



Women do make a difference

Lis Joosten

Drought and pollution do not discriminate between men and women — and we all need decent sanitation. So why is water a gender issue?

'Ensure that clean water is available and accessible to all by the year 2000 and that environmental protection and conservation plans are designed and implemented to restore polluted water systems and rebuild damaged watersheds'

Strategic objective K.2 of the Beijing Platform of Action, signed by governments in September 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women of the United Nations

Six years ago, *Waterlines* dedicated a special issue to women and water — 'users and managers'. It highlighted a range of gender issues, and emphasized women's close involvement with water and sanitation. Now, a few years, floods, droughts, World Conferences, conventions, and inventions later, we are exploring what has changed or moved — and in which direction. In 1992, the main points our contributors raised were:

- the need for women's participation at every stage of decision-making;
- the value of listening carefully to the views of men, women, children — the whole community;
- approaching water issues in a holistic and participatory manner;
- the importance of successful training (within the community) of female sanitation volunteers, as well as women mechanics to maintain and repair pumps;
- the need to pay attention to women's limited time and resources.

Uliywai, Malawi --- collecting water. Are women also carrying more of the burden of finding and maintaining clean water sources?



IT/Paul Harris

Now, in 1998, we aim again to highlight the wide range of aspects related to gender, water, and sanitation; from ownership, policies and rights, to ecology and urban waste, to the 'nitty gritty' of masonry and latrines. Unfortunately we are unable to include contributions on gender and irrigation, or water pollution — themes which will be addressed in a future *Waterlines*.

Our contributors

Borjana Bulajic gives us an overview of the main advances made at the World Conferences held in the past few years, and highlights the alarming situation of water scarcity, pollution and, related to that, the increasing burden on women and the feminization of poverty. As she did in 1992, Borjana again makes a strong case for women's participation in all phases of water and sanitation planning and policy, and repeats her call for a holistic and gender-sensitive approach to water management as a starting point for sustainable development. She stresses the need for attitudinal and structural change in the management of human, natural and financial resources. At the policy level, there is an urgent need for more (and reliable) gender-disaggregated data — as well as the development of gender-sensitive indicators.

Vandana Shiva argues also for structural change. Shiva describes the characteristics and effects of the patriarchal water order, which is exclusive and exploitative, as opposed to an ecological and just water order, which is inclusive and sustainable. She also explains the difficulty of attributing value and price to water as, for many communities, water has cosmological, political, social and

economic value. Further, women often depend on common property over land and water. Vandana shows that common property management is, in many cases, a solution for reaching an ecological and just (water) order. It is a misconception that individual ownership would guarantee the conservation and regeneration of natural resources. She shows that we are easily misled by the economics-led Northern worldview and stresses that it is necessary to listen to the women and local communities in general: *they* have workable solutions for equitable and ecologically just distribution of water.

Change from within

The other writers in this issue illustrate how women have managed to ensure their control over water by participating in the monetary economy and turning it into their advantage. **Yanflé Touré** describes how the women in Diass, Senegal, have made boreholes their business. By selling the water from the boreholes they manage, the women retain control of the wells as well as the service. They also demonstrate that it is possible to manage and maintain the boreholes successfully. But the problems the women face are closely linked to the issues that Vandana Shiva raises: there is a severe erosion problem, which affects the quality and quantity of the water available; and unsustainable agricultural practices, coupled with economic instability, threaten everyone's livelihoods. With the participation and support of the entire community, these women are struggling to create a sustainable water-management system, and will have to tackle the technical, ecological and socio-economic aspects in an integrated and participatory way.

Going to the other end of the globe, to Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, women again prove to be the movers behind the success of a water and sanitation programme introduced by Unicef. Through their work in the water projects, women have obtained not only practical gains (through access to clean water which results in less disease, less expenditure and more time) but they have also increased their participation in decision-making in other communal matters. Now they are respected leaders in their community. The Honduran women — especially the traditional midwives — also

prove to be the most active participants in sanitation activities, and have worked their way up into paid jobs in the sanitation sector. Now they continue to address the community's socio-economic and sanitary problems, and attempt to open more doors for women's participation in planning and decision-making.

