

**Report of a Workshop on Water and Gender
held on 4th October 2001 at The Asian Cultural Centre in Oxford, UK.**

The day consisted of three presentations, two based on in-depth field work undertaken by PhD students at Southampton, funded by DFID. Deepa Joshi presented her on-going work in India, and Tina Wallace presented the key findings from the now completed work of Shibesh Regmi (who is currently the country director of Actionaid, Nepal). Anne Coles, research associate of QEH, presented her reflections on the water/gender interface. Questions and plenary discussions followed each presentation, and there were three small working groups exploring different critical issues in the afternoon.

Introduction by Ben Fawcett.

Ben Fawcett, the research supervisor for this project at IIDS, Southampton University, introduced himself and the project. The research developed from a proposal put to DFID in 1995 by his predecessor (Alison Barrett) to explore how to better provide water for poor people and to promote gender equity. The research focused on several levels- the policy level of the World Bank, DFID and others, the work of organisations implementing gender work in the water sector (Government, NGOs and CBOs), and the community level. Where were the barriers to promoting the involvement of women and increasing their access to and control of the benefits? The significance of the research lay especially in looking at the issues across all these levels, and also in the fact that substantial resources were available for detailed field work.

Deepa Joshi: The rhetoric and reality of gender issues in drinking/domestic water projects (with a particular focus on her community level findings)

Deepa's research was carried out in India and she started her presentation by challenging the current positive rhetoric about the provision of domestic water and the improvements it has brought to women's lives by showing pictures depicting the struggles many women have in accessing water. The pictures brought into the room the reality of the conditions under which poor women live and the burden of water collection.

She questioned the validity of the many claims that have been made about how well gender has been integrated into the provision of domestic water, and whether women's increased involvement has indeed led to increased project effectiveness and women's empowerment. While the water sector says the only problem facing the sector is **how** to implement gender and gender equity (with a demand for toolkits), the problems found were much deeper and more widespread, including whether the sector properly understood the concept of gender.

The research on which her findings are based had limitations- it was only in one country and three geographical areas of that country, covering only four projects. The research was supported by secondary data drawn from literature.

The water sector largely sees women's participation as their involvement in building the water resources; their representation in committees and decision making fora; their involvement in health and hygiene promotion; and their participation in water related income generating activities. Project documents show that these modes of participation are expected to contribute equally to the goals of project efficiency and women's empowerment. These goals are seen as complementary.

However, the findings show that the assumptions behind this understanding of gender and participation are flawed. First, ***not all women participate in water projects***. The barriers to their participation are many, including traditional gender roles and responsibilities, and social barriers such as caste, class and wealth. Women are affected differently by these social barriers leading to some being able to participate and others being excluded. Case studies of social exclusion were presented, showing the depth and range of exclusion for e.g. Dalit women, and very poor women.

While gender theory has long explained that women are not a homogeneous category, the theory and practice of water projects avoids this complexity continuing to see women and men as the only (or main) category of social difference. This leads to few questions being asked about who can participate and who is excluded beyond counting the numbers of women and men involved. Little work is done to see who is excluded, so few attempts are made to address the real barriers of social exclusion.

The second key question addressed by the research was how empowering is this kind of participation? Deepa's research showed that ***the roles women were given and the ways in which they were allowed to participate were not sustained nor were they empowering***. Women's contributions were often voluntary and unpaid, and where they did enter the male domain of technology this was not sustainable beyond the life of the project. Their participation did not lead to a greater role in decision-making, or to major changes to project design and implementation.

A third key finding was that ***the focus on women in health and sanitation reinforces the marginalisation of women and their responsibility for family health***. Existing gender roles and responsibilities are perpetuated. Projects also ignore the many other uses and needs women have for water, focusing only on safe drinking water while there are so many other uses women have for water which are often unmet.

Fourthly, while women are involved in some community fora, ***their representation is not effective or empowering***. The more powerful men control decision-making and little work is done to find innovative ways of involving women and allowing them to find a voice. Projects have standard approaches and procedures that do not meet the needs of different women in different contexts, and no attention is paid to the complexities of social exclusion and how to address it. Again case studies were used to illustrate how women are ignored or play a token role within committees.

