects.

Rather than a workshop the exercise was conceived as a semi-structured discussion where sector professionals could openly express their views about gender in such a way that would prove useful to the research and the participants.

Format of the consultation and results

The session took the form of the presentation of a number of questions to plenary based on a pre-determined session outline. A facilitator guided the discussion that each question prompted and based on the feedback asked the next question. Questions from the participants were also used to steer the discussion. The ideas, opinions and experiences were captured on flip chart paper and then used as the basis for group based tasks and feedback. The responses to three of the questions are shown in boxes 1 to 3.

Local case studies presented by participants were used to highlight the issues and further develop ideas.

Box 2 shows that the engineers did not understand the concept of mainstreaming as it is meant: bringing gender into the mainstream of development programme and project work rather than treating it as a marginal add on.

Box 3 includes some interesting points. Disappointingly however these engineers did not respond positively to the revised Chapter 2 on *Mainstreaming Gender in Water Projects, an Engineer's Overview*. Despite the substantial engineer's input which had gone into revising it, they did not like the perceived jargon and they were not really interested in the arguments and principles. Individuals were asked separately about the chapter, and some of these comments are listed in Box 4.

Other feedback

After changing employment from WEDC to a major international relief agency, a previous project researcher attempted to raise discussion of the issues at a water and sanitation workshop of the agency, but found there was

Box 3: Question 10: How can we mainstream gender?

- focus on 'customer satisfaction' rather than 'community' which usually = men
- focus on customer preference – which demands that we think about the needs and requirements of men, women and children
- make real links between 'supply' and 'demand'
- ask 'why change' – remove the blinkers to change – we aren't even asking the question
- make links within the sector itself
- look at ourselves – our organisational hierarchy is negative in terms of gender sensitivity, women engineers do not have the same opportunities either formally or informally to their male counterparts

Box 4: Comments on chapter on mainstreaming gender in water projects – an engineers overview

- title immediately sounds theory, need a more practical title 'Practical solutions to gender issues at work'
- it doesn't make an overworked engineer want to read it
- it will not be read by the intended audience and those who read it will already be convinced
- it is not coming out clearly enough what it is that an engineer is supposed to do - the project cycle is the key and should be brought in throughout the guidelines instead of the abstract theory
- the guidelines must be made relevant to the country/region in which they are to be used - India and Africa should not be combined

Box 1: Question 8: Name one obstacle in your job that stops you doing something about gender:

Not having the first idea what to do in a practical way to make a difference

Work pressure and time to think through what to do

Government policy (only in some States)
Political will > have to live with it

Traditional ways of thinking and the energy/willingness to challenge it

Total absence of any pressure to actually do something about it – my salary, appraisal, boss, society doesn't ask me to do anything, so I don't....

Box 2: Question 9: What does mainstreaming mean?

- giving importance
- existing system as it is today
- priorities and focusing
- accountability – monetary and non-monetary
- realising potential of
- participation of everyone

little interest (Parry-Jones, personal communication). She concluded that a lot of preparatory work is needed to create demand for material on gender mainstreaming. Discussing the project with both UK and international engineers studying at WEDC we found a mixed reaction, some were interested, others switched off at the mention of gender, others argued that the topic was being given too much attention.

Review of the project's objectives and approach

We went back to the knowledge and research project documents to decide how to proceed. The project entitled *Practical Guide to Mainstreaming Gender in Water Projects* has the following Purpose: *Tools and training materials are used by engineers and managers to incorporate gender issues in their work on water supply and sanitation and other infrastructural works in peri-urban, rural and emergency situations.*

In the light of this, the project needs to be primarily concerned with developing tools and training materials which engineers accept and try to use in their work. It also would be desirable for them to understand the underlying principles of gender mainstreaming, so they could apply these in circumstances not covered by the tools, but this is not essential.

The project was conceived and is being undertaken from a rights-based approach to gender, but this does

not mean that we need to emphasise this approach in the Practical Guide. Language which the target group regards as preaching or patronising or mystifying jargon is likely to discourage them from reading and using the Guide.

A parallel may be drawn here to social marketing techniques used to create demand for sanitation and hygiene. A funding agency may wish to encourage sanitation and hygiene for health reasons, but the most effective way to do this may be to emphasise other benefits which the target group values, such as privacy and attractiveness.

Discussion

The consultations showed that engineers and project managers are easily put off by the terms “gender” and “gender mainstreaming”. This is not simply explained by sexist attitudes and hostility to the concepts, though this is clearly a factor in some cases. There is a wider resistance to the language itself which means that many engineers do not relate to the terms, and just switch off. There is also widespread misunderstanding of what the terms mean - “gender” does not easily translate into local languages, and “mainstreaming” is an unfamiliar word.

