



Women and Water

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Abstract

To begin with two different approaches to “women and water” are explained: eco-feminism based on women’s strong relation with the environment, and a gender approach to water management, in which empowerment is a central concept.

Gender is used in the broad meaning, including different power relations, such as age, ethnic differences, socio-economic situation, etc. Also water is a complex entity, and includes all water uses: for drinking and domestic purposes, for sanitation, for food security, and for a sustainable environment. This even includes solid waste management. The concept IWRM (Integrated Water Resource Management) is explained in this framework.

The specific gender aspects of urban water management versus the rural situations world wide are described. The issue is raised if Northern women can learn from Southern women in relation to control over water.

Current issues and trends related to women-and-water are listed and described, such as privatisation of water supply and sanitation, financing of water services, conflicts and climate change. How do these trends influence women differently from men, and how can women as well as men be active agents influencing processes in a positive way?

Lastly follows a brief explanation of the work of the Gender and Water Alliance, an international network, with different members worldwide, and with the ultimate aim to improve the water situation of poor women, men and children, briefly listing what is found effective in change towards empowerment and towards access to water.

Women and Water

Approaches

Regarding women and water, it is often said that women have natural ties with water, more so than men, that women are the keepers of the earth and especially of water, and that therefore women should be singled out as those who are responsible for the environment as a whole and the preservation of clean water in particular. Those who follow this idea are called eco-feminists.

The reality all over the world is different, and certainly less romantic. It is true that women are major water-managers, they provide their families with water, they themselves are not necessarily the biggest users. That is the situation for the majority of people in this world. Providing this water to the household is not at all romantic, it is heavy, water always has to be

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carried up, never down, women suffer from trauma's resulting from too heavy loads, which they have to carry in many places for long distances. Apart from heavy this is time-consuming work, and the time they use for carrying water cannot be used for other work or for pleasure.

That is the victim side of the story. There also is another side, which has to do with knowledge and strength. Most women in this world are very strong, especially because of this hard work, and they are clever, because they have the knowledge to find water in places and times, where none of us could survive.

As Gender and Water Alliance, we always try to emphasise both sides of the coin, women are victims, yes, but not only victims, they are also capable actors and decision-makers. Equitable access to water and equal involvement of both women and men are what we visualise in the future. This is a different picture from that of eco-feminists, who believe that the earth will be saved if women take the responsibility. For GWA it is more important that everybody takes responsibility for the environment and for water management, men, women, poor and rich, young and old. Women have too many responsibilities as it is, and equitable sharing of work will make everybody more conscious of what people and this world need. This is a gender approach.

Gender

Gender has to do with men and women, the relations between them, the asymmetric power differences, hierarchy, and difference in participation in decision-making. Gender is not just the difference between men and women, it also includes age differences because they have a large influence on the position of a person. In most South Asian contexts an older woman will have a large say in what younger women of the household should do or not do. That is also a gender issue. Children are boys and girls, and they are brought up differently, the relations amongst them and those between them and the elder people are gender relations as well. Men and women have different responsibilities, in the house but also in the village or community. Differences and power positions depend also on religion, socio-economic class, caste, ethnicity, urban or rural location. So when we use the concept gender relations, we must not forget the differences between women and women and the differences amongst men. Gender has a different form in different cultures, places, and also changes over time. Like culture, gender is dynamic, if people want to change their own culture, it will change. The key word for gender in relation to development is change.

So, gender is used in the broad meaning, including different power relations, such as age, ethnic differences, socio-economic relations, etc. Such power relations persist on all levels, including within the household. Gender is everywhere and important for all development.

Empowerment

Empowerment of people will result in a better world and in more equitable access to water. Empowerment has four elements, which are interrelated. Empowerment is the process in which categories of people and also individuals manage to improve their own position, possibly with some external support. Empowerment has four interdependent elements, which



are the social, the economic, the political and the physical aspects. In water supply and sanitation all four elements are strongly present.