The fifth key point arising from the research was that ***the rhetoric around time saved collecting water leading to women's involvement in new income generating activities is often false***. Time saved on collecting water may be used in participating in other aspects of the project; women may lack the capacity to get engaged in new activities because they are shouldering so many burdens already, they may not have found ways to gain increased access to and control over the water. Not enough work is done to explore the market potential, to invest in new skills for women, to explore the time needed for creating a new product for the market, leading to many failed income generating projects and a lack of signs of women's empowerment through these activities. The links between improved domestic water supply and raised incomes for women, leading to their empowerment are assumed and the research did not support these assumptions.

The research showed that there is a misinterpretation of what gender empowerment means, and how to achieve it, in the theory and practice of water projects. The equation of participation with project efficiency is sometimes right, but projects are not tackling the issues that underlie the unequal sharing of power within communities and so ignore women's empowerment.

Deepa's work looks beyond the community level to argue that currently the discussion of gender in water begins and ends at the community level, and even at that level assumptions and approaches are simplistic and ignore the complex realities of social difference and social exclusion. Gender is, however, a real issue at other levels, including the level of policy and the organisations that implement the projects. Her research explores the incoherence in policy perspectives and the problems caused by the fact that people-centred approaches are all hinged on the concept of water as an economic good, and so much of this work is in fact co-opted. The equation of participation and empowerment with efficiency is an assumption that in practice translates into equating women's empowerment with projects that are implemented and maintained at lowest cost. The water sector defines gender as women, or at best women and men, and there is further misinterpretation and evaporation of the concept of gender as global policy permeates other institutional levels.

Her research clearly shows that the unequal social order impacts on water organisations and water policies as well as at the community level, and yet these other levels are usually totally ignored. The result is a ***reinforcing cycle of***

gender inequality across the institutional levels of policy, organisations and practice.

These other levels were not presented by Deepa due to shortage of time and the issues around policy and organisations were deferred until the second presentation and debate. However, Deepa's work raises many critical issues about the importance and impact of gender concepts and theories and how they are understood and applied at all levels of work around water provision, and she stresses the vicious circle of gender inequality which occurs from global policy to community level.

The key points discussed following her presentation were:

1. ***Is gender the key barrier for exclusion from access to and control of water or are there multiple barriers?*** The discussion focused on the reality that gender is shaped by issues of caste, class, religion and other aspects of social difference, yet this is often ignored or unknown by practitioners in the water sector. The need for a more comprehensive understanding of gender was endorsed. The way gender interacts with other factors and how these shape women's lives need to be studied on the ground, yet there can be real difficulties in some contexts about gathering data on women and their roles and needs at community level. Deepa had advantages in collecting her data in one area- she was from the area and had many points of access. It can be hard for externally driven projects to collect important local information using the existing methodologies (including PRA tools) which commonly still have a male bias and tend to exclude the most vulnerable and marginal.
2. ***NGOs promote women's involvement in water projects, not their empowerment through these projects.*** However, even getting women's involvement in meetings is difficult, and success is often closely related to how far women have to go for meetings and when they are held. Their domestic responsibilities prevent them getting involved at all in some contexts. Involvement is demanding and may not lead to empowerment without other things such as literacy, or new skills for doing the jobs around water provision. It is essential to do capacity building with the women to get them involved and enable them to participate. Yet NGOs often 'hide' these difficulties because they are under great pressure from donors to show they have achieved a lot very quickly. Often they can not find the time or budgets to hold multiple meetings close to the homes of women and the very poor at times that suit their needs, or to do long term capacity building training with them.
3. ***The barriers to women's involvement are often not addressed within projects.*** Women are often not allowed to participate freely because of male domination, and their subordinate status and lack of confidence inhibit them from challenging the men about this. Few projects have undertaken work with men on the need to allow the women to come forward and get involved, so

the onus is on the women to break through the barriers of culture and tradition. They need support in challenging and changing existing social relations to enable them to take up their roles in development. Gender is about power relations but projects often ignore power relations in the way they operate.

