

Gender Issues and Irrigation: Some Experiences and Initiatives

We were happy to receive quite a number of reactions to our request for information and experiences on gender related questions in irrigation. The reactions prove that there is a growing awareness that effective irrigation planning and management approaches need to take gender considerations into account. As a result, there also is a growing need for information on approaches, mechanisms and strategies to adequately recognize and address gender-related issues in the context of irrigation. A number of people wrote to us, requesting for information, training materials, and methodologies. Collecting and evaluating past and on-going experiences is a first good step in developing this information. We would therefore like to encourage members of the FMIS Network to keep in touch with us and to share with us, and others, your findings and experiences.

First attempts to improve the gender awareness of irrigation-related actors have been made in Bangladesh, Indonesia, India, Tanzania and Burkina Faso. The experiences show that involving and accommodating both male and female stakeholders in irrigation systems requires a somewhat different approach. First of all this is because women water users' needs and interests are often not well known and understood, and secondly, because women often face specific constraints and are more difficult to reach than men. Women often lack institutional support, and often have less (secure) access to, and control of, critical resources.

A participatory approach, communicating and interacting with both female and male farmers can help to identify and address women's and men's shared and conflicting interests and needs. This is emphasized in two sets of guidelines, one prepared by SAWA (a consultancy bureau) and the other by the Netherlands Embassy in India. These guidelines aim to assist irrigation planners and designers in recognizing and addressing gender considerations in the planning, design and implementation of irrigation projects.

The need for research aimed at analyzing and understanding the various agricultural, irrigation and management activities performed by women and men and the way in which these are interdependent was stressed by various respondents. Women need to be recognized and addressed in their capacities as producers and providers, and not just in their domestic roles. In many existing irrigation systems, projects complying with donor requirements to pay attention to women and/or gender issues has resulted in isolated, small-scale income-generating projects. The experience has shown that merely adding a women's component to existing or planned irrigation projects often has a very limited impact, and in itself may cause the aggravation of gender inequalities in project activities.

Some of the more interesting experiences and initiatives are summarized in more detail below. If Network members would like to have more information, please either contact us, or communicate directly with the authors.

(Margreet Zwartveen, Associate Expert Gender Issues and Irrigation, IIMI.)

Role of women in Pump Irrigation in North-East Thailand

Five selected pumping schemes in Northeast Thailand were part of the Mekong Irrigation Programme, implemented during 1985-1991. The main objective of this Programme was to increase agricultural production. The role of women in achieving this objective is significant, even though many young women migrate to cities for off-farm work. Once women are married, their off-farm work decreases and they assume major roles in regular farming activities. Women are also responsible for household work and they often engage in craft production. Even though the income women gain in craft production may be minimal, it serves an important purpose in reducing the uncertainties of crop-production.