

# GENDER CONCERN IN WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

## Rethinking gender initiatives in India

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### Abstract

*Gender concern in water resources management is globally seen as instrumental in achieving greater efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the sector. Working within the global framework, in recent years, the state in India has drafted and designed gender-based initiatives in the sector at policy as well as program levels. Most of these concern the water users in local communities, primarily the women. Beginning with a concern for women as 'beneficiaries', the state's initiatives have been expanded to enhance the scope of their participation in the sector as 'actors'. This is reflected in the initial designing of water supply programs aiming at unburdening women in the task of water procurement, to be succeeded by formulation of new interventions promoting their participation in decision-making within domestic as well as irrigation water management arenas. The paper seeks to analyse the effectiveness of these gender-based initiatives in India, looking for the situational factors influencing the achievement of the underlying goals. It argues that the localised social and cultural context interplay in the process of effective implementation of the interventions. The conceptualisation of the gender, gender needs, gender roles and relationships with respect to water resources management within the local context may not necessarily match the constructions underlying the gender initiatives designed and promoted by the state. Consequently, the paper argues for the need to rethink the content and strategy of these initiatives so that the aspirations of the local community and its members are fulfilled in a way that buffers the state's interests and efforts.*

**Keywords:** Gender, women, water resources management, state, local communities.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Background**

Gender concern in water resources management is seen as instrumental in achieving efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the sector. The concern within the sector implies that all decisions regarding the planning, design, location, operation and maintenance and management of water as a resource should be based upon recognition of the differences between men and women with respect to their needs, interests, opportunities and powers (Matiza, 1994; Sida, 2002, Woroniuk, 1994; Woroniuk, Thomas and Schalkwyk, 1996, UNDP, 2003). In a narrower sense, however, it is often expressed as a concern favouring ‘women’ within the sector (Matiza, 1994; Binamungu, 1994).

The benefits emerging from adopting a gender concern in water resources management may be identified at both policy and program levels. Awareness of gender issues in water resources management is believed to contribute towards a realistic formulation of water policies and implementation plans from local to national level (Guijt, 1994). It is believed that attention to gender issues in this context will ensure that the roles and responsibilities of women and men are mobilized to the best effect; the creativity, energy and knowledge of both contribute to making water schemes and ecosystems work better; and the benefits and costs of water use accrue equitably to all groups (UNDP, 1990, 2003; ICWE, 1992; Brismar, 1997).

### **1.2. Gender initiatives in water resources management in India**

Working within the framework of international guidelines, significant gender initiatives have been formulated by the state in India in order to adopt a gender-sensitive approach in water resources management. At the policy level, there have been attempts at promoting the needs and interests of women as water users and to enhance their involvement in water resources management activities. The National Water Policy (MoWR, 1987, 2002) recognizes the provision of adequate safe drinking water facilities in rural areas as one of the priority areas for action. Similarly, the National Policy on Empowerment of Women (DWCD, 2001) warrants special attention to the needs of women in the provision of safe drinking water within the accessible reach of households, especially in rural areas. It also seeks women’s participation to be ensured in the planning, delivery and maintenance of the service. Similar are the guiding principles adopted at the level of states, such as the Women’s Policy in Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) (DWCD, 1997) that envisages the water needs of women as a key area of interest and proposes to ensure sources of safe drinking water in every rural settlement. The National Water Policy further lays down the need to

ensure “appropriate role for women” as a part of participatory approach to water resources management. Similarly, the Women’s Policy in M.P. enunciates the need for active participation of women in community-based management of rural water supply systems.

For translating the policy guidelines into action, a number of programs have been designed and implemented in the country. Gender concern in these interventions may be traced to an early concern with women as the focal target group to be benefited through domestic water supply programs in rural as well as urban parts of the country. This involved recognition of women as domestic water managers to be facilitated through provision of new, improved, reliable and safe water sources close to home, most commonly the handpump.

This was followed by program initiatives aiming at increasing the involvement of women in water supply activities through measures such as their training as handpump mechanics under the Training of rural youth for self-employment (TRYSEM) scheme. The program was based on the rationale that through enhanced capabilities for handpump maintenance, women as end-users would be better equipped to ensure continuity of supply in case of breakdowns.

The recent interventions follow the gender and empowerment approach (UNDP; 2003), where question of more equal control over water resources and a more equal sharing of decision-making powers is promoted through the Sector Reform Program (SRP), more or less revised as the new program called “Swajaldhara” (RGNDWM, 2000).

