

Chapter 7

Water Seekers, Carriers and Keepers: The Global and Gender Divide

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Abstract Not having access to sufficient and safe water for basic needs is a feature of extreme poverty. Inadequate water supply and sanitation continues to be the most harmful water risk for people and globally accounts for the largest economic losses. Although gender statistics on water are scarce and scattered, it is safe to say that the larger burden still falls on women and girls, who are the traditional water seekers and carriers in secluded communities and least developed countries, but generally do not have a voice in decision-making concerning water supply and management. It is argued that the water-gender-development nexus (SDG#5 – SDG#6 interface) is a promising and largely untapped connection to reach those furthest behind, in particular through the meaningful involvement of women at all levels and stages of water management processes as called for in Dublin Principle 3 for Integrated Water Resources Management of 1992. Voices of women from Sub-Saharan Africa, a region where water and gender divides are among the highest in the world, illustrate the ingredients and processes of women’s empowerment and their inclusion in water governance, and how addressing water in conjunction with gender has a positive and lasting impact on community development as a whole. A comprehensive water-gender-sustainable development strategy gives due consideration to women’s civil society, whose potential has been only marginally utilised to date.

Keywords Water • Women • Gender • SDG5 • SDG6 • Poverty • Sustainable development

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7.1 Introduction

Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly Resolution 70/1) aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions by the year 2030. It is an ambitious agenda that wants to reach the furthest behind first and which emphasises the importance of combatting inequalities, including by promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls to achieve an all-of-society engagement and partnership for sustainable development.

The new Development Agenda includes a dedicated water goal – SDG #6 – underpinning the importance of water security as the foundation and the glue for achieving food and energy security and for building safe and peaceful societies in which all human beings can lead productive lives in harmony with nature. SDG #6 addresses the entire spectrum of water-related risks and includes targets for cooperation, capacity building and community involvement.

Despite the considerable progress made under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), today's reality still is that water insecurity keeps millions of people in poverty, continues to obstruct human well-being and seriously threatens the ecosystems that sustain our planet. The World Water Development Report 2015 describes reducing poverty through water management as a useful pro-poor framework for action and points to the links with water quality, access, livelihood opportunities, capacity building and empowerment, water-related disaster prevention and management, and ecosystem management (WWAP 2015).

Water is in everything and when trying to find a way out of poverty, access to sufficient and safe water for basic needs, for both domestic and productive uses, is a basic requirement. According to a recent GWP/OECD report, inadequate water supply and sanitation are the most harmful risks to people and continue to have the greatest economic consequence of all water-related risks, with estimated total economic losses of US\$ 260 billion annually; these losses includes the per capita estimates of the value of time spent to fetch water (Sadoff et al. 2015).

There is ample documentation to prove that lack of sufficient and safe water and adequate sanitation facilities is largely a rural and poverty-related phenomenon. In addition to rural/urban and wealth-related disparities, coverage is also much lower for minorities and other disadvantaged groups (The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014). While gender disaggregated data in the water domain are scarce and scattered, it is safe to say that the larger burden still falls on women and girls, who are the traditional water seekers and carriers in the developing world while at the same time being largely excluded from decision-making and water management processes.

7.2 Why Work on the Water-Gender-Development Nexus

Gender statistics on water are among the least available of national-level indicators. The MDG indicators for water have not been disaggregated by sex and 45.2% of countries do not produce any gender statistics related to water (World Water Assessment

Programme 2013). There is general consensus however, that water-related development interventions are not gender-neutral. Priorities for water allocation reflect unequal social status and power relations between women and men, resulting in situations where the water needs for women's domestic and productive roles are often not being adequately covered. There is ample documentation to prove that, when water is not available on the premises – which is the case in the majority of Sub-Saharan African countries - the main burden for collecting water falls on women, while their participation in the management of natural resources such as water is limited (UN DESA 2010). Chapter 6 of the UN Women 2014 global survey on the role of women in development ascertains that the domain of water and sanitation has a particularly strong potential to transform the lives of women and girls (UN Women 2014).

