

WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE IN WATER - REFLECTIONS ON EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

By Women for Water Partnership (WfWP)



Women's Roles in Sustainable Development

Meeting current and future water needs for food, energy, health, sanitation, economic activity and ecosystem maintenance is one of the main challenges of our times, and central to achieving sustainable development. Notwithstanding the long-time acknowledgement of the importance of women in this sector, the potential contributions of women to water development remain largely untapped to date.

To enable women to contribute meaningfully, the underlying causes of gender inequality need to be addressed. Women's empowerment and strengthening women's civil society groups are therefore intrinsic elements of a transformative development agenda.

Social differences between women and men result in gender roles that may vary substantially between countries, cultures, ethnicities and generations. Such gender related differences might result in different consequences of policies and programmes for women and men, influencing their possibilities, potential, and outlook to lead productive lives. Distinctive gender roles also importantly determine the options for women to participate in public life and therefore their potential contributions to society. www.womenforwater.org

The proposed SDGs address many of the structural causes of gender inequality, including issues such as elimination of discrimination,



INVOLVING BOTH WOMEN AND MEN IN INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCES INITIATIVES CAN INCREASE PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY. THIS ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS SOME REMARKABLE CASES OF MEMBERS OF WOMEN FOR WATER PARTNERSHIP WHERE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE. THEY REPRESENT AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO THE WATER FOR LIFE DECADE.

violence, and harmful practices against women, recognizing and reducing unpaid care work, promoting access to and control over assets and property, and reversing unequal participation in private and public decision-making, as well as achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all, access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and ending open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. A recent global survey on the role of women in development confirms that domestic water and safe sanitation is a domain with a particular strong potential to transform the lives of women and girls.

In many societies and cultures women and girls are the traditional water carriers, while their influence in decision-making regarding water is limited. Yet the positive results of involving women in the design and planning stages of water initiatives are multiple, from reducing corruption and increasing transparency to better financial management and empowering women by example. As an illustrative example, UNICEF points to the findings of a World Bank evaluation of 122 water projects, stating that the effectiveness of a project was six to seven times higher where women were involved than where they were not.

Involving women in water decision-making also addresses overall questions of gender equality in the process. The central role of women in the provision, management and safeguarding of water is anchored in the Dublin principles that were agreed during the International Conference on Water and Environment (ICWE) in Dublin, Ireland in 1992, 10 have been integrated in the water programmes of UNCED Agenda 2111 and are the corner stones of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) ever since.

Women's Leadership in Water Cooperation: Good practices from the Women for Water Partnership

In a water-secure world, policies and practices would respond equitably to the water needs of all citizens, regardless of their social identity, status and gender. This would require consulting diverse groups of citizens and stakeholders, but also engaging them during implementation.

Stakeholders are any party who may affect or be affected by projects or programmes, ranging from governments, regulatory agencies and businesses to communities, civil society and NGOs.

Traditional, top-down management places women and other civil society groups on the side of the affected, those that need to be provided for rather than participating in their own development. In contrast, participatory water governance considers all stakeholders as actors with common but differentiated responsibilities in ensuring the sustainable use and management of water resources. Women's groups and networks are organized at local, national and international levels and encompass a diversity of professional, religious, and political affiliations, ethnicities and cultures, as well as thematic interests.

The social capital represented by women's organizations can be a substantial resource for collective action at all levels, contributing to social cohesion, democracy, economic development and sustainability of interventions.

Evidence shows that meaningful involvement of women in water resources development, management, and use can lead to effective solutions to water problems, helping governments avoid poor investments and expensive mistakes, making projects more sustainable, and ensuring that infrastructure development yields maximum social, economic, and environmental results and furthers sustainable development goals.

Women's civil society organizations have successfully provided water and sanitation for the poor, curbing corruption and preventing conflicts, increasing resource efficiency, as well as addressing water management in an integrated manner for sustainable livelihoods. Their strength lies in their ability to reach down into the capillaries of society, they can inform and engage community members, and build trust resulting in locally owned projects and programmes.

