

## Women's Roles and Realities in Water Management

Vijita Fernando  
*Journalist*  
*Member, Board of Management*  
*NGO W&S Decade Service*

November 1998

#023523

## **Abstract**

The emerging acceptance of the importance of the role of women in the water sector has thrown up the problems of mainly rural women accepting new responsibilities in addition to their reproductive and productive roles in the home and community. Pioneers in promoting the role of women have identified these and the need to solve them in their own context, taking into account the women's current roles, their place in the community vis-a-vis the men in their lives and the traditions and conventions which bind them and make them resistant to change, all of which need to be sensitively handled if women are to be treated not as a special interest group but as a mainstream group - as partners with reduced burdens.

Water is a woman's issue. In our part of the world the responsibility for water transport and the operation and maintenance of traditional water supply systems lies almost entirely with women. Water is also one of the main priorities for women because of its importance for family health and welfare.

Women are also the first victims of water scarcity. It is the women who suffer the extra burden when water systems fail to function. Water is one of the greatest users of a woman's time, spending as she does almost one quarter of her working day on fetching, carrying, using and managing water. It is also a user of her energy, leaving very little for her other manifold tasks.

Despite this close association, women have been the bit players in the water scene, with little access to better tools and techniques and less information on their use. A rural woman's mobility and participation are also generally hampered by traditional and cultural constraints. Thus women's needs and constraints tend to be neglected in project planning, especially when we come across the mainly male planners' limited understanding of the woman's roles and responsibilities. Traditional knowledge and management skills are almost always unrecognized with the result that a woman's position is weakened rather than strengthened by external projects.

This leaves our women in a truly ironic situation - theirs is the vital role in water in the home and the community, but they have little or no voice in the setting up and functioning of water systems. To use a cliché, they remain the fetchers and carriers of water.

It takes very little to realise that a woman's traditional role in the home of managing water systems and supply should logically extend to women setting up useful and functioning water systems. When new water supplies are built without knowledge and acknowledgement of this traditional role, women's tasks in public management of water are limited to physical work. Women keep standposts and drains clean, collect water fees, report problems about handpumps and so on. But they do not have recognized status or authority and are often in a subordinate position, having no voice in a matter so vital to the welfare of their families.

Fortunately, during the UN Decade and after, pioneering efforts by several people have provided a major breakthrough in achieving the involvement of women as part of mainstream concerns, including designing a learning environment, achieving sustainable and effectively used water systems through replicable methods and developing a framework of technical and social interventions acceptable to managers, technicians and Women in Development (WID) specialists.

There were several pioneers in this process - men and women of practical sensibility and a vision of the full roles ordinary women can play. Anne and Gilbert White did the now classic first study on water use practices in Africa, Anne White focussed on the importance of users' choice in community involvement supported by a national policy. Mary Elmendorf initiated the concept of women's participation at all levels as primary managers of water and stressed the importance of special training to make these roles effective to enable women to perform their roles more effectively. There were also women like Marilyn Carr of UNIFEM, Ma Yangsheng of UNICEF, Samiha El Katsha of the American University Social Research Centre in Cairo who helped in many ways to make women effective as managers of water systems. Thus towards the end of the UN Decade for Water, women began to emerge not as a special interest group in water and sanitation, but as a mainstream group - as partners with reduced burdens.

Over the years it has also emerged that though the role of the woman in water management is primarily one of providing and using water at the household and community level, a woman's contribution is not necessarily limited exclusively to these narrow confines. Women also have important roles as decision makers, planners, managers and research scientists in making water resource development and management possible. Though women's current and potential contribution in these major areas has been largely neglected, they do not appear to be mere pipe dreams any longer.

Many Sri Lankan NGOs working in projects in water, are gradually placing a strong emphasis on gender in their programmes and evolving individual gender orientations. Though these differ from one organisation to another, as a whole it means that it is realised that women and men must be equitably involved if a project is to be successful and sustainable. They are also aware of the cultural and historical context and the value systems of the society they are working in and that gender perceptions must be in tune with these.

For women to be successful as managers in a project, several broad issues relating to the situation of women in the country vis-a-vis the men must be taken into serious account.

I believe that despite the prominence achieved by Sri Lankan professional educated women, despite free education and the high literacy rates among women, the sad truth is that women in general occupy a subordinate position to men.

Thus one of the first prerequisites is that women generally and especially women in remote rural areas and in semi urban slum and shanty dwellings have to be brought into the mainstream of development.

We also need policies that satisfy strategic needs of women, not only their practical needs.

Democratic decision making processes in matters relating to both men and women need to be institutionalised.

My fringe involvement with a partner organisation of the World Bank pilot project CWSSP (Community Water Supply and Sanitation Project) has shown that it is counter productive to mobilise only women. Promoting a gender balanced approach through training at every level has been the mission of our Executive Director, a very balanced feminist! She has promoted this in dealings with policy makers and taken on an advocacy role at rural level among the women of our projects in the Ratnapura district.

Several gender awareness programmes were launched, first at national level to men and women who would introduce such programmes in their projects and, much more successfully at grassroots level - away from air conditioned conference rooms and magi boards - to the actual beneficiaries of our water projects.

It was indeed surprising - and wholly welcome - that at the first grassroots workshop there was a gender balance of men and women and among the men were young bachelors on the brink of marriage and older professional men of position in the village.

One of these was a retired principal of the school in the village. He was a keen participant and confided to the trainer that he had always believed in the full participation of women in any development project, but he could not articulate his ideas as traditionally a man in his position in the village should not express publicly that men and women were equal or that women could do things as well as the men!