In rural areas of the Least Developed Countries, the gender-water-development interlinkages are particularly strong and connected to agricultural livelihoods. Agriculture is the main consumer of water, accounting for 70% of total water withdrawals globally (FAO 2015). More than 80% of the world's food is produced on family farms, the vast majority of which is small to very small (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2014). Small-scale women farmers represent the majority of rural poor populations in developing countries and their numbers are increasing (Rekha and Mary Hill 2008). The Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook points to the distribution of water and land as a major determinant of poverty, with women having far less access to these essential assets than men (The World Bank, FAO, IFAD 2008). Moreover, policy and decision-making regarding land and water management are traditionally in the male domain. As a result, policies and programmes do not always consider women's unique knowledge, specific needs or unequal ownership rights.

According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the lack of attention for gender issues and women's unequal access to natural resources is the main obstacle to improving the livelihoods of the rural poor. Paying adequate attention to the water and gender interface also increases water efficiency and avoids expensive mistakes. In Sub-Saharan Africa for instance, gender-based farming systems with women and men cultivating separate fields are quite common. Ignoring this gender dimension has caused the partial or total failure of irrigation schemes. In the daily reality of rural women, the same water source typically meets multiple needs and there is no clear distinction between domestic and productive water. Not addressing the multiple uses of water has a proven negative effect on women's livelihood resilience, and has also been recognised as one of the causes of lower participation of women in Water User Associations (IFAD 2007).

The positive impact on women of investing in water for poverty alleviation and rural development is underscored by the World Bank OED report on focused Bank lending for rural water supply. This evaluation of 15 stand-alone water and sanitation projects reports, among other things, a dramatic decrease in time spent by women and children on water collection, in some cases of up to 80%, and a related increase in beneficial activities such as education, family hygiene and women's engagement in economic activities (Ronald and Tauno 2000).

Such examples illustrate that addressing water and gender equality together can create a positive multiplier effect. Gender equality and access to water can both have a catalytic effect on community development and they both can contribute positively to breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

Box 7.1 Salamatu Garba, Director of Women Farmers Advancement Network of Nigeria (WOFAN):

Rural women in Nigeria are voiceless. Although they are the majority of the farmers, they have no say over water and no equal rights. Water management does not take into account the needs of those women; and sanitation – which is a major problem for women - is not high on the agenda. Also, we should realise that problems do not cut across and that capacities are very different. WOFAN therefore organises local women’s groups and supports these groups to work in their own pace and context. We develop the capacity of local women to effectively address their problems. WOFAN has 1500 functional women groups. With support of USAID we have sunk over 1500 boreholes in four States of Northern Nigeria that are maintained by the women’s groups themselves. In addition to water, WOFAN self-help groups address sanitation, climate resilient farming, marketing of products etc., which gradually transforms their lives. These women in rural Nigeria now speak out in public and address their issues with political leaders. They have become key actors in their own development.



Women Farmers Advancement Network of Nigeria (WOFAN) was established in 1993 and has grown to 1500 active working groups of 20–30 members in 5 states of Northern Nigeria

7.3 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: An Instrument for Development

Gender roles – and therewith the positions that men and women occupy in public and private life - may vary substantially between countries, cultures, ethnicities and generations. Traditional gender divides continue to restrain women's opportunities to lead productive lives. This makes gender equality not only a human rights principle but also an important contributor to societal development.

Since the 1970s important milestones such as the International Women's Year (1975), the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (1976–1985), and four World Conferences on Women,¹ have united the international community behind a common set of objectives to promote women's integration and full participation in development efforts, with concrete action plans to advance the status of women in public and private life. The efforts undertaken have gone through several phases and transformations, from regarding women almost exclusively in terms of their development needs, to recognizing their essential contributions to the entire development process, to seeking their empowerment and the promotion of their right to full participation at all levels of human activity (UN Women 1975–1995).

The development focus on women's equal participation continued into the twenty-first century with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG-3) targeting gender parity in education, enrolment in the labour market and increased political participation of women as instruments of women's social and economic empowerment (Millennium Development Goals 2015). However, in his report for the 60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (UN Economic and Social Council 2016), the United Nations Secretary General, concludes that: "Acknowledgement of the importance of women's social, economic and political empowerment by State and Non-state actors has not been matched by concrete policy implementation and demonstrable change on the ground".