1. Social empowerment relates to the self image women (and other people) have, and how they are seen by the rest of the family, in the community, the society at large. When women (or for example low cast or indigenous groups) are seen as second class citizens, to change this is social empowerment. In sanitation usually the lowest people and women are responsible for the work most looked down upon: cleaning of toilets, removing of sanitary waste and other solid waste, caring for sick people, etc. If these activities can be considered as most important for the health of the families and the communities instead of just dirty work, the position and social status of those who do this work will rise. If this work is done by all instead of just the lowest categories of people, it will also have a great empowering effect.
2. Economic empowerment deals with work and income and the decisions related to work: can a person decide her or himself which work to do, and can she or he decide about how the income and other benefits will be spent? Related to water management and sanitation it is clear that the most dirty work is done by women mainly and that it is usually not paid at all. Therefore it does not improve her situation, even if it is a lot of necessary work.
3. Political empowerment does not particularly relate to political parties, but rather to the right to organise one selves, the right to participate in democratic institutions, but also in village water committees. In general and globally it can be said that the more hierarchical a society is, the lower the position of women. Related to water, the political aspects of empowerment are important for women, because it will mean that they will have a say in decision making, and not just take part in heavy and dirty work. If they will be able to influence development efforts, they will feel empowered.
4. Physical aspects of empowerment are the right to decide about one's own bodies, about one's sexuality, the number of children and the spacing between them, and the right to physical dignity with regards to sanitation facilities available to women, especially. Also the right to safety and security, that is not to be harassed or even raped when in need of a toilet during the night, and not to fall with too heavy loads of water.

It is important to realise that these four sides to empowerment should not be seen as empowering if in isolation. What good does a high status do to a person, if there is no way to influence development efforts, and that there is no dignity because she has to wait to the darkness, to relief herself, or if there are beautiful toilet blocks, but the costs are so high that she can't afford it. And at the same time she has to remove the solid waste, without payment, just because it is women's work. This as examples of how the four elements interact in sanitation.

Water, IWRM

Water, like gender, is everywhere and is important for all development and in fact for all life. We talk about Integrated Water Resource Management, and we mean with that that all water uses have to be taken into account, and also the social aspects such as gender. Different water uses are drinking water, domestic water use, sanitation, water for agriculture and food security, water for industries, and water for nature: for a sustainable environment. This even includes solid waste management. In theory it is easier to understand IWRM than in practice. It is not difficult to see that water used for one purpose is not usually available for another



purpose. Still, to manage the available water in an efficient way, which also gives equitable access, is in practice to be fought for, and not easily achieved. Asymmetric power relations result in more and cheaper water for industries, whilst women world wide have to do with ever less water for their families.

Irrigation is much more controlled by rich farmers, than by the poor. Water for agriculture: worldwide, women are small farmers, and the majority of food producers do so in rainfed agriculture. This last group of rainfed farmers are mainly women. Most people in this world eat the food women produce. When cash crops are introduced, the idea is that families have more income, so it would reduce poverty. But in reality the family often does not benefit from that money, whilst the self-subsistence crops diminish, resulting in more malnutrition.

Urban water issues

So far, what I said is true for many parts of the world, including urban areas. Still, whilst before it were especially rural areas where people depend on dirty surface water, the problems are increasingly serious in urban areas, because cities grow explosively and infrastructure does not expand and is hardly maintained. Dry taps are more common than a regular water supply, that is in neighbourhoods with piped systems.

When in the sixties I lived in South Asian countries I was shocked to see that what seemed villages on the map, which nobody had heard of were much bigger than Amsterdam. In the seventies when we lived in East Africa, towns were of reasonable size and there were hardly cities of over a million inhabitants. Now these same small towns have expanded to large cities, much bigger than Amsterdam. For example Kisumu then was perhaps 30.000 people, I am making a guess here, a real small provincial town. Now it is more than one and a half million people, whilst Amsterdam has grown from 650,000 to perhaps 900,000, or not even. You can imagine, or maybe not, how existing infrastructure for water supply and sanitation can never keep up with such explosive growth. Recently I was in Lagos, Nigeria, a city with an estimated population of 25 million. It is not a small effort to attempt to manage the water there. Endless illegal settlements there hang over the lagoons, houses built on poles, nowhere even the technical possibilities for toilets. And neither for water supply.

