

# Gender, Water and Sanitation: A Policy Brief



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Produced by:  
*Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water*  
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## Gender, Water and Sanitation

This policy brief was developed by the Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water (GWTF), a sub-programme of UN-Water in support of the *International ‘Water for Life’ Decade, 2005–2015*.

### Current status/trends

During the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade of the 1980s there was a very strong emphasis on involving women in water and sanitation programmes at the national and local level. During the 1990s, however, the emphasis shifted from ‘Women in Development’ to ‘Gender Mainstreaming’. In the process of this transition, many of the programmes targeted for women in development were discontinued. During the International Decade for Action, ‘Water for Life’, 2005-2015, which was launched on 22 March 2005, success in achieving the Millennium Development Goals in Water and Sanitation will require both gender mainstreaming *and* programmes targeted specifically at women in water management.

**Relationship between Gender and Water Millennium Development Goals**

MDG relevant Targets	Ensure environmental Sustainability (Goal 7) Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation (target 10)	
	Contribution of domestic water supply and sanitation	Contribution of sound water resources management and development
<b>Promote gender equality and empower women (goal 3)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Reduced time, health, and care-giving burdens from improved water services give women more time for productive endeavors, adult education, empowerment activities, leisure</li> <li>○ Convenient access to water and sanitation facilities reduces risk to women and girls of sexual harassment/assault while gathering water and increases privacy</li> <li>○ Higher rates of child survival are a precursor to the demographic transition to lower fertility rates; having fewer children reduces women’s household responsibilities and increases their opportunities for personal development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Community-based organizations for water management can improve social capital of women by giving them leadership and networking opportunities and building solidarity among them.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Millennium Project Task Force on Water and Sanitation, *Health, Dignity and Development: What will it take?* Stockholm, Stockholm International Water Institute, 2005.

The Millennium Declaration includes a commitment to achieve gender equality and empower women, as well as a pledge to reduce by half the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water by 2015. Governments at the Johannesburg Summit added a complementary target to halve by 2015 the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation. These ‘Millennium Development Goals’ (MDGs) are closely interlinked (see table above). Progress on water and sanitation is essential to empowering women, and the involvement of women in designing, operating and managing water and sanitation facilities is key to their sustainable use.

Moreover, improving access to freshwater and sanitation has an impact on related MDGs for maternal health, and the overarching goal of poverty reduction. In many cases, demonstrating that water projects work better when women are involved has a greater

impact on mobilizing finance for gender-biased projects than showing that access to water has an impact on gender equality. Policy makers may be more interested in ensuring the success of water projects than in promoting gender equality. Approaching the subject of gender and water from a development angle will still result in empowering women.

Women have accumulated a wealth of knowledge about where and how to find and store water, as a result of their primary responsibility for water supply, sanitation and health at the household level, as well as their role in growing subsistence crops. Access to water provides greater self esteem, reduced exposure to the threat of violence and health hazards, and increased time available for education, childcare, growing food and income generation.

An interesting trend which may provide an impetus to gender and water programmes is the recent increase in the number of women who have been appointed as water and environment ministers. As of mid-2005, there were about 40 women ministers of water or environment, representing every region and level of development in the world. The recently-elected chair of the African Ministerial Council on Water (AMCOW) is Maria Mutagamba, Minister of Water, Lands and Environment of Uganda. This is a concrete illustration of gender mainstreaming; these ministers constitute the critical mass needed to get gender integrated into water and sanitation policies and programmes.



*Photo: Women Leaders for WASH during the Commission on Sustainable Development, 13<sup>th</sup> session, New York, 19 April 2005 [From left to right: H. E. Mamphono Khaketla, Minister of Natural Resources, Lesotho; Ms. Anna K. Tibaijuka, Executive Director, UN-Habitat, H.E. Buyelwa Sonjica, Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry, South Africa; Ms. June Zeitlin, Executive Director, WEDO; Ms. Sunita Narain, Director, Centre for Science & Environment, India; H.E. Martha Karua, Minister of Water & Irrigation, Kenya; H. E. Penelope Beckles, Minister of Public Utilities and the Environment, Trinidad and Tobago; H.E. Maria Mutagamba, Minister of State for Water, Uganda, Chair of African Ministers Council on Water; H.E. Carmen Arevalo-Correa, Vice-Minister of Environment, Colombia; H.E. Hilde Johnson, Minister for International Development, Norway]*