Some of the examples of women participation in water sector are given below:

The Situation in Tanzania

Women Organizing for water provision and

management under the umbrella of women for water partnership, women's civil society leaders in Tanzania have organized themselves around issues of water provision and management since 2005. The WfWP small grants scheme along with the women and water workshops organized at the 2007 and 2009 Tanzania Gender Networking Programme gender festivals have resulted in national Women for Water hub to develop and coordinate women and water action in the country, and the development of the Women Fund Tanzania as an institutional support mechanism for local women's groups.

The Tegemeo Women Group (TWG) is a prime example of how a local civil society group, if empowered and capacitated, can lead water and sanitation provision at community level and transform the community in the process. The water and sanitation programme in Mweteni has been operational since 2005, whereby the role of TWG has changed over time. From being a lobbyist in the early days, sensitizing the community and pressurizing the village leadership to take an active stance in water provision, TWG developed into the driving force behind community consultations and multi-stakeholder engagement in the development of a comprehensive water and sanitation development scheme with the same District water engineer. In the course of the phased project, TWG developed capacity for project oversight and took on its financial administration. TWG members have also become trainers on sanitation and hygiene.

Throughout the entire project, the Tegemeo Women have played the crucial role of liaising with the District water office and upholding constant communication with community members, informing them of progress and challenges and encouraging them to participate actively in decision-making and to contribute to implementation. Being part of the global WfWP network and the visible support of international peers and the global WfWP secretariat, have given the Tegemeo women face and recognition at home, and the courage and power to uphold their prominent position as guardians of the project and spokesperson for the local beneficiaries.

This has ensured that the project remained



community focused, while attempts at corruptive practices were effectively curbed. The Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, Women Fund Tanzania, and Tegemeo Women Group thus have complementary roles in bridging the gap between national policy and local implementation in supporting gender mainstreaming and women's leadership in the water sector.

Contributions to the Water for Life Decade: The Mweteni example Policies, legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms since 2011 Tanzania is involved in the development of a new Constitution. A strong women's coalition, including Women Fund Tanzania and Tanzania Gender Networking programme has consistently and successfully pushed for explicit inclusion of gender equality in this new Constitution. The Constituent Assembly which ended towards the end of 2014, has included in the proposed constitution the specific mention of the right for women to acquire, own, use or develop land under the same conditions as men. Having land and water rights for women included in the Constitution will greatly enhance their possibilities to lead productive lives.

A challenge in decentralizing water supply and management is reconciling national laws and policies with customary law and traditional practices. Local authorities are often not

equipped to address integrated water resources management (IWRM), and communities are frequently neither aware of nor organized to practice a participatory approach. In the case of Mweteni, Tegemeo Women Group demanded action from their local governments, initiating the process of securing water title deeds for the springs that supply the village, which were obtained by the village authorities in 2006. This was followed by the protracted development of participatory water governance, whereby the flag of the global women for water partnership and the peer support of TGNP and Women Fund Tanzania helped the Tegemeo Women Group to become and remain an equal partner in the process. TWG has been instrumental in the development of water user committees and an umbrella water users association. As a result, the required Community Owned Water Management Organization is now in place and functional, its constitution requires gender balance in these decision-making bodies.

Women's empowerment and capacity development Tegemeo Women Group positioning themselves as leaders in the water and sanitation project has been a continuous process of capacity strengthening and mindset change. In 2005, Tegemeo Women Group was an informal grassroots group dedicated to small income-generating activities. In 2015, TWG

is a competent membership organization that is capable of project oversight and financial administration and presents its approach at regional and national workshops.