Major urban water-and-women issues include the lack of sanitation and solid waste management. Whilst the lack of toilets in rural areas is bad, it is obviously worse in urban areas, where it is so difficult to find a place for women to relieve themselves. They have to wait till it is dark, and run risks of sexual harassment, insects or wild animals, and falling. They drink less, which results in bladder and kidney problems. Public toilet-blocks in urban slums, if they exist, are usually very unhygienic, too few for lots of people, and still too expensive for women to use. Diseases of themselves, their elderly and their children, reduce drastically the number of days they can do productive work. Sanitation is a terrible poverty trap. Girls are kept out of schools because of bad toilets or no toilets at all. Especially when they reach the age of menstruation, they cannot utilise the dirty narrow toilets without locks, without water, and with no clean place to put anything. These girls lack education just



because of lack of toilets, and will again get too many children and bring them up in an old-fashioned way, somehow another generation without development, a spiral downwards. To have more women in certain positions does not always help. A head-mistress in Kenya, when asked why the toilets for girls were smaller and fewer than those for boys, replied: A toilet is a toilet, they only have to relieve themselves, that's all.

Solid waste removal also belongs under the heading Water management. In many, or even in most cities solid waste is seen as a number one health hazard and problem which is difficult to solve. Nowadays new systems, high tech or traditional, are thought of to solve the problems and utilise the waste for energy production, and all sorts of recycling. Often women are included in this work to earn some money with it. The solution itself can also mean a health hazard for women and their families, if they have not learnt the dangers and the if they have no gloves and shoes or boots to protect themselves.

Urban agriculture is an important source of income for many women in slums. Waste water is used, and one is not always aware of the health implications, if used carelessly.

Cities in the North

Here in the North we often take the reliable high quality water supply for granted. Nevertheless, also the systems here are vulnerable and clean groundwater often threatened by pollution from industries, from agriculture and from sewage. The gender aspects of water in Northern countries and cities are not so obvious. On the one hand, also here, women are more in need of hygiene than men, but because of empowerment, and of more equal gender relations, women can demand their rights, in this case their rights to water. Those who are empowered, women or men, don't need support in their struggle for access to water, the way women and men in developing cities need. Women in Europe also need water, But for most European women it is not needed to go out and fetch water, they pay their bills to the water company.

Nevertheless, not all women and men in the North are empowered, and like in the South, those who cannot make their voice heard and who have to take the situation as it comes, could learn from the many years of experience in the South. This is especially true for poor neighbourhoods, where sewage systems are not effective, and sanitation poor. Water supply may not be safe nor sustainable. Over the years in developing countries, a lot of experience has been gained with participation of poor women and men in their own water and sanitation services, so called demand driven water services. Theories and practice has been developed, a lot of money been invested in these efforts. Cultures and gender relations are different everywhere, but important lessons can be learnt from the South.

Current issues and trends

Water is a human right, most people believe this. It does not mean that all water supply needs to be free. Financing of water supply is a controversial issue. There are many different situations. Sometimes the water prices increase, but the taps remain dry, you can imagine that



people don't support such policies. This happened in Nigeria, for example. A different example is South Africa. Up to 25 litres per day per person is free, and it is in the constitution that it is the duty of the government to supply this. Recently we were in Cape Town and visited a few illegal settlements. There we found some other extremities. In those parts which have not been settled yet, toilet-blocks and water stand-posts are already placed. Illegal immigrants, especially from Zimbabwe, come to these areas, and immediately they start demanding their rights: where is the water, where are the toilets?

From our members we hear that especially poor women suffer from water privatisation. Whoever manages the services and the utilities, still governments remain responsible for water for their inhabitants. But there are lots of governments who do not deliver at all, and in those cases the private sector can mean an improvement for poor people. Poor women, who depend on daily labour, rather pay for water, which they can when and where they want it, than wait for days and nights till the government tanker comes, or the tap starts dripping. In general the poor people pay much more for water in cities than those in the better neighbourhoods, with piped water and monthly bills. Governments are not all the same, and neither is the private sector homogeneous. Some large multinationals with their high tech equipment pump groundwater from very deep, leaving whole areas dried out, and all wells dry too. Both women and men are help less against this disaster, unless strongly organised.

