

Gender Issues in Conservation and Sustainable Use of Water

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Four out of the eight Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations are directly related to the issue of Water and Biodiversity with reference to women. Eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; Promotion of gender equality and empowering women; Improvement in maternal health; and Ensuring environmental sustainability are the goals which when seen in conjunction with the issues related to the conservation and sustainable use of water and biodiversity, form a continuum of main social goals enunciated at global level in the past few years that is safe, adequate and sustainable water supplies for all.

One-quarter of the developing world's population still lacks clean water while millions die annually from water related diseases. As the world population continues to grow, the need and demand for water escalates. Water has become a strategic resource: its control is a source of power, a key to economic development, and a trigger to socio-political stress. The multiple uses of any water source in any given area can be incompatible, both in terms of the amount of water people require and the effect on the resources they have. Conflicts are brewing over the use and preservation of the globe's increasingly scarce supplies of water, while it is increasingly being recognized that improved management of water is imperative to sustainable development, poverty alleviation and biodiversity preservation.

To resolve these issues in humane ways, it is necessary to take a hard and critical look at the way the freshwater resources were managed in the past, and find new solutions that will be sustainable in the long-term by guaranteeing:

- Basic services for all;
- Integrated water and land management for multiple uses;
- Equity across gender and class;
- Sustainable ecosystem management practices;
- Public standards on service quality, set in all countries;
- Accountability for sustainable use and management of freshwater resources

Current approaches to water management are highly segregated, focusing on technical improvements and sectoral solutions without sufficient attention to their basic social and sustainability goals. Recent research has shown that shifting the emphasis to the social base has major implications for strategy and the technologies employed. More technology is not always better. A reorientation of the technological approach may be more effective in delivering water services where they are needed, when they are needed, at a cost that is realistic and acceptable, and with consideration of the larger time frame and scale necessary to ecosystem sustainability.

Women's role in the management of water resources has not been properly understood. The distribution of task and responsibilities, access to adequate resources and uptake and utilization of these resources varies considerably. Various kinds of social factors such as caste, age, generation and religion govern these differences.

Women play very significant role in water management at household level owing to which they are



Rains and Floods have significant effect on availability of water



Man made ponds and watersheds are source of drinking water as well as livelihood for rural women



Religious beliefs and festivals promote the conservation of water bodies
(CHHATHA PUJA SITE FROM EASTERN UP)

regarded as domestic water managers. Women are in-charge of gender specific task of collecting, storing and using water for drinking, food preparation, care of domestic animals, personal hygiene, care of the sick, cleaning, washing and waste disposal. Because of their dependence on water resources, women have also gathered considerable knowledge about water resources, including location, quality and storage methods. They also could categorize the quality measures as per the use, for drinking and cooking the desired traits are colorless, odorless and tasteless water. Women are sole players in assurance of prompt and proper usage of water resources. Despite of all these, several factors impede proper usage of water at households namely unavailability of clean drinking water, water pollution, distant water source etc.

However, the role of women in water management is flexible. In Indian villages as in case of upper cast, women are involved in decision making regarding water management only at domestic level. Therefore, men are responsible for fetching water from outside if they do not own a private water source. Factors such as age and generation are also the basis of differentiation among women. Older women that occupy a senior position in a large family enjoy the privileges and responsibilities different than that of the younger women. In some cases they can go outside for collecting water only in the absence of men and look after matters other than the domestic space. They have the decision making power related to water use and management.

Another aspect which associated women with water use and management is agriculture but here also differences exist among women as well. It has been observed that women contribute largely in the sector of agriculture but it's ostensible. The women belonging to lower castes lack the access to land resources due to the pattern of economic exchange in the village which makes their caste landless. Although these women contribute significantly in the agriculture but they have nothing to do with irrigation. Male laborers are generally used in irrigation. Secondly, upper castes women are least concerned with irrigation water management and use. However, they are active in cases where they themselves manage the agricultural land. Women in their active role can be seen in small scale plots for vegetable gardens and they show their interest only in those irrigation water

sources that are used to solve their domestic purposes but decision making and other responsibilities are taken care by the senior women.

Traditional pattern for the management of water resources has recognized the role of women in obtaining and managing water. Although women contribute in decision making regarding maintenance of water sources as they possess knowledge about maintaining quality of water stored and used at home but the problems and requirements they face related to domestic water sources are expressed through gendered consultation and traditional women leaders. It is a gender based division of labour that excludes women from the management of resources which restricts their reach to adequate and clean water. Access to clean water is also very important to mothers and their daughters during their pregnancy. It has been noted that in many areas pregnant women have to carry water from outside for their baby's delivery and besides unhygienic conditions and inappropriate water supplies often contribute to diarrhea and malnutrition among their children.

Therefore, direct involvement of women and men at all level regarding water use and management and strong measures aimed to increased education of women and community involvement for water management are of much importance. The health issues of women are also important as she is the one who bears the responsibility of collecting water hence suffers more during water scarcity. It necessitates hygiene education along with judicious use of treated water and programmes emphasizing the need of women and men in designing water, sanitation and hygiene programmes, internal gender biasness and discrimination in public sector organization need to be obliterated.

Resources need to be mobilized so that access to clean water and sanitation is ensured. There must be a channel to make the women aware of various laws, initiatives of Government and grants meant for them for installation and maintenance of good quality water supply and other sanitation facilities. As women's role in agriculture, livestock and fisheries has been recognized, strengthening of legislation and facilitation of land and water accessibility for productive use is a must which would assist, support and promote land arrangements at

equitable basis and help women to become decision makers which will also explore women's caliber in using water for agriculture and also in small scale business through appropriate training and awareness programs.

Owing to their religious beliefs and daily household chores, women not only have unique knowledge of ecosystems and environmental sustainability, they are further most affected by distortions in ecosystems. This particularly applies to poor women who have least control over natural resources and whose primary tasks depend on natural resources, such as forests, rangelands, water bodies and inshore fishing grounds. They also have least means to find alternatives. Climate change is predicted to have a disproportionate effect on women. As main water fetchers and food producers who are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, their time burden and responsibilities will increase as they will try to maintain same levels of drinking water and food production. As such, many women have great interest in the protection of ecosystems and are active agents of change. Women worldwide have been playing a primary role at grassroots level in raising water and environmental concerns despite less access to and representation within formal political structures at all levels and less access to the media.

Environmental sustainability is enhanced when the priorities and demands of all stakeholders are addressed

in such a way that:

- Women should be recognized as central to the provision, management and safeguarding of water and environmental management.
- Policies and strategies on water and environmental management need to respect gender differences.
- Good understanding of gender equality issues is required for adequate implementation of policies and strategies.

It is very much clear that rural poverty and the status of women would receive a significant boost if policy makers will focus on providing employment opportunities for women along with improved water supplies. Water supply projects should be designed and managed not only for welfare and public health but also for economic stimulus and gender sensitivity in households. Microenterprise that targets women should allow women to influence the planning design and management of traditional and improved water supplies as a group and then within this group more attention is needed on gender relations among women themselves. Women need to realize their potentials and role and so does the organizing bodies. A sustainable development model could be established only when all the sections of society and law makers of the country work together hand-in-hand mutually benefitting one another.