### **1.3. The issues of concern**

While the state’s initiatives in promoting a gender concern in water resources management have been stated, the implementation of these initiatives in local communities constitutes an interesting case for study. How effective have the state’s initiatives in water resources management been in achieving the gender-sensitive goals?

Do the concerns expressed in these initiatives reflect the gender needs and priorities of the water users? Are these initiatives built upon the specificities of the gender dimension already prevailing in the user community? How do such social realities influence the process of implementation of the initiatives? Finally, what implications do such realities hold regarding the content and strategy of the initiatives so that the aspirations of the local community and its members are fulfilled in a way that buffers the state’s interests and efforts? This paper seeks answers to the above questions within the context of local communities where water use and its management actually take place.

#### **1.4. Methodology**

This paper draws upon primary as well as secondary sources of information. The local contexts where gender-based water management initiatives are operationalized are primarily covered by an anthropological study in India. The data in these studies is qualitative in nature procured through intensive fieldwork conducted in the central state of Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) and the central-eastern state of Bihar. Intensive fieldwork techniques such as participant observation, unstructured and structured interviews, focus-group discussions and case study were used for procuring the data. In addition to the primary data, a number of other relevant secondary sources were referred for cases, as was literature on policy context.

## **2. IMPLEMENTING GENDER INITIATIVES IN INDIA: A SITUATION ANALYSIS**

In accordance with the nature of the gender-based initiatives implemented by the state, the situation may be analysed at three different levels. First, let us examine the situation regarding the pattern of utilization of the modern domestic water supply systems installed primarily with the goal of unburdening women, particularly in the rural sector. In this context, it is important to note that women in local communities have strong preferences for particular types of water to be used for different domestic purposes. They report consideration of three important criteria while selecting water source for drinking and cooking purposes. These are colour, smell and taste. Good quality water for these purposes is expected to be colourless, odourless and sweet in taste. Accordingly, women as ‘end-users’ are not unanimous in acknowledging that the new public sources have been able to fulfil their various domestic water needs in an integrated manner. Where handpump water is found to fall short of the culturally defined criteria, women, even under situations of time and energy constraints, may prefer traditional sources. In such instances, use of handpump water may actually pertain to washing, bathing and watering of nearby kitchen gardens and animals.

Other additional cultural criteria may also be considered while using water from the modern sources. For instance, handpump water may not be found to be suitable for pregnant women and lactating mothers because it is believed that such water lacks necessary therapeutic qualities that may enhance the health of such vulnerable individuals. In some instances, water for religious purposes may be specially fetched from traditional sources on grounds of perceived purity of the source and its water.

As a result of the diversity of criteria determining the nature of water preferred for different domestic uses, the newly installed public water sources may actually be viewed by women as a good “add-on” source that may fulfil a part of the domestic water requirements because after installation of new domestic water supply systems, they may actually depend upon more than one source for managing their domestic water needs. Consequently, their time and energy input in water fetching activities may remain unchanged even after such installations in the vicinity of their houses, besides raising questions on direct outputs of the exercise from health point of view.

Another question to be considered while examining the situation regarding utilization of the modern water sources concerns perceived reliability in terms of the working status of the installation and the input of energy and time in actually making use of it. According to several women users, handpumps are unreliable as they break down frequently and may lie so for months. Sometimes, these are even declared dry and permanently unusable. Consequently, they find greater reliability and sustainability in their traditional water sources that they also find as less time-consuming and easy to operate.

The question of utilization of the modern water sources also needs to be analysed from the perspective of the category of potential women beneficiaries. Within the gender-based initiatives, a special concern has been expressed for women from the ‘weaker’ sections, namely the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)<sup>1</sup>, who are identified as the most needy in terms of lack of access to safe drinking water sources. However, in a number of instances, such as in Saprar and Lamkana (in M.P.) and Masarh (in Bihar), it may be recorded that these women continue to lack access since the handpumps installed for them are virtually in use by the upper castes from where, by virtue of the prevailing caste norms, they are denied the privilege of sharing water. In fact the entire process of siting and installation of the modern water resources in the villages tends to overlook the realities underlying the Indian social structure, resulting in manipulation of the resources in favour of the handful of dominant sections<sup>2</sup>.

The study also reveals that quite contrary to the basic assumption underlying the gender initiatives, fetching water in rural communities is not always women’s burden. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> The terms SC and ST imply categories mentioned in one of the schedules of the Indian Constitution. These categories are considered to be weaker sections of society whose interests need to be safeguarded and promoted. Socially, these groups are seen as occupying the lower rungs of the local hierarchy.