The recent UN Women world survey on the role of women in development (UN Women 2014) underpins the interconnectedness between gender equality/women's empowerment and sustainable development. Women's agency is identified as central to many sustainable development pathways over the past 20 years in areas such as food security, climate change adaptation, and management of local ecologies including water, sanitation and energy provision, which are all critical elements for sustainable livelihoods for the poor.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a dedicated goal for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls (SDG #5) and has many references to women as development agents.

¹Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, Beijing 1995.

Box 7.2 Voices of Katosi Women Development Trust (KWDT)

Rehema Bavuma, a KWDT pioneer:

Water is a very strong empowerment tool. Everyone says that women suffer the most from absence of water. Yes, that is very true. But I have also seen how women can transform from mere water carriers into the best water managers. The women of Katosi Women Development Trust in Mukono District, Uganda, a fisher community on Northern shore of Lake Victoria, have organised themselves to address their water and sanitation challenges. Rainwater harvesting schemes now bring the water close to them and remove the burden of daily water collection; but equally important, this project has given the women confidence that they can change their lives and their communities. The Katosi women have lobbied their political leaders to ensure adequate water and sanitation in public places and they have thus developed sustainable agriculture programmes, generating income and diversifying the nutrition of their families. When you empower women, they can turn the world around.

Margaret Nakato, Director Katosi Women Development Trust:

Over the years KWDT has developed into a strong support structure for women in poor communities of Uganda. We engage in a long-term process: building grass-roots groups, empowering individual women and increasing their participation in decision-making so that change comes from within. Access to safe water and adequate sanitation is our starting point. We have broken gender taboos by training women as masons so that they can build and maintain their rainwater harvesting tanks themselves. KWDT has instated a revolving fund from which community members can borrow to continuously acquire tanks and livestock so that communities continue to benefit.

Matovu Prossy of Bugolombe women's group:

Through my group, Bugolombe women's group, I applied for a tank from KWDT and one was constructed in our home. My husband was very proud of me and he has since treated me with respect. He does not see me as a dependent anymore but as someone who contributes to improvement of life.

(continued)

Box 7.2 (continued)

KWDT was formed in 1996 by 20 women from Mukono District in Central Uganda to improve the living standards in their community. Water and sanitation provision is a prime entry point. Today there are over 511 women organised into 19 groups. KWDT has so far been recognised nationally and internationally with several awards for transforming women's lives through the water and sanitation program among others. KWDT has also been selected by the Uganda Ministry for Water and Environment for the up scaling of rain-water harvesting through the revolving scheme in the whole district.

7.4 IWRM: A Participatory and Women Inclusive Approach

For the water domain, an integrated, participatory and women-inclusive approach is enshrined in the Dublin Principles for Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) of 1992 (The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development 1992).

IWRM is essentially a Human Rights-Based Approach (RBA). A key distinguishing feature of RBA is the process through which development outcomes are achieved. Normative principles that guide RBA development processes are: equality and

non-discrimination, accountability, and participation. RBA transforms beneficiaries from passive recipients of development aid into active citizens with rights and expectations, but also with responsibilities. A fundamental benefit is that RBA unfolds the potential of the grassroots. Moving from receiving charity to claiming justice boost people's self-esteem. It liberates the underprivileged from their position as 'victims' and empowers them to actively pursue their rightful entitlements, to hold their governments accountable and to participate in decision-making on issues that concern them (Emilie Filmer-Wilson 2005).

There is mounting recognition that stakeholder participation in the development, implementation and management of water service provision is truly beneficial. In their comprehensive global assessment of water supply options, Sutherland and Fenn state to that effect (Sutherland and Fenn 2000): "*Whatever the circumstance (be it in rural Laos or urban California), the chances of improved performance and sustainability are greatly increased with the inclusion of all stakeholders in the planning and operation of water supplies.*" The Global Water Partnership describes participation of stakeholders across communities, civil society, minorities, indigenous peoples and women, and at all levels and stages, as an intrinsic element of effective water governance and conditional to achieving fair trade-offs between different water uses (Peter and Alan 2003).

