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ENGENDERING UTILITIES PARTNER PROFILE ISWSC, NIGERIA

USAID partners with Imo State Water and Sewerage Corporation (ISWSC) to improve women’s participation in Nigeria’s water sector.

When women serve as leaders and employees, businesses benefit and company performance improves. **USAID’s Engendering Utilities program works to increase women’s participation in the water and energy sectors globally.** In February 2020, Engendering Utilities partnered with [ISWSC](#) to design workplace initiatives that will expand job opportunities for women and enhance the utility’s performance. ISWSC supplies water to over three million Nigerians in Imo state. Over 40 percent of staff at ISWSC are women, but few occupy technical and field-based roles.

Recognizing that diverse teams build better businesses, ISWSC partnered with USAID to increase gender balance across the company and encourage more women to enter Nigeria’s water sector.

PHOTO: ARAI MONTEFORTE / USAID

NIGERIA'S WATER SECTOR

While 70 percent of Nigeria's population has access to basic water services,¹ only 20 percent have access to safe water.² Migration, urbanization, and rapid population growth have strained government efforts to deliver safe drinking water to Nigeria's urban areas, where half of the country's 185 million people have migrated over the past several decades. Today, only seven percent of the country's urban population has access to piped drinking water, and sanitation and waste management is largely unregulated across the country.³

In 2018 the government of Nigeria developed the Water and Sanitation National Action Plan and declared a state of emergency in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector. The action plan outlines a five-year emergency response strategy and long-term plan to improve access to water and sanitation services across the country.⁴

Engendering Utilities' work with ISWSC will ensure women can capitalize on increased investment in Nigeria's water sector as the government scales services to meet the needs of all Nigerians.

GENDER EQUALITY IN NIGERIA'S WORKFORCE

A complex web of contributing factors prevents women in Nigeria from joining the formal workforce; particularly the male-dominated water sector. Increased investment in Nigeria's water sector is creating economic growth opportunities, and the exclusion of women from this market deepens Nigeria's gender equality divide.

Nigeria's national gender policy prohibits discrimination against women in all forms. While this has slightly improved gender equality in some areas—like education—significant gender disparities remain when it comes to labor force participation.⁵ Less than half of Nigerian women participate in the labor force,⁶ and only 13 percent of working women are wage or salaried workers.⁷ Women are under-represented in higher-paid positions,⁸ and Nigeria's gender pay gap is one of the highest in the world, with men earning 54 percent more than women.⁹

Harmful cultural practices and gender norms further impact a woman's ability to join the formal workforce in Nigeria. Early marriage is common in the country. One survey found that 70% of women were married before age 18, and 20 percent were married before age 15 in some areas of the country.¹⁰ When employment policies and practices are inflexible, women and girls—who perform the majority of household tasks—are unable to balance the responsibilities of work and home.

Violence against women in Nigeria compounds these issues, and UN Women estimates that nearly 20 percent of women in Nigeria have experienced intimate partner violence. Domestic violence has real costs for companies. One study estimates that violence against women costs \$1.5 trillion in direct costs and lost productivity, globally.¹¹ Employers that work to reduce and mitigate violence and harassment both at home and work improve the well-being and productivity of men and women at work.

Engendering Utilities supports companies—like ISWSC—to consider and respond to factors that reduce women's workforce participation by building inclusive policies and practices that benefit men, women, and businesses in the water sector.

GENDER EQUALITY IN ACTION AT ISWSC

Engendering Utilities uses an [evidence-based methodology](#) to support women's participation in Nigeria's water sector. The program supports ISWSC to increase opportunities for women by introducing gender equality initiatives at each phase of the employee lifecycle: from reducing gender bias at the hiring stage, to creating strategies that will help retain female talent. ISWSC is in the early stages of corporatization and is eager to use the restructure as an opportunity to build gender-equitable policies into its business practices. Using a globally-recognized [framework](#) for change, Engendering Utilities is supporting ISWSC towards their goal of becoming a pioneer in gender equality among state-level water boards.

A dedicated change management coach supports the utility and works directly with three staff to become agents of change within ISWSC. A baseline assessment is conducted to identify gaps and opportunities for improving gender equality across the company. The findings are used to develop a strategic action plan that will facilitate ISWSC's gender equality goals. This is supplemented by the program's partnership with the Georgetown University McDonough School of Business, which delivers the [Gender Equity Executive Leadership Program](#) (GEELP) to three utility employees. The GEELP is a best-in-class 12-month executive course that empowers decision-makers to integrate gender equality initiatives into their corporate structure.

Engendering Utilities will also work to support and accelerate existing gender equality initiatives underway at ISWSC, including:

- **Review of the Equal Employment Opportunity Statement and HR Manual**, which expresses and formalizes corporate commitment to gender and social inclusion, to ensure strong gender integration.
- **Development of a Male Engagement Strategy**, which identifies and supports male leaders as champions of gender equality at ISWSC.
- **Increase recruitment of female students**, based on the utility's recognition that female students are excelling in areas such as engineering and is eager to hire and support this burgeoning female talent.

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NOTES

¹ Defined as “drinking water from an improved source, provided collection time is not more than 30 minutes for a roundtrip including queuing.” Retrieved from: <https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2018-04/JMP-2017-update-methodology.pdf>

² WHO/UNICEF. (2017). Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) for Water, Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene. Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.H2O.SMDW.UR.ZS?locations=NG>

³ USAID Global Waters. (2019). Professionalizing Nigeria’s Water Sector: Transforming Service Delivery One State at a Time. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/usaaid-global-waters/professionalizing-nigerias-water-sector-transforming-service-delivery-one-state-at-a-time-24363c659e74>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ World Politics Review. (2017). Women's Rights in Nigeria: What's Holding Nigeria's Women Back? Retrieved from <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/20822/womens-rights-in-nigeria-what-s-holding-nigeria-s-women-back>

⁶ ILOSTAT Database. (n.d.). Female labor force. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=NG>

⁷ World Bank. (n.d.). Gender Data Portal. Retrieved from <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/nigeria>

⁸ Fapohunda, Tinuke. M. (2013). The Gender Pay Gap in Nigeria: Causes and Remedies. Retrieved from <https://www.mcser.org/journal/index.php/mjss/article/view/208/193>

⁹ GenderGap Africa. (2019). Retrieved from <https://gendergap.africa>

¹⁰ Demographic Health Surveys (DHS). (2017). Retrieved from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.M18.2024.FE.ZS?locations=NG>

¹¹ Copenhagen Consensus Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/publication/post-2015-consensus-conflict-and-violence-assessment-hoeffler-fearon>