4. ***It is hard to translate policy on gender into good practice***, and the focus of work in the water sector remains on outputs and not impact. The experiences presented by Deepa are similar to those found in irrigation projects, where gender is often an 'add on' and not integral into the way the project is planned and implemented.
5. ***Projects carry Western values, projects are not challenging inequalities*** and northern perspectives dominate. It is hard for people in the south to challenge northern funders- there are real constraints around addressing issues of power. For some gender is seen as an externally imposed concept, poorly understood and so not accepted. Is it the use of the term gender or the project focus (or other factors?) that limits women's empowerment within projects? What are we aiming for through the provision of water- are we expecting water projects to change the world and is that realistic? What is the relationship between efficiency and empowerment in the water sector? It may be possible to do both, but NGOs will need to learn how this can be done.
6. ***Why is there such a gap between rhetoric and reality?*** Is there always this kind of gap? Gender policy evaporation is very clear even though in some ways gender is better addressed in water than other sectors such as roads; the rhetoric provides a good start. There is a real need for more understanding, knowledge, skills and management to get beyond tokenism because it is clear that claims of success around gender and women's empowerment by the water sector are often not accurate, but may be made to satisfy donor requirements. The research shows the need for a fundamental rethink by the sector around gender issues and what they want to achieve.

Tina Wallace presented issues arising from Shibesh Regmi's research in Nepal and subsequent work at a workshop held in Kathmandu in September 2001, entitled "**Gender issues in drinking water in Nepal**". The presentation focused on organisational and policy issues. This presentation drew heavily, but not exclusively, on Shibesh's research, drawing in experiences in Nepal subsequent to his research and the experiences and analysis of others in the IIDS gender and water team. The presentation is of only a few of the many issues explored by this research.

Tina started by presenting a powerful quote from Lyla Mehta stressing that global debates and policies around water have been more ideologically driven or based on assumptions rather than being grounded in past experience, facts and

realities. The importance of this research was emphasised in this context, where good data and feedback has been largely neglected. The research in India and Nepal was undertaken to find out what was happening at all levels- international, government, organisational, and on the ground at community level.

In Nepal, as in many other places, safe drinking water is not available for all in spite of many international commitments, and 50% of water installations are in a state of disrepair five years after being constructed. At the international policy level several ways of tackling this reality have been promoted, ways which are expected to lead to sustainable water supplies for all. These include defining water as an economic good and finding ways to charge for water which will ensure a commitment by local people to sustained contributions and maintenance. Providing water according to demand rather than being supply driven will also ensure the provision meets the needs of people and so be sustainable. Participation is another key component of current policy; women especially must be involved as they have special responsibilities for drinking water.

In the policies at international, national and organisational levels there is a stated commitment to addressing gender issues in the provision of water because of women's key role in water provision, and to ensure they benefit from the projects. Some projects are aimed at providing women with access to clean water, others go further and talk of promoting gender equity through water provision.

However, the research in Nepal, as in India, showed that ***there is a real lack of clarity about what gender means at all levels.*** The concept is not well understood or analysed, for some it is externally imposed and only for very few is gender a guiding principle behind their work. This lack of understanding and analysis of gender and how gender relations impact on water issues has led to often mechanistic or simplistic approaches to the problems. Gender is equated with women getting involved in implementation and user committees. The barriers to their involvement are overlooked and little attention is paid to their subordination and relative lack of power. The Nepal research argued strongly that ***without tackling issues of women's subordination and powerlessness it was not possible for them to actively participate and promote even project efficiency.***

There is a lack of real commitment to gender illustrated by the fact that the ***measurement of the success of water provision continues to focus on technical performance*** while ignoring the social and economic impact of the water provided. There is little or no monitoring of who has access to water, barriers for the poor, for women of different castes, or how water is controlled and by whom. Projects allocate little time or energy to issues around empowering women, gender staff are subordinate to engineers and lack resources, the time allocated for addressing social issues is often rushed or absent altogether, and measures of empowerment are absent from monitoring and evaluation plans.

The research in Nepal, and subsequent discussions, has focused on ***why the work on gender in water is so limited***. A number of answers have emerged which cut across the different levels of intervention. There are serious contradictions at the heart of water policies at the international level, where the focus on water as an economic good may exclude the poorest and many poor women, where cost recovery may cut across access for all, where social equality aims are undermined by economic approaches. The contradictions are reflected in national water policies, which in Nepal are very weak on gender issues. No independent work or thinking has been done to embed a gendered approach to water at the policy level within Nepal.