It has also been the experience of many NGOs - the Decade Service, for one - that women's equal participation enhances such programmes. During the past decade and more there have been extremely successful social mobilisation programmes in the country in poverty alleviation, in rural banking, in volunteer health programmes which have exposed mainly rural women to new concepts. Their involvement in successful new ventures has made them open to the fulfillment of strategic needs, the concepts of gender and the potential for women as leaders. Many women's NGOs have found that developing leadership roles among women often leads to the development of the community in which they live and to the development of the NGO itself.

A CWSSP spokesman felt that there has been a clear indication that partner organisations have achieved some progress in a gender approach. But he also felt that there were several key elements that could be incorporated to achieve a more comprehensive gender approach. Here are some that may be tried towards this end:

- ensuring that at least half the number involved in a project is women in all stages of the project from planning to final evaluation. This will ensure an impact on long term sustainability.
- supporting gender sensitization and balancing by developing case studies of successful experiences from countries with similar situations as in Sri Lanka.
- taking the long term view that introducing a gender approach can address women's strategic needs which can, over time, improve the situation of women and not merely a practical which seeks to improve the present condition of women by providing water close to their homes.
- Compiling the experiences of NGOs to help formulate policy guidelines to support gender balanced development in future programmes.

At a recent (May 1998) Latin American workshop senior women decision makers participated on "Contribution of Women to the Planning and Management of Water Resources" in Mexico City. The workshop analysed the current and potential roles in sustainable water resources management and provided a forum to review experiences objectively to draw practical and operational lessons.

There were women from governments, the private sector, Universities, research institutions, national and international NGOs. Here are some of the practical and wholly relevant findings - to be published later as a book together with the background papers.

The situation of women cannot be improved in the foreseeable future by making statements at international conferences in support of women's involvement - there should be a platform for action.

Pay attention to the discriminations women face, just as you speak of their achievements, if their participation as managers is to increase.

Analyse objectively the technical, political and social issues in water resource management and the participation and contribution of all the actors.

Society has a role alongside the woman's pivotal role of guarding the environment - society as a whole must be concerned with it. Society has to be better educated to deal efficiently with the various water problems and has to be empowered to influence the decision making processes.

To increase the participation of women in balance with the participation of men, communication, training, education, transfer of information and interdisciplinary teams which could contribute to integrate water development are fundamental.

NGOs have a vital role to involve the overall population on water resources development programmes.

The situation of women without men also has to be faced. This is specially crucial to Sri Lanka where daily women are taking on new responsibilities with men migrating, dying in the war or in the emerging single parent families headed by women. These create new roles for women as administrators and producers, managers and users. It is imperative that women get the necessary technical training to plan and manage water supplies and facilities by themselves.

In our own context again we must face the truth that in spite of the proud political achievements by two of our women, women are barely visible in the seats of power, and invisible in the water sector. We have never had a woman Minister nor even a secretary in the line Ministry, nor as head or anywhere near the top position in the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB), there is not a single woman in the newly created Water Resources Council, and just one woman somewhere near the top in the CWSSP. We are sadly short of women engineers in the country despite women in other professions as law and medicine overtaking the men in numbers. And sadly, there is no disaggregated data on women in the water sector.

But there are rays of sunshine emerging from NGOs. These may be faint now, but there is promise -

the health and environment programme of the Lanka Mahila Samiti in which at every level women were in charge, the Sarvodaya Women's Movement environment programme headed by a woman, the Water Supply and Sanitation Decade Service has a balance of both women's and mixed NGOs in its membership, a balance of men and women on its management and its Secretariat is directed by a woman for the past ten years, to mention some at random.

There is no gainsaying that properly educated and trained women are important assets to this sector, if less educated women are to fill a meaningful role. Case studies in other less developed countries show promising statistics in water studies - in Brazil for instance, the number of women studying water resources engineering has increased by 40 percent in the last decade. In Panama the number

of women studying civil engineering has increased from 2 percent in the early seventies to 47 percent at present. Analyses from Brazil have shown that more women are now joining water resource related careers as their own personal choice.

In Panama 37 percent of ministers, deputy ministers and heads of water issues related agencies are women. 43 percent of the academic staff in water sciences of the major universities are women. A similar percentage of women work as technicians and engineers in the government and private sector in the water field. Though still the number of women at decision making level is low, many Latin American countries have women as planners, supervisors, managers, researchers, operators and technicians. But of course, they are aware that there is a lot more to be done.

Empowerment of women is high on the current development agenda for women. Perhaps one of the best places to start an empowerment programme is water management, a sector which fundamentally affects the lives of women and men and where both need to be equitably and appropriately involved in determining all sector activities, remembering that women are not a homogeneous group, that however much we may not like them, caste and class differences do exist and need to be taken into account, that convention and tradition are very much a part of the lives of rural women, and taking the greatest care to prevent further overburdening of women which will automatically perpetuate and reinforce the traditional roles of women.



## References

1. Gender Issues Sourcebook for Water and Sanitation Projects  
Wendy Wakeman  
UNDP/World Bank W & S Program
2. Participation of women in W&S : roles and realities  
Christine van Wijk-Sijbesma  
Technical Paper series no.22, International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), Netherlands
3. Water Systems  
Vijita Fernando  
UNIFEM and IRC - Energy and Environment Technology Source Book.
4. Water Newsletter IRC Publication No. 257, August 1998.
5. Status of Women, Publication of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Sri Lanka.
6. Together for Water and Sanitation - The Asian Experience.  
IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, The Netherlands.