

The role of women in water management—global trends and lessons learned

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Introduction

Women constitute half of the world's population. They are the caretakers of children, the guardians of family health and well-being and, frequently, the managers of household resources.

In the developing world, where millions of families still lack clean water and adequate sanitation, it is the women who ensure that their families have water. Yet, despite their number, and their roles and responsibilities, women often have no voice and so no choice in decisions about the kind of services they receive in relation to water supply, sanitation and health.

Many countries have recognized the benefits of involving women in all aspects of their water and sanitation programmes. Most government guidelines, project designs and programme policies now incorporate a gender dimension: this is regarded as crucial to the sustainability of any programme or project. It has been accepted that water-development and management policies and programmes that exclude women as actors, and as an interest group, bypass half the population and are lower in efficiency and effectiveness.

At the implementation level, however, the promotion of a gender balance is often lacking.

This reveals that it is not enough to accord women paper rights through policy, law or institutional reform. Instead, the overall goal of any gender strategy for the water sector should be: to develop a framework which ensures that both women's and men's concerns and experiences are an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of water projects—as well as of legislation, policies and programmes.

Gender and water sector

Both men and women shoulder responsibilities relating to water. But the gender division of labour within societies determines who has control over its use. Balanced attention to the gender-dimension optimizes



In Africa, 90 per cent of the household water and wood needs for food preparation is done by women. In many regions of the world, women spend up to five hours per day collecting fuelwood and water. (Photo: FAO)

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social and economic development, and reduces competition and conflicts over water.

Women, however, are not a homogeneous social group. Class, age, religion and ethnicity create important variations in the conditions under which women live, influencing the needs they express, as well as their priorities and demand for water. In general, women comprise an above-average percentage of those designated as poor, but the physical and social realities governing water supply and sanitation are often markedly different. The problems connected with women's roles can therefore vary radically because of geographical context.

Women and water in the mid-1970s

When community participation in water supply and sanitation started in the second half of the 1970s, it was synonymous with the participation of men. In project meetings and assemblies, mainly men would participate. If women attended, their culturally prescribed role was to listen, not to speak or take part in planning and decision-making. Maintenance, financing and management training, functions and decision-making were also male prerogatives. Women were mainly involved in the physical work. They helped in digging the trenches or provided food and drinks to well-digging teams. After construction, they

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would become mainly responsible for preserving hygiene around the new pumps and taps, doing preventive maintenance and site cleaning.

Women's demands not met

In water and land development programmes in many countries around the world, demands by women for domestic water supply were overlooked. As a result, water points for domestic use were located far from the settlement areas and women had to walk long distances to collect water. This resulted in lower amounts of water collected for the family, thus reducing hygiene and health. It also reduced their time and energy for other development activities such as education.

In other programmes, women were not consulted on the design and location of domestic water points. When the points did not meet women's requirements, they were not used. Giving more health education did not make a difference, because the women had strong and valid reasons for disliking the imposed locations and design. Failure to consult women on latrine design and location has also resulted in inappropriateness of new facilities for local conditions and use.

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Collecting water is usually a woman's or a girl's job. (Photo: WHO)

Women's expertise, commitment and indigenous management functions unrecognized

Women have traditionally played key roles in decision-making on the use and management of water sources. Though men take the formal decisions on new construction and dig new wells, women have culturally accepted ways of initiating and mobilizing male resources and often carefully manage indigenous domestic water supplies. Yet, indigenous management systems of water are seldom assessed and built upon when installing new water supply and sanitation services. As a result, women's traditional public management roles have gone unrecognized and women have lost management functions, jobs and status when new water and waste systems arrive. Existing systems are neglected and holistic water resources management traditions are overlooked.

Focus on participation of women in the mid-1980s

In the second half of the 1980s, it was realized that the lack of participation of women in planning, maintenance and management had negative impacts on the quality of the services and the overall position of women and their participation in development. As a result, many projects began to take special measures to involve women in decision-making and management of services. However, this greater focus on the participation of women was not without its risks either.

Women getting more work without influence and compensation

Paid male mechanics were found not to perform well. They were therefore replaced by women. The women got technical training but, unlike the men, no arrangements were made for community payment for their maintenance and repair services.