The reality that Nepal, as elsewhere, is a male dominated society means that in practice women's voices are rarely heard at the policy level, and institutions and organisations in Nepal reflect that gender inequality. A male hierarchy determines the way most things are done within the country. There is a serious lack of representation of women at every level in Nepal, the figures collected by the research of women filling key position from projects up to parliament were truly stark. This male domination is also true at the local level where inequalities of caste and gender especially often go unchallenged; they are tied closely to religion and so seem to many to be sacrosanct. External donors do not ask for monitoring and evaluation against gender criteria, so although gender objectives are mentioned in many documents there is little driving people to find ways to implement them, especially in complex social contexts.

Within organisations engineers and technical issues dominate, with little support and training for social/gender officers who are often isolated and lack real resources. Gender training is non-existent or sporadic, with little real follow-up. The complexities of addressing gender inequality and the lack of women's voice and involvement are not well understood by those implementing the water provision projects, and little is done to address this issue.

The research in Nepal highlighted some exceptions to the overall bleak picture and examples drawn especially from NEWAH were given to show that there are different ways of approaching gender, and that these can lead to positive changes.

The Nepal research, as the India research, highlighted the need for work at every level to try and seriously address gender issues. This work is urgent because the research in Nepal showed that none of the projects researched, whether run by government, bi-lateral donors or NGOs had really addressed women's strategic needs for empowerment. This lack of empowering women meant that their involvement in projects was often token or marginal and did not lead to more efficient provision and use of water. Projects have not been able to increase women's access to and control over income, poor women have benefited less and still walk long distances for water, women often cannot pay for water

because they do not control the purse-strings within the household. The projects studied did not lead to increased self esteem or status for women, and the reasons for these failures lie at every level from the international policy level, through national government policy, to organisational behaviour and attitudes, down to community level issues.

Critical issues to be addressed include at the international level questioning current policies in the light of real experiences within countries and communities, and getting donors to monitor work against their commitment to gender issues. There are urgent debates to be had around current concepts of water as an economic good and demand driven supply, in relation to providing water for all and meeting the needs of women and the very poor. At the national level there is a need for a national gender policy and clarity about what the gender issues are in Nepal. Ways need to be found to encourage women's representation at every level of government, and concrete commitments to gender in water provision need to be made in the plans. At the organisational level the need for gender training, on-going support for gender officers, family friendly recruitment and terms and conditions are all needed. Social analysis needs to be an integral part of every project from the beginning, and social issues need to be adequately monitored and evaluated so the social impacts of water provision can be understood, and changes made to improve these. Work at the local level must include addressing the barriers preventing women participating and working in ways that bring real benefits to women and the poorest.

The Nepal researcher was forthright in his criticism of donors, government and organisations at the workshop in Nepal. He called male dominated hierarchies and ways of thinking to account, and challenged them to accept there have been major failures in the past. Addressing gender issues in water will require new ways of working and real commitment at every level.

The discussion following this presentation highlighted the following points:

1. Donors may refuse to fund work they see as 'political'- DFID refused to fund some gender work on those grounds, yet this contradicts the commitment to seeing social change from development work.
2. ***There are contradictions between the demand driven approach and reaching the poorest*** who often have no voice or access to forums to articulate demands. Yet National Ministry people accept the 'demand led' approach, in discussions with donors anyway, even though, for example in Nepal, they see water as a social good and a right to be provided for all. While originally the demand led approach was introduced as a counter-weight to top-down supply-led projects which lacked any involvement of local people, over time demand led has changed its meaning. It is now defined by the economists (at the World Bank) and equates with defining water as an economic good to be provided to those who ask for it and who can demonstrate a willingness to pay. The rhetoric of demand-led is that

communities will design the projects but in fact engineers continue to do this. They present people with options on designs and prices, and often people lack the knowledge or understanding to make these kinds of decisions given the way questions are asked and information is presented. In reality willingness to pay may be very different from ability to pay, with consequences for poor people, and women who lack control over household resources.

