



Water and environmental sanitation projects — why women?

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MEN AND WOMEN can participate in any project activities in which communities are involved. Their level of participation and roles are determined by local socio-cultural conditions which also include class, age and gender. As opposed to biological roles, which are fixed, gender roles change as it is socially constructed. The distinction is made between the social and economic activities, access to resources and decision making authority. Gender roles are influenced by social factors and quite dependent on religious beliefs and practices, socio-cultural attitudes, class differences, and the legal system which supports these. Perceived gender differences are often so deeply embedded in people's behaviour patterns and worldviews that they are seen as natural or of biological origin. However, it has been seen that gender roles vary from across societies and cultures and these roles can change over time in response to changing external / environmental conditions.

To seek equity it is essential to consider gender issues. In most societies, decisions are usually taken by men and women are expected to be subservient, even if they are able to exert indirect influence. Development goals and gender relations are strongly connected as the latter may be in contradiction or may prove to be a constraint, or may serve as a catalyst, if appropriately incorporated into the programme, first in project planning followed by the implementation phase and then in the operation and maintenance.

In most societies women and men have different roles and responsibilities in water and sanitation. Within this division of labour, women have traditionally played central roles. Usually men are most concerned with water for irrigation and the like. They tend to have a greater role in public decision making about water and sanitation issues. Women, with the help of their children, are usually the primary collectors, users and managers of water in the household. Women also play an informal but often invisible role in the public maintenance of water sources.

For the development process to be meaningful and to make substantial impact it is essential to involve women and the society must support and facilitate gender participation. In projects of water and sanitation the role of women's involvement cannot be undermined and is only reinforced as it is not in conflict with the traditional role of women. The traditional responsibilities on women with respect to water, depending on the age and class, are quite varied:

- making water available for household consumption (including fetching);

- managing the household distribution (use in terms of laundry, cooking, bathing etc.);
- storage (quantity and quality) health of the family

Women select the water sources on the basis of their perception of access, distance, reliability of the supply, efforts and time required in using / operating them, quantity available and quality of output. These perceptions and preferences determine the use, management and quality of water in the home.

In addition women are traditionally responsible for maintaining a clean environment in the house by disposing household waste, maintaining sanitation facilities. Educating and training children in hygiene is also a part of their responsibility. Sanitation is particularly concerned with gender issues as sensitivity to women's privacy is an important force in designing and placing of new sanitation facilities. If their views and concerns are not expressed and integrated into the programme design, it is unlikely that it will earn their commitment which is a likely hindrance to success. It has been seen that women truly incorporate behaviour change into their daily lives. These are then introduced in the lives of their children, thus increasing the sanitation programme's sustainability.

Glimpse of Pakistan

In Pakistan, gender issues tend to get quite clouded as many aspects are seen as sex differentiation which actually have been influenced by culture and the roles perceived accordingly. Water and Sanitation continues to be a critical area of intervention for both urban and rural infrastructure. The underlying question is how to make this a participatory development activity with gender participation.

Pakistan's overall ranking is 6th in social development infrastructure indicators while it ranks 6th in drinking water and 5th in sanitation. It is well known that parts of Pakistan are worse off than others with respect to social development and access to basic services. The development of the education sector seems to play a key role in predicting the general level of social development. It has been seen that those areas which shows progress in education, specially female literacy and primary school enrolment, rank highest in overall social development. Within the social sector expenditure, Punjab spends 52 per cent, Balochistan 39 per cent, Sindh 38 per cent and NWFP 32 per cent respectively on Physical Planning and Housing which includes water and sanitation. This makes it 43 per cent combined of the

total expenditure in social sector in Pakistan. These figures in terms of percentages are not very small but the fact is the benefits are not comparable to the expenditure. Among other things the programme crashes on sustainability due to lack of gender considerations

Water and Environmental Sanitation figures quite prominently among the development indicators. It has a strong bearing on the quality of life of people. Whether urban or rural, women are the most affected - from the time of making water available to the instance of consumption. This relates, among other things, to the women's daily routine, workload and health.

Urban example

In the low income **urban communities** the environmental conditions tend to be unhygienic and women spend more time in keeping clean their house and environment. Based on studies let us look at the representational daily routine of a woman, Sakina, living in a *Katchi Abadi* in Karachi.

Getting up with the call for the morning prayer Sakina carries out ablution and realises that the quantity of water for washing up for her children before school and for her husband before office is almost on the drying up side. She offers a silent prayer that her husband does not decide to take a bath or else she would have to bear his wrath. Little would he realise that the lone tap near the kitchen ran dry and the common tap in the lane had developed a leak and the line closed for repairs by the municipality, since over 10 days. As a result households in the community are forced to buy water from a tanker which is parked at the edge of the broad road. Mostly women of the community along with their young daughters line up to fill up the canisters, pay high prices and be subjected to vulgar comments and leering looks from the tanker driver and his three companions.

Moving towards the kitchen to cook breakfast, she reaches out to lift the steel lid of the earthen drinking water container, and frowns in dismay as the ladle used for scooping out water is seen floating inside the pot. It could have been any one of the younger children or her husband. She searches for another clean ladle to retrieve the floating one and scoop out water for preparing tea. It would make no difference to her husband, she thought, even if she shared her concern that the drinking water was probably contaminated. He never could understand why she made so much fuss over clean water.