Box 7.3 The Dublin Principles:

Dublin Principle 2: *Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels. The participatory approach involves raising awareness of the importance of water among policy-makers and the general public. It means that decisions are taken at the lowest appropriate level, with full public consultation and involvement of users in the planning and implementation of water projects.*

Dublin Principle 3: *Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water. This pivotal role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of water resources. Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them.*

Box 7.4 Voices of Women in Mweteni Village, Tanzania:

Resti Gerald, Chair of the Tegemeo Women Group:

Ten years ago water was a big problem for the 10 000 people of Mweteni village. Women and children had to spend a lot of time fetching water; the water was not clean and caused diseases; children missed school and when HIV Aids came into our village, the water burden became too much. When Tegemeo Women Group set out to address these problems, we were met with obstruction from our community and authorities who did not think women could do such a project. Together and with the help of Women for Water Partnership we have overcome all challenges and united the villagers and leadership to jointly develop and implement our plans with the Same District. Now clean water runs through pipes to all our sub-villages; our hospital and schools have rainwater harvesting systems and proper toilets; we have our water title deeds secured, water tariffs and water user associations that manage and maintain the systems. Tegemeo has also developed income-generating activities like sewing, planting maize and joint sale of products. And we have developed a revolving fund (vikoba) to finance new activities. Water has changed our lives.

Happy Zawadi of Mweteni:

This program empowered women; during meetings they are no longer silent, but we speak freely. There is no longer the problem of fetching water far away. Less female students drop out, they have time to do their homework.



Tegemeo Women Group (TWG) was formed in 2001 by seven women from Mweteni Village in Same District of Tanzania to promote gender equality and women's economic independence. TWG has taken a leading role in obtaining access to water for sustainable livelihood for the approximately 12 000 inhabitants of Mweteni and grown to 25 members in the process.

While women's involvement in the provision, management and safeguarding of water is generally embraced by development and donor agencies, an extensive literature review in 2007 considers the evidence base too fragmented to conclude that the positive effect of women's agency on water management is undisputed, nor that it yields unassailed benefits for the women themselves (Ray 2007). Local circumstances are very different and social roles not only vary across gender, meaning that women in different communities or segments of society may have different requirements for their empowerment. Enabling participation requires a good understanding of social conditions and bespoke approaches are needed that are best left to the local stakeholder groups themselves. The many best practices from women's civil society around the globe make a compelling case to further ascertain the conditions under which women can contribute meaningfully to water security and reap the benefits of their involvement.

7.5 The Role of Women's Civil Society

The remaining part of the global population that lacks access to water and sanitation is hard to reach. Many live in dispersed rural communities and informal settlements of developing countries, where water is often and increasingly scarce, traditional norms and gender divides prevail, and water allocation is guided by customary law in an informal water economy.

The earlier mentioned World Bank OED evaluation points out that the challenges for making decentralised rural water supply services work sustainably and reach all intended beneficiaries are typically of a social and institutional nature. Villages with higher social capital are reported to have much better results than villages where the level of social organisation was low. Social capital is what holds communities and groups together and guides their collective action. It is defined as: *the internal social and cultural coherence of society, the norms and values that govern interactions between people, and the institutions in which they are embedded*. Greater social capital in a community leads to more participation in service design, to more effective rules for governing implementation and to better monitoring of construction, use and maintenance.²

Women traditionally unite in social networks that are characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity. These quality social relations provide a social support and safety net and enable network members to collectively resolve problems while obtaining mutual benefits. Women's social networks are organised at local, national and international level and in a diversity of peer groups ranging from professional background, religious or political affiliation, ethnicity or nationality, to thematic interest groups. They form a substantial resource for collective action contributing to social cohesion, democracy and sustainable development (Bouman-Dentener and Devos 2015).

²Pages 31–32 (Ronald and Tauno 2000).

A recent publication on women's agency in water illustrates how water and sanitation interventions in which women's civil society groups had a leading role not only effectively meet women's practical water needs and increase their productive contributions, but also facilitate women's engagement in public life, giving way to more inclusive decision-making, demand-responsive services, and increased cooperation with local authorities and the water sector. The positive effects of empowering women through water extend far beyond the water domain, as these grassroots groups subsequently address other development challenges in their communities (Bouman-Dentener 2015).