3. ***Governments and agencies are full of contradictions and NGOs and people can exploit these contradictions for their own benefit.*** NGOs should look for the spaces provided by policy contradictions, and tie their work to policies that support their approach. For example water provision could be linked to poverty reduction programmes, or rights based approaches, and so circumvent some of the Dublin principles currently dominating the water sector. There is a need to find allies within donor and other agencies to work with.
4. ***Gender in the project cycle.*** Gender is often in the plans but disappears in the details. The time allotted for developing projects is usually so short and money is limited so it proves very difficult to find ways to turn policy into practice. There are no guidelines on how to turn policy into practice in different contexts or how to implement policies at the local level. And yet time is too short for developing understanding by working on the ground long term. It is important to get gender into the logframes, targets, indicators of change etc. There is a real need for funding good monitoring and evaluation so we can learn from real experiences. This information is needed to shape work at all levels. But more is needed than analysis and information; there is also need for change, action and improved practice. Gender is about social and organisational change.
5. ***There is a separation between the funding for research and funding for turning research into action.*** Funding stops just when the issues are interesting and need to be turned into usable guidelines. Funders need to be lobbied to take a longer-term approach to research and to promote discussions between academics and practitioners.

Anne Coles: The gender/water interface

The aim of this presentation was to set the morning's discussion in a broader context in order to facilitate the working group discussions that would follow. Anne emphasised that water is an essential resource for the whole community; the issues are broader than women's involvement.

Water projects typically last only last 3-5 years and, given the slow pace of much social change, it is important to be realistic about what these projects can

achieve in terms of women's empowerment. The provision of water can, in itself, be strategic for women because of the release of time and energy.

There are many barriers to the participation of poor women (and poor men) in water projects, and each time the question needs to be asked 'What is possible and appropriate in this context?' Government officials and engineers are seldom experienced in participatory approaches and bureaucrats often do not see the value of consultation, particularly with poor women whose experience they wrongly perceive as too limited to be relevant.. Moreover, even when practised, many PRA methods seem to be more appropriate for men than women.

The use of water depends on its accessibility and this in turn depends on physical and technological, as well as political, economic and social factors. The availability of water is critical - is it plentiful or in short supply, is it seasonal, how far away is it? How are surface and sub-surface water supplies replenished? Factors such as these, involving geology and climate, affect the water that can potentially be provided, the kind of water project possible and how water supplies can be maintained. Sometimes the community can manage the maintenance and much of the provision, but sometimes the technology is too demanding and cannot be community run.

The characteristics of water supplies affect men, women and children differently, depending on their respective roles. Seasonal shortages are a good example. In the dry season in parts of rural Africa, men may be preoccupied with finding water for cattle, while women are concerned about irrigating vegetable plots. Where seasonal migration is practiced, men and women will be affected in different ways. Over much of the world, women have the responsibility for fetching water for domestic use. Inadequate urban water supplies thus affect women more than men. It is women who queue for stand-pump water, who are most disadvantaged by erratic supplies and who are forced to buy water at exploitive prices when the system breaks down. Personal safety can be a factor, either when rural women have to fetch water from far off when local water sources have dried up or when urban women have to wait up for water supplies to resume late at night.

The amenity value of water is very important in deciding which sources will be used. From women's perspective, rivers may have more value than, say, pumps, because they can use rivers for multiple purposes, including personal bathing, washing clothes, cleaning children, watering animals, washing utensils and obtaining drinking water, as well as socialising. The taste of water, along with its temperature and smell, can also be important in deciding how water will be used. The most hygienic source is not necessarily perceived to be the most drinkable.

There are potentially positive relationships between improved water supplies and health, but the relationships are complex and there are other factors that affect the outcomes. The poor live in poor environments.

Increasing the quality and quantity of water, alone, may not result in marked improvements in health, even though women are both “the guardians” of water and family health. We have rather limited understanding of how women’s knowledge of hygiene impacts on health, how this changes with the health education that often accompanies water supply projects and whether health improvements accompany women’s empowerment. There are simplistic assumptions around the water-health relationship that need analysing further in the light of local contexts.

The disposal of water is a major issue also - how is excess water to be drained away? This is crucial in urban areas especially. If the provision of water is subsidised it may be over-used or even wasted, leading to major ‘run off’ problems. Subsidising water, which is often undertaken for the best of reasons, may lead to the need for greater expenditure on drainage and sewerage. While all households in an area may be affected by the accumulation of waste-water, it is those in the neighbourhood during the day (often women with small children) who are likely to be most affected.

To conclude, there is no such thing as gender neutral service provision – “a pipe is never just a pipe”. The ways in which water supplies are provided typically reflect existing, often inequitable, gender and power relations. Those implementing water projects need to make a conscious effort to address women’s strategic, as well as practical needs, contributing to their empowerment as an essential part of the development process.