Having the house to herself and her eldest daughter who was on leave, she began her chores. She instructed her daughter to start the cooking for the day while she went and checked on the water situation. She had barely turned into the other lane leading towards the broader road when she saw a huge crowd of both men and women. She quickened her steps to join them. The entire community was deciding to create a committee to approach the municipality to

restore water in their area and stop the tanker racket. They were drafting out a petition to be signed by head of each household. She was very excited and pleased that the entire community had come to gather on this issue and were lobbying for their rights. She promised to bring her husband over in the evening for signature and proceeded towards the tanker. They refused to give water as they saw this as a threat to their profitable income but at the same time refused to budge. She then walked to her mother's house which was 10 minutes walking distance away and filled up her two canisters and walked back to her house which took her about three-quarter of an hour as she stopped many times due to the load she was carrying.

Once home she was happy to see that not only had her daughter cooked but cleaned up the house as well, and to her amazement ready for a bath. She was waiting for her mother to come back with the water so she could take a bath, put on fresh clothes and sit down to correct the papers of her students. This gave her another jolt. Since the past week she was washing selective clothes as she did not have enough water for the full load of laundry. First things first. She lit the stove and put one container full of water to boil for drinking. She checked three plates were washed and could be shared by the siblings for eating curry while the chappatis can be kept on a newspaper. She half-filled a bucket for keeping in the bathroom and another half in the toilet. At the same time she realised that the toilet needed cleaning. With more phenyle than water she got rid of the stench in the toilet, at the same time cursing herself for the extra expenditure.

The hungry children on returning home went straight towards the food, only to be reminded by the mother to first wash their hands but not waste water. After lunch she stacked away the dirty dishes near the washing area to wait till after dinner to do all the dirty dishes together and save some water. She carried on with her other activities and waited for her husband to arrive home. He barely stepped in and she excitedly told him about the morning incident and the community meeting in the evening which he had to attend. Appreciating the gravity of the problem which inconvenienced not only his wife but the entire household he decided to go for the community meeting and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Rural instance

In another representational case of a woman in **rural community**, Husn begum's plight illustrates the problem of women's exclusion from participation in Water and Sanitation projects from the beginning.

She gets up before dawn along with her teenage daughters to walk towards the field for defecation, while the men folk are asleep. On the way they scoop up water from the channel to wash up. On return journey they take a detour to collect water for the day and some dried twigs. Two of

her daughters go to school where there is toilet but as part of morning ritual they go with their mother. For quite some time they have been resisting and coaxing their mother to urge their father to respond to the questionnaire that related to water and sanitation. They reminded their mother of two years back when a water storage tank was constructed in the village near a boy's school which had now become redundant because none of the young women or girls ever go there to fetch water. The girls having acquired education were now aware of the dead investment. In fact, they recalled that at the time the men were consulted and they did not mind the location. When it was built the women felt uncomfortable in going there and the men also did not find it befitting for their young wives and daughters to go there to fetch water.

This time again, though the design probably was not finalised the questions were mostly asked from the men and the girls along with their mother felt that they would talk to their father and make him fill up the form. That night they sat together and to their surprise the discussion went on for hours. The difference of opinion occurred at every point - from location of toilet to the placing of the hand pump. The mother mostly kept quiet but secretly nudged her daughters to speak as she did not want to offend her husband.

The daughters suggested that the toilet be placed on the left inner corner of the courtyard which was closer to their sleeping and work area. They also suggested a small bathing stall adjacent to the toilet. The semi open kitchen, toilet and the bathing area would be in one line in the inner part of the courtyard. Her husband and brother-in-law felt that it should be in front as the guests would use it and it would be a status symbol. They felt that the members of the household would in any case be going out to the fields and fetching fresh water rather than relying on hand pumps which he felt would breakdown very often and bear high maintenance cost. He said that he was not clear as to who in the household would maintain it. The daughters then tried to emotionally black-mail the father who had to give in.

Next morning when the project team came to discuss the questionnaire they were in agreement with the suggestion made by the women of the household which also turned out to be technically feasible. Husn begum was thrilled and felt proud of her daughters. But her daughters told her that this was only the beginning as they would have to work and convince the men folk at every step. The father simply smiled.

Lessons and suggestions

Having illustrated the general conditions in urban and rural communities, general lessons can be drawn and means for gender participation highlighted for effective programmes in Water and Sanitation:

- It has been observed that the women are quite well **aware** and often make better decisions regarding water and sanitation.
- It is important to include **community (men and women) participation** in water and sanitation projects during **preparatory phase** of project development.
- It makes sense to **involve women** in water supply and environmental sanitation projects as they are primarily involved with water and cleanliness (sanitation) in low income urban community or rural community.
- The project must lay emphasis on the culturally sensitive **role and status of women** to invoke and evolve their participation.
- A **culturally sensitive gender approach to water supply and environmental sanitation** projects enhances the effectiveness of community participation by recognising differences in decision making and in the division of labour between men and women. Culturally sensitive gender analysis rather than simply targeting women in a given context helps diffuse stereotypes and unwarranted assumptions about both women and men.
- It is important that the **project strategy clearly carry through the idea of participation of men and women**. This needs to begin from project justification, target groups, objectives and achievements, implementation through to monitoring and evaluation and on the other level at institution building and policy development. It is important to know the roles and responsibilities of both men and women with regard to water, sanitation and hygiene education. Pre collection of project data dis-aggregated by sex is necessary.

End note

Women generally have the most to gain from, and have the greatest interest in better services in water and sanitation as it befits their traditional functions. Unless specific efforts are made, socially enforced gender related constraints often limit participation. It is imperative to have recognition of the needs, demands and potential of women and their incorporation into project planning and implementation in managerial, professional, community-based and household roles must be consciously and explicitly done. Gender analysis with regard to socio-cultural context and project must be carried out to avoid assumptions and danger of project failure. Generally involving women into the activities of projects is more effective than separate effort directed towards women. This may require careful handling. There could be a case of overcoming effect of past discrimination, constraint of unrelated male and female working together, to avoid conflict or competition with men to maintain domestic equilibrium also required for project's success.

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