Women who were engaged as voluntary water tariff collectors found they had to spend more time on tariff collection than formerly on the collection of water. Women sat on water and sanitation committees but without any real say in decision-making. In some cases, all important decisions were made at higher levels, where no women were represented.

Men withdrawing from responsibilities

Water committees became all female committees and women became responsible for all work and even, for all payments for operation and maintenance. When only women were selected for training, husbands and fathers did not allow their wives and daughters to participate.

Men bypassed in hygiene improvements

The focus on women's responsibilities in health and hygiene has increased their already heavy workload, failing to address the availability of work-alleviating tools and the re-division of work within the households. In most countries, the work—e.g. constructing latrines—and investment decisions needed for better family sanitation and hygiene are traditionally the responsibility of men. Yet health and hygiene education projects do not address men on their responsibilities.

Furthermore, in a number of cultures, women cannot influence the behaviour of older males, be they husbands, fathers and fathers-in-law or adult sons. Egyptian women said they felt powerless in influencing male behaviour. Tanzanian girls were frustrated by getting hygiene education in schools but not being able to influence conditions and practices in either their paternal homes or in their own home after marriage.

A gender approach being adopted in the mid-1990s

From the above review of historical developments and cases, it is evident that neither an exclusive focus on men nor on women will work. Both approaches have led to ineffective and unsustainable services and behaviour change and have had undesirable effects on wider socio-economic development.

If projects and programmes do not take the roles and responsibilities of both men and women into consideration, they may prevent men as well as women from participating in areas where, precisely, they have the capacity and influence.

There is therefore a need for a more equitable gender approach in service participation and management by both women and men. In this approach, the access to new information and knowledge, the division of work and the sharing of decision-making, resources and benefits are divided more equitably between men and women of different age groups, classes and ethnic and religious groups.

In more recent programmes several examples of “promising practices” in gender-equitable approaches can be noted.

Africa

In Doss, Niger, the issue of gender was first raised by the external support agency. However, the manager of the community participation programme remarked that the programme itself had also noted the overburdening of women in the villages. For the water supply, sanitation and hygiene programme, it was also a mat-

ter of common sense to involve women more in the water management and get more male support in matters of health and hygiene. But how to change behaviour across the board: of men and women in villages, as well as staff? To start off, gender-determined tasks and authority were investigated for old and young women and men and boys and girls in five villages in the programme area. These formed the basis for discussions about gender divisions of work and influence with project staff at village and programme level. The workshops have led to a greater gender consciousness of staff and also to some changes in their own practices. Acceptance and pursuit of gender measures in the programme—organizing separate meetings with women; shared committees; raising the awareness of men on their responsibilities in water payments—have increased.

Asia

The women of Limaï in Indonesia marry into the village of their husbands and continue to be considered strangers, although they belong to the same ethnic group as their in-laws. The shared experience has created high solidarity among them and has stimulated them to unite and organize around their most pressing need—a better domestic water supply. They formed a women's group that initiated the water project, chose the locations and raised the initial capital by cultivating a communal field. Having got the project off the ground, they then invited men into the local water committees that manage the service. The management work is divided along gender lines: a man is in the chair at village level and a woman is the village water treasurer. Women chair water committees at neighbourhood level. Men committee members clear the paths and sites from vegetation, open and close the water points and manage conflicts, spending in total about three times as much time as women members. Previously, the women's group raised all the income to maintain the service. Recently, they have been able to convince the men to also contribute financially as the domestic water benefits all members of the household.

Latin America

In Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 400 000 people live in rapidly growing peri-urban settlements without basic social services. In the early 1980s, most of these communities lacked access to a drinking-water source. A family could spend as much as one-third of its income buying water from a vendor.

In 1987, UNICEF and the National Water Board (SANAA) began a programme to provide safe, potable

water from boreholes and surface water. Under the terms of the programme, a community becomes eligible for a water project by setting up an independent water committee to run and manage its own water system from the construction process onward. Eventually, the community becomes the owner of the water system, and is responsible for collecting fees, managing the administration, operation and maintenance.

Women are the driving force behind the organization of communities, filling approximately one-third of the positions on water boards. Some 62 per cent of them function as committee president or financial controller. They make up half of the participants in plumbing workshops.