Talking about jobs, women in Mali and India have shown that no job is too dirty or heavy, and that there *are* many opportunities to move successfully into traditional male areas such as construction, brick-making, truck-driving and solid-waste management. Unifem's **Aster Zaoude** describes how the women of COFESFA tackle holistically a series of problems, and touches upon the practical and strategic needs of women in urban Mali. They have created jobs out of the need for improved sanitation: they started a successful waste-collection business and became involved in the sale of garbage-bins and the installation of community toilets and waterpoints. Further, COFESFA created spaces for dialogue and learning (training) amongst women, on hygiene, health, and reproductive health. By responding to urban women's needs, the co-operative was able to count on community support in dealing with the local authorities, and reinforced a political empowerment process. The challenge COFESFA now faces is how to maintain the co-operative — and respond to the changing situation. Women need more training in (financial) management, and also access to and information about modern and appropriate technologies for waste management and recycling.

Brick by brick

In the case of Kerala, women have changed their traditional role as helpers of male masons — becoming fully skilled masons themselves. Now they are better able to help themselves and their community, building their future brick by brick. **Thresiamma Mathew** describes the experience of SEU Foundation in constructing thousands of latrines and training women masons. The training encourages dialogue and learning about a whole range of technical aspects of masonry as well as gender issues related to health and sanitation, community participation, and development — vital when dealing with



By teaching other women about hygiene and diet, women can gain respect in their communities — and a foothold on the career ladder.

WHO



... continued



Heldur Nelocny/Panos Pictures

Miwale, Mtwara District. 'Because women want clean water, they are important agents in operating and maintaining services.'

'Projects that pay attention to [women's] status within the community tend to be more successful in the long term'

entrenched opposition to doing 'male work'.

Overall, we can see that a combination of strategic and practical gender needs *are* being addressed in W&S projects. The practical needs, such as water availability, and better health and sanitation, have been addressed traditionally, but we can see a shift towards projects that create the opportunity for women to participate actively in both design and implementation, to increase their skills, earn a stable income — and to boost their self-esteem and status within the community. The projects that pay attention to the latter tend to be more successful in the longer term. Another dichotomy can be made in the approach of the projects, and why women are being taken into account. We distinguish efficiency approach versus empowerment approach. The first responds to the recognition that including a gender perspective in the planning and execution of a W&S project is a guarantee for effectiveness and sustainability. It is now clear that, because women want clean water, they are important agents in operating and maintaining services. The empowerment approach is linked directly, however, to the need for a combination of women's practical and strategic gender needs, and addresses not only the problem of water and health but focuses on the improvement of the capacity of women to sustain their livelihoods and to participate on an equal basis with men in (community) development and decision-making.

We must ask, in what sense do women really benefit from W&S projects, and do these projects address the most urgent needs of women? Also, do women (as usual) have to do the work, which means *extra* tasks in their full working day, or does it eventually alleviate their daily drudgery and improve their status and ability to take part in decision-making? Do women participate actively in water committees? At what level are women represented in the regional, national, and international decision-making bodies — and are women involved in research on water quality and planning? Do women have land and water rights to sustain their access and control (apparently) gained over water by projects? Is there enough water for women to start their own businesses? And, which is the larger ecological, social, and political

context in which the programmes are being developed?

In April 1998, at the sixth session of the UN Commission for Sustainable Development, women from many regions of the world were asking for attention to be paid to their specific water-related problems. In events organized by the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) they discussed community participation, water rights (access and control), water quality, the impact of industry on water quality and availability, and planning priorities for allocating water to urban and rural industries, households and hospitals. Women from the Aral Sea region in Central Asia demanded that the international community pay attention to and accept accountability for providing access to clean water, without salt or highly toxic chemicals. They want to see the creation of an independent international body, which watches over the equal distribution and quality of (national and transboundary) waters of the world.¹

With less than two years to go before the year 2000, we can see clearly that the noble goal of universal access to safe water remains an ambitious target — especially given the multiple interests surrounding water resources — but we also see that many women are working hard at all levels to contribute to this goal. We need not only many thousands of successful cases of community projects with women's participation, but also a strong, (inter)national political will to distribute water justly and protect its quality from toxic and other waste, as well as a commitment to monitor the implementation of international agreements that are geared towards both alleviating feminized poverty, and guaranteeing universal equal and safe access to drinking-water. The courage is needed to implement alternative models. Women do make a difference, if heard and given the opportunity. If this does not happen soon, we will have to bring the water from the moon.

¹ For detailed articles on the problems faced by people in this region, see *Waterlines*, Vol. 16, No. 1.

about the author

Lis Joosten is an Environment and Technology Specialist with Unifem in New York.

Contact:
Unifem, 304 East 45th Street,
6th Floor, New York,
NY 10017, USA.

Fax: +1 212 906 6705.
E-mail: unifem@undp.org
<http://www.unifem.undp.org>