The Situation in Armenia

After independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia experienced a period of transition to a market-driven economy. Over the last two decades significant political, economic and institutional reforms have gradually taken place in the country. One of the major areas undergoing change is the water and health sector. While Armenia has sufficient water resources to provide the total population with safe drinking water, insufficient investment and the collapse of water supply systems have resulted in inadequate and often unsanitary water supplies. Seventy-five to 85% of water is lost on its way from source to consumers because of pipe deterioration and other reasons. Over the last decade the government of Armenia has taken important steps to improve access, reliability and quality of drinking water and its infrastructure. The water resource balance in many parts of the country has improved and water supply in certain areas has progressed. However, in most parts of Armenia the institutional framework for water supply delivery remains poor. In addition, the sanitation sector had been neglected, particularly in rural areas.

The Role of AWHHE: After Armenia had signed the Protocol on Water and Health to the UNECE WC in 1999, AWHHE became a key actor in the implementation of the Protocol. As a national NGO, AWHHE functions as a liaison between the government and civil society and represents the voice of civil society to ensure that policies give due consideration to the gender dimensions of water and health.

AWHHE influences policy and monitors State projects to ensure better alignment with the reality on the ground and to safeguard that the local population benefits from investments and interventions. At the same time AWHHE implements projects on service delivery that yield immediate results. An important part of the work of AWHHE is to strengthen local actors, in particular women, to become active contributors

to safe water and adequate sanitation in their communities.

The Situation in Ukraine

Ukraine is considered a “country in transition”. Following the Soviet era and independence in 1991, the country suffered a devastating economic blow and the majority of the people live in various gradations of poverty. It was estimated in 2010 that approximately 24% of the population in Ukraine lives below the poverty line. 37 Access to safe drinking water is one of the largest environmental health problems in the country, both in urban and rural areas. About 75% of the population is supplied by surface water, most of which is not fit for drinking unless treated. In addition, water tariffs are rising rapidly. The government is seeking to reform the water sector, and ratified the Protocol on Water and Health in 2003 to address these issues and improve the nation’s health.

The Role of MAMA-86: MAMA-86, the foremost environmental, women’s and social justice organization in the country, has been a driving force behind the drafting and subsequent implementation of the Water and Health Protocol since 1998.

Since 1999 MAMA-86 has contributed directly to improvement of access to safe water and sanitation for over 40,000 people in urban and rural areas by implementing more than 50 pilots in 12 regions of Ukraine. MAMA-86 works with national and local authorities to ensure equal access to WASH for vulnerable groups: school children, patients in healthcare institutions, pregnant women and mothers with babies. MAMA-86 has initiated and coordinated numerous public consultations, raising awareness and building capacity of the population with a focus on women’s involvement in water and health management issues.

Since 1997 MAMA-86 has grown from 1 drinking water project in 5 locations (Kyiv and 4 local branches) to a network of WASH projects in 13 regions with over 90 pilot projects in urban and rural areas of Ukraine, all based on local ownership and women leadership. These pilots have resulted in the replacement and/ or rehabilitation of 3 water supply and 2 sanitation infrastructures, installation

of 16 water purification systems for schools, boarding schools, kindergartens, sanatorium and maternity hospitals, and construction of ecosan toilets and 9 small wastewater treatment systems for 5 schools and 91 households in different parts of Ukraine.

The Situation in Nepal

Nepal is endowed with abundant water resources; however, the use of water resources for economic and social purposes, as yet, is limited. Child mortality is exceptionally high, and largely due to poor water supply and sanitation. About 10,500 children die every year in Nepal due to diseases related to water supply and sanitation. The legal framework in general and water laws in particular - are still under development in Nepal. The Interim Constitution of 2007 includes women’s rights (article 20) and the right to live in a clean environment (article 16), but no specific mention is made of water.

Community mobilization and service delivery in Sankhu, Nepal: W-PLUS, in association with the Friends of Sankhu (FOS), has mobilized women’s groups to form cooperatives at Sankhu, Kavre district of Nepal. W-PLUS conducts capacity building and awareness rising, particularly on water management and sanitation. Nine women’s cooperatives have been formed to tackle the range of development needs,

including building small infrastructure to provide drinking water and sanitation. As a pilot project, a 7000-liter water tank was built through a cost-sharing scheme between FOS and the community members. Over 5 years, more than 200 drinking water facilities and over 3000 toilets were built. A total of 100 women in the community have been trained on solid waste management and income generation through fertilizer production. The women’s cooperatives collect funds to cover operations and maintenance.