For our project, the challenge is to follow a gender mainstreaming approach, but in such a way that we attract and retain engineers’ interest. We have decided that our initial approach will not succeed in meeting the project purpose. In starting with detailed explanation of the terms and principles of gender mainstreaming we are likely to lose engineers’ interest before they reach the material on the application of these principles at each stage of the project cycle and in various types of project.

Therefore we are currently revising the Practical Guide with a much shortened introductory section on the principles and minimum use of jargon, with the details put in an Appendix for interested readers. The reader will then reach the practical applications early in the Guide.

We are aware of the pitfall of only considering practical gender needs, which facilitate existing gender roles (e.g. enabling women to do their work better), rather than strategic gender needs which change existing gender roles (e.g. raising women’s status and power). We need to ensure we consider both practical and strategic needs.

Meeting strategic gender needs is more difficult than practical needs and takes longer to achieve because they challenge unequal gender relations. It also involves overcoming a male bias which is implicit in much development practice. This bias may be a result of conscious prejudice and discrimination. However, often it is ‘*embedded in unconscious perceptions and habits, the result of oversight, faulty assumptions, a failure to ask questions*’ (Elson, 1995, p7).

However practical and strategic needs are closely interrelated and consideration of practical needs can facilitate consideration of strategic needs.

To take some examples from water, sanitation and hygiene:

- the drudgery of women’s roles can be reduced by bringing water closer to the village and by improving hygiene practices which reduce illness of the family etc.
- women’s comfort, health, privacy and security can be improved by convenient sanitation at their home and work
- girls (especially teenage girls) need adequate sanitation provision at school.

In each of these cases, the practical improvements would also make a significant contribution to raising women’s power in their situation, and put them in a better position to seek strategic gains, e.g. through training or employment. School sanitation in particular has a major effect on the enrollment and attendance of teenage girls, which in turn has a major impact on their future status and employment opportunities. *Research has shown that education for girls is the single most effective way of reducing poverty. Women with even a few years of basic education have smaller, healthier families; are more likely to be able to work their way out of poverty; and are more likely to send their own daughters and sons to school.* (DFID, 2000)

Conclusions

Raising gender issues with engineers is a difficult topic. In these circumstances written material, such as the *Practical Guide on Gender for Engineers and Managers in the Water Sector* needs to be written in such a way that the target group will respond to them. The following approach is now being followed:

- trying to ensure that an engineer or manager picking up the Guide gets a first impression that it is useful and therefore worth looking through
- maintaining interest as the engineer reads through the Guide, by introducing practical applications early on and highlighting pragmatic arguments for the proposed approach
- using language that engineers can relate to and which does not put them off as preaching, patronising or jargon
- leading on from practical to strategic issues
- ensuring that the Guide does properly represent a gender mainstreaming approach, even if it does not use the same terminology.

Training material, which is intended to be used in an interactive way with a facilitator, can be more challenging than written material which needs to attract and retain the reader.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an interim output from a research project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

The authors would like to thank Marie Fry, Louiza Duncker, Archana Patkar and Renu Gera for their contributions to the consultation work in South Africa and India.

References

- Coates, S and Patkar, A (2000) *Consultation Exercise conducted in Mumbai, India August 10th 2000*, WEDC, Loughborough University, UK.
- DFID (2000) *Strategies for Achieving the International Development Targets: Poverty Eradication and the Empowerment of Women*, Department for International Development, UK
- Elson, D (1995) *Male Bias in the Development Process*, Manchester University Press
- House, S (1998) Gender Awareness of Engineers Working in Development: Learning from the South. *Science, Technology and Development*, vol 16, no 3, pp119-134
- Parry Jones, S A, Smout, I K and Fry M (1999) Mainstreaming gender issues in water and sanitation projects, *International conference on Mainstreaming Gender in Policy and Planning*, DPU London, June 1999
- Saywell, D L and Cotton, A P (1999) *Spreading the Word: Practical guidelines for research dissemination strategies*, WEDC, Loughborough University, UK
- Smout, I K and Parry-Jones, S A (1999) Developing a Practical Guide to Mainstreaming Gender, *Integrated Development for Water Supply and Sanitation*, 25th WEDC Conference, 1999, WEDC, Loughborough University, UK
-
- IAN SMOUT, WEDC.
SUE COATES, WEDC.
-