Climate change seriously affects people, and all over the world women more than men. This is again because of the different responsibilities. In case of floods, there is no drinking water, there are no clean and dry cloths, and the toilets don't work. Hygiene, which is so important for women and children can not be cared for. And continuous droughts, longer and more intense than before, are disastrous for women in those regions where there already was a big problem. Samburu women in Kenya have only a few water-points in their whole region, so they don't do much else than walking for water, girls cannot go to school, so the next generation will not be better than the present, in their options, they are away from the cities, so nobody sees them, and their voice is not heard. If one or two of their men get a seat in parliament or even in the government, they will soon forget how the situation of their women folk was and still continues to be. As a result of climate change more men migrate to cities and to industries, leaving women as farmers with fewer hands to do the same work, but with less water and with more floods.

Another increasingly important theme is about international conflicts over water which result in war situations in which women suffer most. Women have the responsibilities for their children and their elderly and themselves, to supply water every day, war or no war, and supply food. For men the situation becomes one of fighting, but women keep their responsibilities, whilst they have lost all access to the necessary resources. Especially in war situations and in refugee camps, men are the main decision makers, who are not aware of the daily necessities. Also when a fragile peace has been achieved, one invests in and talks of reconciliation, democracy and good governance, but there is usually no attention for the victims of rape and of daily harassment, the women, who have survived only motivated by their duty to care for their children. Their poor water situation continues, without extra support.



When people are ill, women of the household will look after them. They have to get more water, and they need more income, but have less time for paid work. Families with HIV/Aids have these problems, fewer family members to help with the work, whilst there is more work to be done, and more need for money to pay for the expensive drugs.

Instead of looking at women as the keepers of the planet, by nature, because they get children, let us look at power relations, empowerment of women men and minorities. Those who do the work need to be in a position of control, need to make the decisions. That is usually not the situation. Women know more about water, about quantity, quality, for which purpose, in which time off the year. And that knowledge is not utilised. Ecofeminists would probably utilise women's knowledge, but do not fight for more equal responsibilities, and equal shares of the work, neither for more decision-making power with women, and those who are involved most.

The work of the Gender and Water Alliance

I will quickly tell something about the GWA. We are an international network with close to 1000 members in more than 100 countries. Our members are individuals and organisations, who work in water management, water supply and sanitation, agriculture and environmental conservation. Many are also gender experts, but not all. More than 40% of our members are men, and quite some of the functionaries also. This is important for us, because water managers, water professionals, and water decision-makers are still mainly men. And it is them we want to reach. On the one hand we would like to see that more women are active as water professionals but whilst this still is not the case, we have to enable the men to take gender issues into account. They have to be aware that women and men have different needs, different interests, responsibilities, tasks and knowledge related to water, be it for domestic use, for sanitation, for food security or for the environment. And they need to be supported in mainstreaming gender in their work. Then their work will be able to benefit poor women and men and children, which is helpful for all. There are a lot of men who are willing and committed to see the special position of women, but they don't always know how to involve them, and how to work in their favour. That is where GWA comes in. Our work consists of Capacity building we do training of trainers. And training in gender and IWRM. We develop material which we disseminate amongst water managers and various other target groups. Our members also contribute from their experience. We do a lot of work together with partners. After all gender has to be mainstreamed into certain work, and not in the blue sky or in isolation, so we need partners to work with. The work with UN-Habitat in Water for African Cities and in The Lake Victoria Water and Sanitation Initiative are important examples of our urban work. We have the website in 5 languages including Arabic. We Train gender ambassadors, which are members who represent us in international events, where they try to ask attention for gender aspects. We help engender policies on different levels, with the ultimate aim to improve the water situation of poor women, men and children.