In South Africa, Lesotho and Uganda affirmative action programmes have been introduced in the water sector, to train women for water and sanitation related careers, including science and engineering. At the local level, women have found their voices and have now been trained to locate water sources in the village, decide on the location of facilities and to repair pumps. The incidence of breakdown has decreased considerably. It is interesting to note that in these three countries, the Ministers of Water Resources are women. Working closely with these dynamic ministers will be important for advancing a gender perspective at global and national levels during the ‘Water for Life’ Decade, and developing a network on gender, water and sanitation.

The central role of women is often overlooked at the decision-making stages of water resource management. In many instances, despite their central role, women have no voice about the kind of services they receive. This changes when women are actively included in the decision making structures such as in those countries implementing a ‘gender-biased’ programme for water and sanitation that specifically targets women as managers, such as in South Africa.

Access to water and sanitation provides great benefits to a society and the economy as a whole, and a gender approach is central to sustainable management of water resources and sanitation. In recognition of this, the resolution proclaiming the ‘Water for Life’ Decade, 2005-2015, calls for women’s participation and involvement in water-related development efforts.

### Issues of Particular Concern

The following are some of the major factors that need to be addressed to implement a gender approach to water resources management and sanitation. A focus on both women and men is crucial to the approach.



*Photo: Women carrying water vessels, Guatemala, André Abbe, UNESCO*

- **Equitable access to water supply**

Access to water is both a fundamental human right and an integral ingredient in the achievement of sustainable development and poverty alleviation. Providing physically accessible clean water is also essential for achieving gender equality, freeing women and girls to devote more time to the pursuit of education, income generation and even the construction and management of water and sanitation facilities.

In *Morocco*, the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project of the World Bank aimed to reduce the burden of girls “who were traditionally involved in fetching water” in order to improve their school attendance. In the six provinces where the project is based, it was found that girls’ school attendance increased by 20 % in four years, attributed in part to the fact that girls spent less time fetching water. At the same time, convenient access to safe water reduced the time spent collecting water by women and young girls by 50 to 90 %.

Source: World Bank, 2003, Report No: 25917. See: [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/06/17/000090341\\_20030617084733/Rendered/PDF/259171MA1Rural11y010Sanitation01ICR.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/06/17/000090341_20030617084733/Rendered/PDF/259171MA1Rural11y010Sanitation01ICR.pdf)

The Water for African Cities (WAC) programme, supported by UN-Habitat, recognizes that gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment is essential in the provision of adequate water and sanitation in poor urban communities. It is a pre-requisite for the achievement of the Millennium Development target 10 on water and sanitation, and 11 on improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. UN-Habitat, in partnership with the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA), has formulated a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy Initiative as an integral component of the WAC programme, which seeks to mainstream gender analysis into the norms and standards applied by utilities, water boards, local authorities and communities in the development and provision of WATSAN services.

Source: UN-HABITAT Water and Sanitation Programme, 21 January 2005. Gender Mainstreaming Strategy Initiative, WAC II.

- **Equitable access to land rights and water for productive use**

It is estimated that women are responsible for half of the world’s food production. At the same time, women’s access to land ownership, and thus access to water supply, has been limited by the discriminatory legal rights and customs of many countries. Equitable access to water for productive use can empower women and address the root causes of poverty and gender inequality.

The Self-Employed Women’s Association in *India* (SEWA) has concentrated much of its work on gaining access to water for productive enterprises, which are often part of the so-called self-employed workers segment. Today more than 93 % of all workers in India are considered self-employed workers, more than half of whom are women.

SEWA has helped selected areas in India to develop plastic-lined ponds for water conservation, with technical support and training provided by the Foundation for Public Interest (FPI). Local women are now managing their own village ponds, including all book-keeping and accounts. In eight villages of Banaskantha district of Gujarat, women have formed their own water committees. Through these they undertake contour binding, building checkdams, repair of village ponds and other water conservation related construction.

