

Water Governance



WATER AND SANITATION:

THE GENDER DIMENSION

The number of people without clean water and adequate sanitation worldwide is appallingly high. An estimated 1.1 billion people use unsafe water sources, and 2.6 billion people – half the developing world – lack access to even a basic latrine. The problem is particularly severe in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Improving water and sanitation services can have a critical impact on the lives and future prospects of women and girls.

- Less time spent hauling water and caring for family members who are sick because of water- and sanitation-related illnesses means that women have more time for productive activities, education and leisure. In some countries, spending six hours a day collecting water to meet the family's needs is not unusual. In rural Africa, women commonly walk 10 kilometres a day to the nearest water source and back, and often twice that distance during the dry season.
- Easy availability of water supplies reduces water-carrying burdens for girls, which in turn increases their attendance at school. Having separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys in school also increases girls' attendance, especially after they begin to menstruate. In

Bangladesh, a school sanitation programme has increased the enrolment of girls by 11 percent every year since it began in 1990.

- Having water sources and sanitation facilities close to home puts women and girls at less risk for sexual harassment and assault while gathering water and searching for a private place to defecate.
- Societal norms and the biological realities of women's reproductive health make private latrines or toilets and sufficient water for bathing critical to dignity and health.
- Rural women produce 60 percent to 80 percent of food in developing countries, yet women's role as farmers is frequently overlooked by agricultural extensionists, including those working for irrigation agencies. As a consequence, women often lack access to water supplies (when, for example, land titles are required for irrigation systems).

MAKING WATER WORK FOR WOMEN

Women and men have different interests in, and derive different benefits from, the availability, use and management of water. Women, for instance, generally prioritize water for domestic uses such as drinking and washing. And they place a high priority on private latrines or toilets. Women and men often have different



perceptions about the costs and benefits of participating in various types of water users' groups through which water use and management are organized, and they differ in their ability to participate in such schemes. Young women may simply not be able to participate in community management efforts if they have small children to care for; if meetings are held at night, safety concerns or cultural norms may keep them home. All of these factors can be discovered and addressed through a gender-sensitive approach.

Community action and social mobilization around the provision of basic social services such as water can be an effective 'entry point' for promoting women's empowerment. Having a leadership role in community management of water supplies, for instance, can increase women's social capital as well as their bargaining power within the household. Without specific attention to gender issues, however, projects can reinforce and even worsen inequalities between women and men. They can also add to women's labour by relying excessively on their unpaid community organizing efforts.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management: A Practical Journey to Sustainability is a handbook of case studies and practical methodologies produced by UNDP. The booklet provides guidance to development practitioners on policy development, institutional strengthening and capacity-building, domestic water supply and sanitation, and irrigation. It is available at <http://www.undp.org/water/genderguide/index.html>

The Gender and Water Alliance, a network of 300 organizations and individuals that forms part of the Global Water Partnership, supports knowledge-sharing and advocacy. Its website, at <http://www.genderandwateralliance.org>, is a source of useful materials and contacts.

UNDP IN ACTION: INDIA

The women of Rajourgarh village, in the arid north Indian state of Rajasthan, knew that the government had planned to dig a well in their village. But due to manipulation by local officials, the women discovered, the well was being dug elsewhere. Kajouri Mai, a middle-aged grandmother, led the women in seeking an explanation from the local government. Dissatisfied with their response, the women sat on the road, forming a human blockade that prevented the officials from leaving the village. The siege lasted for nearly three days. Finally, the administration gave in and agreed to dig the well in Rajourgarh, as originally planned.

Having tasted victory, the women's groups decided to tackle other issues. One of them was male drunkenness. Kajouri Mai says: "We called a meeting of women from other villages to act upon liquor shops in the area. Women from 10 to 12 villages met and decided to serve notice to all three liquor shops. The owner of the shops knew that we meant business. He therefore decided to close the shops."

Encouraged by their success, the women sought other ways to better their lives. They settled on rainwater harvesting. They collected money for tractors and fuel and, along with men, provided *shram daan* (voluntary labour) in digging and transporting the earth for a medium-sized mud dam. The dam now supplies the village with water.

The success of Rajourgarh village has been replicated in neighbouring communities with the help of a local non-governmental organization called Tarun Bharat Sangh. The NGO, which UNDP supports, works in a number of interconnected areas, including educating girls, starting women's banks, protecting nearby forests and reviving traditional methods of water harvesting. In a three-day conference organized with UNDP support in 2003, Tarun Bharat Sangh brought together more than 1,000 women from 12 states and nearly every region of India to discuss the challenges of managing water as a community resource and giving women an equal role in its use and management.

For thousands of women in Rajourgarh and other rural communities in India, the fruits of empowerment have become visible – more girls are in school, and women have a say in the selection of water harvesting sites. They also have a greater measure of control over the family's finances. The provision of domestic water supply was a catalytic entry point.

Source: Water Governance for Poverty Reduction, UNDP. For more information, go to <http://www.undp.org/dpa/frontpagearchive/2003/february/18feb03/>