<sup>2</sup> For details on the concept of dominance see Srinivas, 1959. Among the basic criteria determining dominance are higher position in caste hierarchy, numerical preponderance and sizeable ownership of village land.

belief about handpump as a source for benefiting women alone is not really true. Women from the upper castes, particularly those who reside in the village by virtue of marriage, are not actually expected to fetch water 'publicly'. This is generally the responsibility of men of the household and only in their absence can younger girls/daughters or even the senior women (mother in law) take over. However, among the lower castes, women may exercise greater mobility in this regard. Besides, it can also be commonly observed that the handpump is as much in direct use by men who wash and bathe there as also bring their animals for watering. Women and men actually describe domestic water management as a cooperative effort between them at the household level since domestic uses of water concern the water needs of both. Thus, while determining water demand and ensuring appropriate use of the water fetched is women's task; men may not only participate in fetching water, but also use domestic water for their own purposes outside home at the public source itself.

At the second level, as a follow-up on encountering the technology management barriers expressed by women, in the mid-1980s, efforts were made to train local women users as pump mechanics. However, the turnout of women for the scheme was rather low, and even when trained, their actual functioning as mechanics is even rarer. The women see this as a result of the traditional role differentiation where maintenance of water sources is rightfully seen as men's responsibility. Also, traditionally the very idea of women repairing handpumps in public is unconventional, being rather negatively valued and therefore, difficult to adopt. It is seen as an act of violation of the social organizational principles whereby married women in their affinal home are expected to follow a certain code of conduct based on avoidance of elder males – relatives, neighbours and others – that the latter are also obliged to reciprocate.

Notwithstanding the problems encountered in involving women in technical aspects of domestic water supply programmes, action has been initiated at the third level, under the new participation-based gender initiatives to enhance the participation of women in planning and decision-making as also supervision and monitoring in relation to public water supply systems. One of the ways of achieving this goal is through a system of reservation of seats (up to 33%) for them in 'Panchayat Raj' bodies that constitute the local government structure at 3 levels, district, development block and village. One of the spheres of action of the local government bodies is 'water and sanitation' for which members are organized as special committees at each level that are primarily involved in planning of new water supply installations and supervising and monitoring their operation

and maintenance within their respective areas of jurisdiction. It is assumed that within this set-up women can voice their opinion and influence decisions through their elected representatives in these committees. The new program Swajaldhara is built upon this concept of participation- of community in general and women in particular. Here the outcome of enhanced women's participation through the Panchayat committees is discussed.

M.P. is the first state in India where the new Panchayat Raj organization has been operationalized since 1995, with women representatives in prescribed numbers at each of the three tiers. However, a closer look at the situation reveals that perhaps the goals underlying such participation are far from being achieved. In this state, it is commonly observable that it is men who take the lead in management decisions about water supplies within panchayat bodies, while women's participation tends to be only officially reckoned. Many of the women members from different tiers report that decision-making about water management in public primarily constitute men's arena of work, where women's needs and opinion carry weightage but are to be conveyed indirectly. Thus, in some of the meetings it can be observed that husbands of the women occupying key positions actually participate.

In these instances, a majority of the women representatives as well as others agree that what is more important is to safeguard their water interests in the way they desire rather than a concern with 'who' actually gets it done. They also explain that there are well-defined social norms about behaviour of men and women in public and that violation of these norms is negatively valued in society. Participation in panchayat meetings involves open interaction between men and women who belong to categories that otherwise share a "relationship of avoidance". A good number of male members participating in the meetings opine that 'forced' participation of women during the early phase of panchayat meetings organized under administrative guidance created 'embarrassing' situations for both the genders. Violation of the societal taboos is seen as a cause of social criticism and dishonour for the family that is undesirable.

Women as well as men, as members of these committees, are further sceptical of the fact that the new water management system introduced by the government tends to overlook their own management system already in practice. The new management system fails to consider that men and women shoulder distinctive roles and responsibilities in the process that balances their 'participation' in socially and culturally viable ways. The new gender-based management initiatives are seen as promoting common overlapping roles for both

men and women that is already showing problems in operationalization due to contradictions with not only the 'internal gendered management arrangements' but also with other aspects of social life.

An example of such contradiction is that while traditionally it is men who take final decisions about the 'extra-domestic' affairs in public, assumption of such decision-making powers by women as members of panchayat bodies is being seen as a cause of power confrontation at home, since instead of differentiation of the arenas of decision-making, such a situation actually leads to overlapping of their arenas. Such social disorder being undesirable, a number of women members prefer to act through their male counterparts at home. In fact, a number of women representatives also express their difficulties about managing time for meetings and other routine 'committee work' since their role in undertaking domestic chores and caring for the children extends over the whole day.