Source: Makiko, W., 2004. Self Employed Women's Workers  
<http://www.gdrc.org/icm/makiko/makiko.html>. See also [www.sewa.org/ca/water.htm](http://www.sewa.org/ca/water.htm)



*Photo: Women cultivating rice, Cambodia, Georges Malempré, UNESCO*

- **Access to sanitation**

Each year, more than 2.2 million people in developing countries die from diseases associated with lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene. The social and environmental health costs of ignoring the need to address sanitation are far too great. A focus on gender differences is of particular importance with regard to sanitation initiatives. Simple measures, such as providing schools with latrines and promoting hygiene education in the classroom, can reduce health-related risks for all, and improve attendance of girls and women in schools.

In *Mozambique*, a UNICEF study found that 80 per cent of all primary schools had no toilets for boys or girls, and no hand-washing facilities. UNICEF supported the construction of latrines for boys, girls and teachers, and hand-washing facilities for hygiene practice. Combined with education and training programmes for the students, the construction of latrines provided a safer, healthier learning environment, and encouraged girls' education. Whereas older girls used to drop out of school for lack of privacy, they are now remaining in school to complete their basic schooling.

Source: UNICEF, 2003. At a glance: Mozambique. [http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mozambique\\_2231.html](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mozambique_2231.html)

- **Capacity development**

Building capacity means bringing together more resources, more people (both women and men) and more skills. Targeting women for training and capacity building is critical to the sustainability of water and sanitation initiatives, particularly in technical and managerial roles to ensure their presence in the decision-making process.

The Watersheds and Gender project in *El Salvador* is an example of how women learned new skills through participation and involvement. The project has promoted women as leaders, and trained them as community promoters and managers of small-scale companies. As a result, women have acquired technical agricultural knowledge and are now performing tasks that were previously considered suitable only for men.

Source: Agua Project Report, 2002. El Salvador: AGUA Project Evaluation August-September 2002, See <http://www.ard-water.com/agua.htm> and [http://www.dec.org/country/more\\_display.cfm?region=lac&country=El%20Salvador&category=phn](http://www.dec.org/country/more_display.cfm?region=lac&country=El%20Salvador&category=phn)

In a number of health districts in Lesotho the village water committee elects a ‘Water Minder’, who is given the tools for the maintenance of the water system and the latrines. A maintenance fund is collected from villagers and administered by the water committee. In one health district, up to 90% of the water minders are women. Villagers tend to elect women because they have wide experience with water and sanitation, are more often more readily available, and are most directly involved in matters of family health and hygiene.

- **Participation and equity in decision-making**

Women are under-represented in the ‘water world’. If water management is to be democratic and transparent -- and represent the needs of the people -- both men and women must have an equal say. A start has been made through the increase in the number of women serving as ministers of water and environment, but the empowerment of women as water managers must also be felt at the grassroots level. It has been demonstrated that projects/schemes in which both women and men are involved in decision-making have a better chance of success and sustainability.

In *Tanzania*, in the Kilombero district, a water well built by a non-governmental organization had dried up shortly after it was created. The development workers talked to the local women to find out what had happened. The women reported that the well’s location had been decided on by a local committee consisting only of men, thus the location was chosen only on the basis of geographical criteria. This proved to be a mistake. The women noted that it was important to consider the soil conditions too. As Tanzanian women lacking access to water usually have to dig for it manually, they usually know the places with the best water yields. Since that incident, women in the Kilombero district have been involved in deciding where to dig water wells.

Tissafi, Maya (2004): “Gute «Gender»-Politik fördert die Entwicklung”, in: Schweiz Global 4/2004, Berne, [http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/g/home/publi/chglob/next1/dossie.Par.0017.UpFile.pdf/04\\_04chgl\\_g.pdf\\_1](http://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/g/home/publi/chglob/next1/dossie.Par.0017.UpFile.pdf/04_04chgl_g.pdf_1)

In *Ukraine*, cleaning railway oil tanks and the city's inadequate sewage system caused overflows of sewage into houses and onto the streets. When women approached the local authority they were denied funds to solve the problem. With the help of an environmental NGO, women met with residents, launched a political campaign and filed a legal suit against the local authority. As a result, the government allocated resources to finish construction of a sewage pump, financed environmental works, and closed the hazardous oil-tank cleaning facility.