The United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) has conducted 35 in-depth local level surveys to gain insight in what makes women's projects successful, how women's social capital adds to the sustainability of local WaSH interventions and what are the benefits of a supporting network at different scales. The projects typically are relatively small and civil society initiated, have multi-stakeholder participation and practice learning by doing. They include indigenous knowledge and leverage community contributions bringing about significant change with small financial investments. Considerable time and effort are invested in information sharing, capacity development, social dialogue and building trust and understanding, whereby technically viable solutions become accepted by the community and local ownership is built. The main challenges are recognition by and cooperation with authorities, gender stereotyping and inclusion of marginalised voice; these challenges are overcome through peer support and perseverance, and if need be, using the power of the global network. A main sustainability factor is that prior to project implementation, the absorption capacity of the community is built. Women's civil society with its intrinsic social capital and bridging and bonding capacity proves an effective and low-budget medium to ensure community involvement, acceptance and trust. If this process precedes the actual project development phase, true demand driven and locally owned processes result. The global network serves to build broader support for common values and goals, to build knowledge hubs and partnerships, to share experiences, to give local and national women's groups recognition, to provide support in fundraising and capacity development, and to influence (inter)national agenda setting (Schuster-Wallace et al. 2015).

7.6 Bridging the Remaining Global and Gender Divides

On the brink of the 2030 development era just under three quarters of a billion people are reported to not have access to improved drinking water sources and 2.5 billion people lack access to basic sanitation, with over one billion people still defecating in the open (WHO/UNICEF 2014). Indigenous peoples, minorities and the rural poor are predominant segments of the global population that still lack adequate

access to safe and affordable water for their daily needs. They are also the ones that often experience gender inequalities in rights, resources and voice. This makes women's empowerment and access to water important and complementary development instruments. Working on the SDG#5 – SDG#6 interface tackles poverty at its roots.

Closing the remaining global and gender divides in water means getting to the hard-to-reach population segments that often live in conditions where centralised water management systems are not an option. Decentralised and tailor-made solutions are needed that take the specific physical circumstances and socio-cultural contexts into consideration. Decentralised water supply and management works best when there is sufficient social capital to engage communities and guide their collective action. Women have a tradition of working through social networks. Making use of women's civil society to mobilise their peers and their communities helps to prevent expensive mistakes and to make the complex network of local actors and social interactions in rural water provision work effectively, which, according to the cited World Bank evaluation,³ is invariably more elaborate and time-consuming than anticipated. Women's civil society knows the social norms and customary laws and has the proximity needed to render moral support for a prolonged period of time.

Building social capital through empowering grassroots women's groups requires effort, time and resources, but such pre-investment would contribute to sustainable water management and community development as a whole. While international development policies have put gender equality and women's empowerment front and centre on the development agenda, this strategic focus is thus far not reflected in gender responsive budgeting. OECD-DAC⁴ uses a gender equality policy marker to assess the gender focus of Official Development Aid (ODA). An analysis of overall donor spending in DAC countries in 2012 reveals that of the 86 061 million USD that were screened for the gender equality policy marker (87.1% of the total allocated amount), 27% included gender equality/women's empowerment as an explicit or as a secondary objective of the activity. A mere 2% of this so-called gender-focused funding was allocated to women's equality organisations and institutions (OECD 2014).

Poor funding marginalises the role of women's civil society and restricts their contributions to gender sensitive water management. At the same time, audits and evaluations by, inter alia, the European Union (European Court of Auditors 2012), the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Evaluation 2012) and the World Bank (1997–2007) indicate that a considerable number of water and sanitation projects fails to adequately service the targeted beneficiaries. Meaning that many millions invested in water and sanitation provision are effectively wasted on unsustainable interventions partly because, due to insufficient involvement of the beneficiaries, interventions fail to match their demands.

³Page xii (Ronald and Tauno 2000).

⁴Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – Development Assistance Committee.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls for an all-of-society engagement and partnership, clearly articulating the importance of involving non-State actors including civil society, in the implementation of this ambitious agenda. It raises the expectation that important lessons have been learned from the past and that world leaders are willing to seriously pre-invest in strengthening those stakeholders that are often and easily forgotten, but known to be crucial for the transition from principles to practice. Women are such a stakeholder group.

Going from the conceptual comprehension of gender issues to solving the everyday grassroots realities of differential access to and use of water is a long and winding road. If we are serious about the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, now is the time to translate the rhetoric of women's important role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water into action and seriously pre-invest in the empowerment of women and other easily forgotten stakeholder groups to contribute meaningfully to the SDG#5 –SDG#6 interface.

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