This presentation led in to the small working groups and there was little time for plenary discussion. However a few points were made in plenary following her presentation:

1. ***Technical interventions do bring social change*** but this can often be negative change, further disadvantaging the weakest and most excluded. Good water sources alone do not bring social change, they must be tied to interventions around social issues.
2. ***Poverty is an exclusion from services*** not simply a lack of money. Ways have to be found to overcome that exclusion. In Zambia subsidies for the poor were essential, given the poverty status of the people. Subsidies may be critical in some contexts, counter-productive in others possibly.

The 3 discussion groups discussed:

1. ***So what? Possible ways forward for work on gender in the water sector***
2. ***Organisational analysis- what are the issues for YOUR organisation***

3. *Is policy reality based or assumption based? Explore any assumptions and actual experiences guiding policy development.*

Feedback from discussion groups:

1. Ways forward.

- ✍ Work with practitioners- e.g. NEWAH to work out better ways of working on gender issues and to ensure the positive experiences are publicised. Share development practice that addresses gender and poverty issues.
- ✍ Use the UK NGO water network- to share ideas, to reach those working on advocacy and practitioner groups.
- ✍ Produce concise clear research findings- for DFID and for lobbying purposes, to promote better ways of working.
- ✍ Meet with UK funders and widen the discussion
- ✍ Gender and Water Alliance- this is recently formed and has about 100 members. It is an international forum that could be used for dissemination, though it is as yet early to see how it will work and what position it will take on gender and water issues is yet to emerge.
- ✍ Dissemination in India and Nepal- this needs to continue and money needs to be raised for this.
- ✍ Dissemination at many different levels is needed
- ✍ One World Action are running seminars on gender issues and water could be one of these

2. Organisational change

- ✍ Gender often remains the 'frill on the dress' rather than being fully integrated into the organisation and its work. It needs to be integral to business ethics and indicators of success, which it rarely is.
- ✍ Gender needs champions- internal and external. They can be active change agents,
- ✍ Accountability and democratisation- this is needed internally and externally
- ✍ There is need for tools and 'how to' guides- lack of these can be an excuse and they do not solve all problems, but once people understand the need for gender they do help to put ideas and policies into practice. They do, however, need to be very context specific and appropriate, not generic.
- ✍ To address gender, organisations need a long-term approach (long time scale), resources and rewards tied to working on gender
- ✍ 'Mainstreaming'- this must allow for transformation and not just build on existing structures and ways of working

3. Policy

- ✍ Policy is seldom based on evidence- evidence can be manipulated, policy is often driven by ideology. For policy to be based on reality there are issues such as whose reality, whose evidence, what is legitimate? Other things apart from experience and evidence often drive policy processes.

- ✍ Policy is very often top-down. The rhetoric is of change coming bottom up, but much development work is driven from the top-down. However, there are some examples of bottom-up changes to policy, for e.g. in South Africa NGOs are driving a pro-poor, pro-disadvantaged agenda; the water sector in Zimbabwe did draw on experience and drive some policy changes.
- ✍ Where did the Dublin Principles come from and why do they persist?
- ✍ There are different policy processes, which may lead to different actions- for example it is possible to challenge the Dublin principles or other policies through the new process of Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans (PRSPs).
- ✍ There are constraints on policy influence over practice -which depends often on the availability of financial and human resources and motivation. There may not be the capacity or ability to turn policy into action.
- ✍ How feasible and how generic are policies which are pro-poor? What is relevant and appropriate in different contexts? There is a need for water policies to be integrated with other approaches.

Concluding comments

The workshop was exciting, full of ideas and discussion. The presentation of research data, based on long term field work provided an opportunity for re-visiting gender issues in water provision in more informed ways. There is a serious lack of field level data available to the water sector. This research project provides unique insights into gender issues around water at every level, from the international policy level down to the community level and day to day realities of poor women and men, in India and Nepal. There was a real interest generated by the findings and the issues they raise for future work in the sector, and it was agreed that further work on disseminating and discussing the research was essential.

**Report compiled by Tina Wallace,
November 1st 2001.**

APPENDIX: Workshop Participants, Oxford, 4 October 2001

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