Khosla, Prabha, MAMA-86 and the Drinking Water Campaign in the Ukraine, prepared for the Gender and Water Alliance, 2002. For more information see: <http://mama-86.kiev.ua/eng/>

*“I encourage the (male) engineers to look at the impact that each decision will have on the lives of men, women and children in the watershed community. What I say to them is, disaggregate all information and data you collect by men, women and children. Break down the project into components and activities to be implemented and look at the differential impact on men, women and children. When you do this, you can easily see and understand gender differences. Project components can then be planned to address the different needs, bringing in much-needed flexibility to implementation.”*

Vasudha Pangare, National Standing Committee for Watershed Development and Water Resources Management, Government of India. See for more information: <http://www.water-2001.de/days/GWA.doc>

- **Protection of the resource base: indigenous perspective**

The traditional management skills of indigenous people often provide the most effective method of water resource management in their settlements. However, due to their lack of sovereignty over natural resources, indigenous people are seriously affected by the uncompensated and unsustainable loss of water to neighbouring industries. Measures must be taken so the indigenous people can develop their capacities to achieve sustainable and equitable self-development.

In north-eastern *Brazil*, women have taken the lead in their communities to protect water resources. The Rural Women Workers' Movement has mobilized women to revitalize a small local river in the water scarce area. This involves community education, i.e., teaching local people not to dump their sewage into the river, in addition to planting native species of trees along the river banks. Women activists are undertaking this project without government support, hoping that, if they are able to demonstrate success, the government will support other similar efforts.

Source: Branco, A. M., Almeida, W, 2002. Women, Mobilization and the Revitalization of Water Resources: the Case of Northeastern Brazil. Paper presented to the Forum on Water in the Americas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Mexico City October 2002. See: <http://216.198.199.82/reports/mex%20Brazil%20Adelia%20english.doc>

In the Witjira National Park in *Australia*, pastoralists have already caused serious deterioration of the ‘mound springs’ in the Great Artesian Basin. Some of them could be restored by using traditional methods and skills of indigenous people.

Dean Ah Chee, 1995, Indigenous People’s Connection with Kwatye (Water) in the Great Artesian Basin. Department of Environment and Natural Resources 1995. Witjira National Park Management Plan DENR. See: [http://www.gab.org.au/inforesources/downloads/gabfest/papers/ahchee\\_d.pdf](http://www.gab.org.au/inforesources/downloads/gabfest/papers/ahchee_d.pdf)

- **Resource mobilization**

The volume of external financial assistance is not likely to grow fast enough to meet water and sanitation needs around the world. Formal and informal women’s organizations and networks can play important and stimulating roles in mobilizing resources for sustainable and equitable water and land management projects. Instructing women in project management and fund raising may empower them to launch new projects and to contribute to poverty alleviation independently.

The role of women in constructing and maintaining water and sanitation facilities varies from fundraising to active work on construction, preventive maintenance and repairs to paying for water with labour. For instance, Swayam Shikshan Prayog in *India* has facilitated the formation of over 1,000 women’s savings and credit groups which have mobilized their own savings to provide loans for one another. Women started organizing to address development issues such as water supply in their settlements.

See <http://www.sspindia.org> for more details on Swayam Shikshan Prayog’s experiences in post-disaster reconstruction in Maharashtra and Gujarat



Photo: A women with a baby on her back fills a clay pot with water, Myanmar, Franck Charton, UNICEF

- **Privatization, Pricing and the right to water**

A very controversial issue from the international down to the local level is the privatization of water services versus the right to water. Governments generally have a responsibility to ensure that water is provided to meet basic human needs and to maintain ecosystem integrity. Beyond this, it is generally accepted that users must pay an appropriate price for water to ensure sustainability of water systems and protection of the water source. Problems arise when corporate profit motives supersede attention to human needs and rights. As water collectors, it is women and girls who often pay more dearly in these cases.

The consequences of privatization of water services in Cochabamba, *Bolivia* and Conakry, *Guinea*, were particularly difficult for the local populations. The increasing water prices have had a serious negative impact on the lives of displaced women, girls and boys. In *Colombia* and the *Philippines* communities started to use contaminated water again when water service was suspended due to non-payment. Such water put them at risk of serious illness.