Over 150 000 people living in 95 per cent of Tegucigalpa's settlements have today benefited from the water-supply programme. Much of the programme's success must be attributed to women willing to organize themselves and motivate the men to work for the benefit of their families and neighbours. Gaining access to clean water was the first step in obtain-

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In Honduras, many communities collect their water from small streams that form near their houses in the rainy season. During the dry season, these water sources dry up and the women and children must walk long distances up and down steep hills to get water from larger streams. It is commonplace for them to have to walk one hour each way. (Source: WaterPartners International/Julie Daniels)

ing other services and improving the community as a whole.

Lessons learned

The cases mentioned indicate that awareness of the importance of a gender approach in water supply, sanitation and hygiene is gradually increasing. In the experience of organizations such as PROWSS/UNDP in over 1 000 communities in 20 countries, four principles of overall importance are outlined below:

- *To obtain women's involvement we must go beyond women.*

There has been a tendency to interpret women's involvement too narrowly. Experience shows that women's (and men's) involvement in water and sanitation projects has implications for every project component, including choice of technology, community organization strategies, affordability and cost recovery, human-resource development, sanitation and health education, as well as applied research, monitoring and evaluation. As long as women's involvement is viewed as one project component, women's involvement, especially in large-scale water and sanitation programmes, will continue to remain peripheral;

- *Successful projects are ones in which managers have become "managers of change" rather than "managers of construction schedules", so that projects evolved and grew beyond the objectives originally conceived.*

This may be characteristic of projects at the particular time of the water decade. Water and sanitation projects in Asia and Africa had changed. In Bangladesh, the Urban Volunteer programme in the slums of Dhaka started essentially as a programme to deliver oral re-hydration salt packets to slum-dwellers and gradually changed to become a primary health care programme. In Kenya, a small project in Kwale started as a hand-pump testing project changed and expanded to become an integrated water and sanitation project. These projects have attempted to involve beneficiaries, both women and men, in a process that attempts to facilitate user involvement in decision-making, predict unpredictability, expect change and hence build adaptability to changing situations in their programmes.

- *Women's participation does not preclude men's or children's participation nor does women's participation equal the number of women physically present or involved in a project/programme.*

Women's involvement does not translate to a number of women vs. the number of men present at meetings or being trained. Physical presence is not always a reliable indicator of involvement, given the great diversity of cultural and economic contexts. The presence of women as the sole criterion can be misleading. Similarly, women's involvement is not an "all or none" phenomenon, but needs to be considered in terms of the needs of different categories of women (age, wealth, religion, caste) and also needs to be linked with project effectiveness. Thus, while it is critical to make special efforts to train women as pump mechanics and to ensure their success, it may self-defeating to train women exclusively.

The most important indicator of women's involvement at all levels, from villages to higher policy levels within governments and international agencies, is involvement in decision-making. This criterion is crucial to avoid creating a situation whereby we actually increase women's workload by projects that are meant to decrease their workload.

- *To involve women and men, create sustainable systems and reach the poorest, water and sanitation programmes must include or be linked to economic development and poverty-alleviation programmes.*

In analysing successful programmes, it has been found that direct support for micro-enterprises' development or linkages established with broader poverty alleviation programmes, are crucial. In Indonesia, for example, it was found that the driving force for women's and men's involvement in water-user groups was not water improvement but the increase in cash income through vegetable and fruit production. If we expect poor people, especially women, to pay for water and sanitation facilities, we must provide or create opportunities for earning increased income.

Conclusion

Programme and project planners have come to realize that equitable gender participation is an essential element throughout the project cycle. Data separated by sex on roles and responsibilities between men and women have shown that men, women, boys and girls are all involved in, and have their specific knowledge of, tasks and requirements for the management of water supply and sanitation in the house, the community and the surrounding area.

Equitable gender participation throughout the project cycle permits men and women to consider a range of options and their consequences. It also assists them to choose technologies, designs, maintenance, management and financing systems that best fit their needs and potential. Such a gender balance is needed since neither the services themselves nor wider development associated with them can be sustainable when one-half of the population is either passed by or overburdened. Only when both women and men can participate in an equitable manner and services respond to their differential demands and capacities can we hope for an effective and sustained water and sanitation sector which is both a condition for, and a part of, wider socio-economic development.

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