



# The Role of Women in Community-Driven Sanitation Transformation in Rwanda

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## Introduction

Access to basic sanitation remains a significant challenge in many developing countries. Behind the statistics, however, are powerful human stories of change: community volunteers working together to transform mindsets, habits, and ultimately, lives. One such story unfolds in Rwanda through the Isoko y'Ubuzima<sup>1</sup> project, a U.S. Government-funded initiative aimed at expanding access to sustainable water and sanitation services in rural districts of Rwanda. This learning story highlights how men and women are collaborating to improve sanitation in their communities by promoting behavior change and increasing demand for products like SATO pans, which offer an affordable and hygienic solution for safely managing human waste.

## Women at the Forefront of Sanitation Change

In many Rwandan households, women are champions of sanitation transformation. Sanitation product sales agents, such as Mukeshimana Speciose from Kayonza, have observed that, due to their constant presence at home and active participation in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), women often lead household decision-making on hygiene and sanitation.

VSLAs are community-managed financial groups that promote savings and provide small, collateral-free loans. These loans benefit their own participants – primarily women - with limited income. Monthly contributions are minimal, sometimes as low as 1 USD<sup>2</sup> (CARE Rwanda, 2020). Decisions are made by consensus, fostering trust, collective ownership, and strong female participation. Members often invest in household development and income-generating activities, and the groups serve as platforms for sharing information and promoting women's engagement in community development (MINALOC, 2021; UN Women Rwanda, 2022).

For example, a mother in Kayonza successfully convinced her husband to invest in a SATO pan by highlighting its health benefits for their children. Initially reluctant due to other financial priorities, the husband ultimately agreed, demonstrating that women's empowerment and advocacy are pivotal in shaping family decisions about sanitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Isoko y'Ubuzima (Kinyarwanda for “Source of Life”)

<sup>2</sup> 1 USD = 1,460 Rwandan francs as of the end of April 2026



*Rose Kanziga, standing in a community showroom she runs in Nyamagabe district*

## **Men's Growing Involvement: A Promising Shift**

While traditionally viewed as a lower priority by men, sanitation is increasingly gaining their attention, especially through tailored engagement strategies. Sales agent Jacky from Kabarondo has found that evening home visits, timed when men are more likely to be at home, have been successful in changing male perceptions and behaviors.

Once indifferent, men are not only purchasing SATO pans but also encouraging peers to follow suit. As Jacky says, "They have started calling me themselves." This change is crucial, as men often control household finances, making their engagement essential to sustaining sanitation improvements.

## **Sales Agents as Community Catalysts**

The heart of this sanitation shift lies with the dedicated community-based sales agents. Female agents have been particularly successful due to their proximity to households and the alignment of sanitation with their everyday responsibilities. Speciose, for instance, has facilitated the installation of over 220 SATO pans in Kayonza, largely by leveraging women's participation in VSLAs, which give participants access to their own savings and allow them to take loans for household improvements.

In contrast, male agents like Jean Bosco in Ngoma have achieved success by leveraging peer influence and engaging in community campaigns. Although women remain the main buyers, men are increasingly convinced through district campaigns and awareness meetings organized by local officials.



*A sales agent explaining the use of a SATO tap to a resident during a community mobilization in Kirehe district*

## **Challenges and the Path Forward**

Despite these encouraging trends, challenges remain. Rising prices and reduced sales commissions pose a threat to the sustainability of the sanitation sales model. This is particularly impactful for male agents who may not have the same day-to-day household presence as their female counterparts.

The key to enduring success lies in collaborative decision-making within the family. By empowering women as change agents and engaging men through tailored outreach strategies, programs like *Isoko y'Ubuzima* can help create resilient, community-led sanitation solutions.

## **Conclusion**

Sanitation transformation in Rwanda is not just about infrastructure; it's about influence and innovation. Women are leveraging financial access and community leadership to push sanitation and hygiene to the forefront, while men are stepping up through targeted engagement and peer motivation. Together, they are not just improving toilets; they are transforming health outcomes and securing a better future for their families.

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