In the villages under study women and men equivocally opine that more innovative solutions need to be worked out if at all women's 'visible' participation is to be enhanced. Such participation must be based upon traditionally recognized water management role differentiation and societal obligations. Moreover, they feel that there is need to recognize household as the unit of participation rather than men or women as individuals. Alternatives are necessary since adherence to social norms and values is essential for maintaining social coherence and order and therefore 'social sustainability'.

They further feel that since the handpump is not the primary source of water supply for them (substantial dependence still being on the traditional sources), situations such as breakdown of handpumps or other problems with their management may at best be seen as one of inconvenience to both women and men. But such a state of affairs may not actually necessitate a situation where societal norms be flouted or transformed to accommodate new water-related needs 'imposed' from outside.

The villagers are primarily of the view that there has not been a substantial improvement in the water management situation in the villages even after formation of the panchayat bodies and their committees and election of women members to these. A comparative record of the operational status of handpumps between 1995-96 and 1999-2000 in one of the northern districts of M.P. – Shivpuri – confirms this view<sup>3</sup>. The villagers are of the opinion that water is a basic necessity of life for all members of the household, even for

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<sup>3</sup> Source: District Implementation Reports, Public Health Engineering Department, District Shivpuri, Government of M.P., 1994-95 to 1998-99.

domestic purposes and perhaps therefore it makes little difference as to who actually takes the 'visible' action – the women or the men.

This study also indicates that the process of participation of women in water management activities is not so simplistic as is often assumed. Women may not constitute a homogenous group due to operation of several other social factors, such as caste affiliation. In villages Saprar and Lamkana, denial of rights to scheduled caste women could not be sorted out through enhanced participation of women in village panchayats. Interestingly, in both the cases, women from the scheduled caste section were represented in the village panchayat as also at higher levels. However, despite their physical presence as representatives of a single gender – 'women' – at the pragmatic level, they were divided on the basis of their caste affiliation and this outweighed their cohesion in terms of gender identity. Since decisions of panchayat in general are much influenced by the factor of 'social dominance', in the first case, women representatives from the scheduled caste section were unable to safeguard the interests of the water-users of their own group. In the second case, cleavages within the women's section lay further down at the intra-caste level – here the women members from scheduled caste section belonged to what is commonly referred to as the "creamy" layer. These women had greater concern with power-based affiliations than with the real needs of their less fortunate sisters.

In recent times, attempts are also being made to enhance access and participation of women in irrigation systems by including them as members of water user associations. Regarding this initiative, women in the villages under study almost unanimously opine that as in the domestic water supply systems, here too, their 'visible' participation may not be really forthcoming. They find irrigation to be primarily the men's concern with limited relevance for them in terms of need or role. Consequently, they do not foresee much benefit from investment of time and energy in this arena of work, although, traditionally speaking, as members of the household with a common concern for agricultural produce from the fields, the men may seek the women's opinion. At times, they may also be involved more directly, for instance, in situations of temporary absence of men of the household or in case of women-headed households. But such cases are seen as exceptional and not impinging upon the societal perceptions regarding working of women in 'public' (as in case of women using or managing irrigation sources). In fact, such women also feel that it may be more effective for them as water users in irrigation systems to justify their claims by referring to socially acceptable roles and associated social and moral virtues rather than through formal membership.

It is also felt that as with water management committees for domestic water supplies, here too, elected women members would have constraints of time to attend meetings. Besides, venues may also be inconvenient to them. Women and men alike also anticipate it that membership of women in water user associations may amount to challenging the prevailing norms and practices by creating situations of power confrontations between genders within households, besides threatening the gender-based domestic arrangement concerning division of labour.

### **3. REDESIGNING THE GENDER INITIATIVES: SOME REFLECTIONS**

The findings of the paper offer important lessons for the designers of gender-based water management initiatives in the country. Beginning from the questions raised in the paper at the outset, we find that, first and foremost, these initiatives are based on a rather simplistic assumption that women are the universal domestic water managers with men's concern lying only with 'productive' use of water. As domestic water managers women are further seen as 'burdened' with the task of fetching water. This study indicates that domestic water management is a much complex process with several elements like decision-making about quantity and quality of water with respect to different purposes, procurement of water as a physical activity, and finally usage of water in specified quantities for pre-determined purposes. Both men and women are co-partners in the process but ascribed different roles. A similar cooperation also extends to the irrigation sector. Recognition of local gender-based roles and patterns of cooperation with regard to water management should be seen as critical in devising participation strategies for more effective management.