Result: Today, women of Sankhu are aware of the benefits of water and sanitation. They are mobilized together and have formed a cooperative. The literacy classes provided by FOS and waste management skills learnt from WPLUS have empowered them. The women of Sankhu developed their leadership skills through active involvement in the cooperatives, and in working for the socioeconomic development of the community.

Demonstrating the Added Value of Women’s Civil Society Organisations

In many societies and cultures women are the traditional water carriers, but their influence in decision-making regarding water is limited. The positive results of involving women in the design and planning stages can be multiple, from creating





local ownership and adequately addressing the needs of the community, to building sustainable solutions and using indigenous knowledge that prevents expensive mistake.

Women's involvement can bring new clarity and energy to ensure effective and responsible water use and management through a (water) stewardship approach.

Women's Empowerment, Capacity Development

A major achievement of AWHHE was the inclusion of women in the national dialogue on the Protocol on Water and Health. AWHHE has a consistent focus on women's groups in all its activities, with the aim of increasing the role of both rural and urban women in decision-making processes at local and national levels. AWHHE projects developed women's leadership skills, resulting in their increased involvement in community problem resolution through co-operation.

Instruments and Tools of Women's Civil Society Organizations

The most powerful instrument to contribute to achieving universal access to water and sustainable water governance lies in the women's civil society network structure itself. By uniting women citizens from different social strata and sectors, the Women's Major Group provides a platform to raise awareness, discuss different opinions and opposing interests, and forge

partnerships that jointly address a common problem. Moreover, women's organizations, when empowered and enabled, have the potential to build on local ownership and to develop and scale up successful community interventions.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Women-Inclusive Water Cooperation

Effective water cooperation should be based on a human rights approach, which means that the interests of different parties are recognized and the legitimacy and interdependency of the roles of different stakeholders are taken into account. A clear definition of roles and responsibilities is needed for the Institutional mechanisms guiding water cooperation. Strengthening institutional mechanisms requires resources and should also include strengthening partnerships with other organizations that have complementary roles and expertise.

Civil society organizations have the capacity to reach, empower, represent and/or defend vulnerable and socially excluded groups - as well as to trigger change and social innovation. The roles of women's civil society organizations may vary but typically include awareness raising, creating community engagement, coordinating action, monitoring, strengthening women's capacities, bridging between governments and citizens, and influencing decision-making on issues of mutual concern.

Targeted investments are needed to bring women's civil society organizations to the level and scale that are needed to deliver on the proposed water SDG and targets. The four prerequisites to enable meaningful engagement of women consist, first and foremost, of governments willing to involve women in decision-making processes backed up by valid legislation, policies, and regulations. Secondly, decision-making should be inclusive and on the basis of equality, which means equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for women and men in their different – and similar – roles in society.

This is a key element of good governance and a principal responsibility of all levels of government under the human rights based approach. Third, women will be motivated to engage if concrete results may be expected. Providing an enabling environment for women's leadership in water projects will produce manifold results in terms of cost efficiency and sustainability of interventions as well as the spin off for social and economic development. Fourth, investment in the social capital of women's organizations facilitates community involvement and brings to the fore women's skills and leadership that can be effectively used for building and strengthening decentralized water governance.

About the Contributor

Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) is a unique partnership of women's organizations and networks, uniting women leadership. All member organizations are rooted in society and are active in the areas of water, sanitation, sustainable development and women's participation. WfWP positions women as active leaders, partners, experts and agents of change in water. WfWP links day-to-day practice to policy at national and international levels and vice-versa. The organization is experienced, has a solid track record, has built a large and influential network throughout the world, and will contribute to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals with a focus on women and universal access to water for all, for all uses.

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