Source: Rivera-Santander, M.A., 2004. Cited in Obando, A. E.: Women and Water Privatization, Women's Human Rights Net. See: <http://www.whrnet.org/docs/issue-water.html>

## **Recommended areas for action**

To ensure that the gender perspective is successfully incorporated into the global water and sanitation agenda, it is essential to advocate for the direct involvement of both women and men at all levels: national governments; regional/local governments; communities and civil society organizations; donors; and international organizations. Proposed actions for each are suggested below:

### **A. National Governments**

Governments need to have a clear commitment to both incorporate water and sanitation programmes explicitly into their national development strategies, and to ensure that a gender perspective is mainstreamed into this agenda. Some suggested actions are outlined below:

*1. Strengthen legislation and mobilize resources for increasing access to safe water and adequate sanitation*

- Facilitate access to grants or credit on concessionary terms to women and women's groups for improving access to safe drinking water supply, adequate sanitation and water for productive uses;
- Allocate resources to civil society organizations and small-scale providers of water and sanitation services, particularly those that include women as full partners;
- Provide micro-credit and creative alternative financing mechanisms to gender-sensitive organizations for improving or building community-based water and sanitation services.

*2. Facilitate access to land and water for productive means*

- Recognize women's important role in agriculture, livestock, fisheries and agriculture;
- Support and promote equitable access to land and tenure arrangements that enable female producers to become decision-makers and owners;
- Accord women equal rights to land inheritance;
- Improve women's productivity in using water for agriculture and small business through training, market linkages and access to information.

### 3. *Promote access to sanitation*

- Ensure that the overall national sanitation framework is gender-sensitive;
- Earmark funds for hygiene education in school curricula and separate sanitation facilities for boys and girls;
- Commission research to identify, through gender analysis, where social and economic groups are chronically excluded from access to sanitation.

### 4. *Develop capacity and encourage participation*

- Introduce affirmative action programmes for training women in technical and managerial careers in the water and sanitation sector;
- Ensure a minimum percentage of women participate in decision making from the ministerial down to village levels;
- Allocate funds to the capacity development of women and girls;
- Provide assistance to facilitate research into gender considerations in water resource management;
- Encourage women to participate in businesses involved in water resource management and sanitation schemes.

## **B. Regional/Local Governments**

- Encourage gender mainstreaming at the local level;
- Promote sanitation education messages through women's organizations, schools and health clinics;
- Design and implement capacity building to consider the needs of women and men in the design of water, sanitation and hygiene education programmes;
- Remove internal gender biases and discrimination in public sector organizations;
- Encourage gender sensitive budgets so that local governments can assess the economic value of policy commitments on gender equality.

## **C. Communities and Civil Society**

- Lobby for better services targeted towards women and children;
- Assist in collecting information on men and women's roles, access, needs, priorities and perspective on water and sanitation related issues;
- Support equality for women in the decision-making process at a local level;
- Enable women and girls to acquire access to information, training and resources related to water and sanitation initiatives.

#### **D. Donors and International Organizations**

- Engage women leaders, especially environment and water ministers, to serve as role models in the effort to mainstream gender into water management at all levels;
- Promote gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation through linking with MDG 3: 'Promote gender and empower women'.
- Compile and disseminate examples of good practices and develop norms and guidelines for gender mainstreaming;
- Invest in the capacity building of the water sector, with emphasis on empowering disadvantaged women and men;
- Encourage the media, in both developed and developing countries, to provide more coverage on gender and water issues;
- Promote equal opportunities for men and women within the donor sector;
- Provide capacity building support of gender focal staff and organizations;
- Cooperate with partner organizations to develop a framework of conventional wisdom between water and gender employees from each organization;
- Support the development and implementation of a gender sensitive water policy framework both on national and international level during the decade 2005-2015.

#### **Further information**

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International Telecommunications Union (ITU)  
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA): Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW); Division for Sustainable Development (DSD); Office

of the Senior Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI); and Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)
- United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)
- United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)
- United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW)
- World Bank (WB)
- World Health Organization (WHO)

**Non- UN Members**

- Gender and Water Alliance (GWA)
- UN Foundation
- Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)
- Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO)
- Women for Water Partnership (WfWfW)

**Observers**

- Freshwater Caucus to the Commission on Sustainable Development
- Plan International