Second, the existing initiatives, though proposing a gender concern actually tend to view women in isolation. From this study it emerges that in any gender-based framework, women as well as men, must be considered and they must be seen in relation to each other. Considering only women, their problems and needs and their roles is bound to yield distorted pictures of the reality. An isolationist approach pursuing the needs, interests and priorities of women alone does not appear to be realistic given the gendered realities of their lives. This study indicates that the gendered needs for water and the role allocations between men and women for their fulfilment are complementary and reflective of the interconnectedness and interdependence of women and men at various levels within as well as outside the household. Further, such interrelatedness within the domain of water management is intricately linked to other institutional aspects in the socio-cultural matrix

of the community. Gender differentiation with respect to needs, roles, rights and privileges can be meaningfully understood only when seen in the light of such interrelatedness. Further, manipulations within gender-based complementarities may not be accepted by society, thus rendering new organized modes for improved water management ineffective. Thus, there is need of a gender framework that visualizes women and men and their needs, roles and rights as integral components in water management systems.

Third, the findings presented here also spell out the need to develop an understanding of how socio-cultural intricacies active in the local implementation contexts may bring an impact upon the effectiveness of the program. This further demonstrates that the design of the present gender-based initiatives incorporating merely the aspects of technology, women (as beneficiaries/actors) and institutions, is not adequate. Its weaknesses are evident in the outputs that fail to deliver the goods. There is a need to take into consideration even the intricacies of the socio-cultural context while designing interventions. This ‘contextual’ factor is dynamic and may show variations across situations- both in space and time – and make implementation a complex phenomenon.

In this case, the gendered beliefs and values concerning water use as well as gendered social usages play a critical role in determining the effectiveness of the interventions. The cases presented here illustrate the nature of socio-cultural intricacies that may interplay with the process of program implementation in the local Indian context, caste being an important factor that may even cause variations within gendered roles and behaviour patterns. Further, if a perceived gendered water management role does not actually exist, then attempting to fulfil it or improve may show no real outputs, thus rendering the input wasteful and failure to achieve participation of the community. In this case, this argument can be seen as extending to the perceived needs of enhancing ‘visible’ participation of women in water management activities – a sphere that does not appear to have been accepted well at societal level and hence lack of effectiveness. Theoretically speaking, since these intricacies are definable and meaningful only in the local context, each local context warrants specific assessment rather than generalized opinions and universal policy formulations.

Thus, as an overview, the findings of the paper clearly imply the need to rethink the gender-based water initiatives in the country. The conceptualisation of the gender, gender needs, gender roles and relationships with respect to water resources management within the local context do not appear to match the constructions underlying the gender initiatives designed and promoted by the state. If real benefits are intended to be ‘effectively’

delivered to women and men, there is a need to integrate the socio-cultural context of implementation as the fourth aspect within the design of initiatives. Integration of this aspect will imply requisite changes in the contents and strategies of the initiatives so as to make it more pragmatic, acceptable, workable and effective when introduced in local communities.

As an alternative, it may be proposed that fulfilment of gendered water needs and interests of women as well as men should be the underlying goal or ultimate end of gender-based water initiatives in India. The means for achieving such a goal must focus upon supporting the 'actors' in the given context, whether women or men. Gender need not be set as a pre-determined criterion for identifying the 'actors'. The policy focus should be "facilitation of gender role performance by the actors in a given water management situation". The manner in which such role facilitation can be achieved may be variable. The gendered realities of lives of people as actors and beneficiaries in a water management system must find a reflection in these initiatives. Increasing mere head counts (of women) in the name of women's participation may lead nowhere. Instead, the initiatives need to focus on 'empowering' the 'actors' by upgrading their capacities towards performance of their gendered roles as actors with greater efficiency and effectiveness. These roles and responsibilities must be seen as contextualized within specific socio-cultural situations rather than attempting to redefine them under sweeping universalistic assumptions.

There is an increasing international consensus on the intimate relationship between water, peoples and cultures, as laid down in the "water and cultural diversity statement" at the Third World Water Forum, 2003. Cultural diversity, developed during the millennia by human societies, is to be regarded as a treasure of sustainable practices and innovative approaches, that can help find effective and sustainable solutions to water-related problems (WWC, 2003). Designing of community-based water initiatives incorporating the dimension of socio-cultural context of implementation would be an effective action in this direction.

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