



EMPOWERING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY WATER RIGHTS

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FOCUS 6 • POLICY BRIEF 3 OF 12 • AUGUST 2001

Empowering poor rural women with adequate water rights means strengthening their access to water for both domestic and income-generating uses. Better access to water improves women's health and incomes and liberates them from the daily drudgery of fetching water. Income-generation through gardening and farming, livestock, aquaculture, forestry, and other water-based enterprises constitutes the mainstay of rural livelihoods, but women's opportunities for water-based income generation are still too limited.

Women's improved access to water can be negotiated relatively easily when new water resources are developed. Women need to obtain an appropriate portion of larger supplies of water. However, when the available water sources remain the same, competition for water risks is harsh. Worldwide, growing populations with higher living standards are making ever greater claims on finite fresh water resources for agricultural, domestic, industrial, and other uses. In an increasing number of river basins, the physical limits of available water resources are being reached. And pollution deteriorates water quality. Marginalized water users, especially poor women, risk losing even the limited access to water that they now have. Growing absolute water scarcity and pollution hit poor women hardest.

WATER USED FOR HOUSEHOLD CONSUMPTION

Water used for drinking, cooking, washing, and cleaning contributes to the welfare of all household members. Like other responsibilities for household welfare, the responsibility to provide water for consumption is gendered. In rural communities men may be responsible for the construction and maintenance of domestic water infrastructure, while women ensure that water is permanently available in the home, although other patterns have been reported as well. When the government or private vendors sell domestic water for cash, either men or women or both may be responsible for that household expenditure.

The gender issue at stake is the intrahousehold division of responsibilities for household welfare. A common long-term vision is that spouses should equally share these unpaid domestic chores. In the short run, however, in poor urban and rural areas, the main issue is that poor men, but especially poor women, need to be liberated from the often exorbitantly high cash or labor costs for mediocre water service and low-quality sanitation. What is widely recognized as a basic human right, namely access to safe drinking water and sanitation, needs to be concretized. Whether the private sector or public sector is most effective in realizing this right is an open issue, but public

financial support remains necessary. In any case, water supply projects become considerably more effective if men's and women's complementary intrahousehold roles and perspectives are incorporated in project design and implementation, up to decisionmaking levels.

WATER USED FOR INCOME-GENERATION

Water as input in farming and other productive activities generates an income that is mainly controlled by the manager of the enterprise. The manager is usually also the one who makes investments in infrastructure construction and operation to harness water for her or his enterprise. In order to increase women's incomes from water-based enterprises, access to water and water infrastructure are important factors, but access to land, markets, skills, credits, and so on also critically determine the ultimate profitability of women's enterprises. But even more fundamentally, in areas where most women are excluded from own economic opportunities, water alone as one input cannot contribute much. A comprehensive perspective is indispensable. Take, for example, the issue of water for cropping.

Depending upon the gender of the majority of the farm decisionmakers in a specific site—for example in an irrigation scheme—male-managed, dual-managed, or female-managed farming systems can be distinguished. In sites with dual-managed or female-managed farming systems, where women are about half or the majority of farm decisionmakers, water for irrigation directly contributes to women's farming enterprises. Therefore, irrigation agencies that supply water, and in some cases also reallocate the land that is newly brought under irrigation, need to target both men and women farmers on the same footing. However, ample evidence has shown that irrigation agencies, whether state or nongovernmental organizations, have ignored the gendered organization of agriculture and interacted exclusively with male farmers, mostly with the local administrative and political elite. Women farmers (and poor male farmers) were typically excluded from these negotiations in which the rights to newly developed water and irrigated land were set. This resulted in the erosion of women's pre-project status and resource rights. Conversely, agencies that took the gendered organization of local farming as their starting point and included both women and men in irrigation institutions and land and water rights, empowered both women and men farmers, tapping the productivity of both groups. Men, women, and the project all gained.

The need for gender-balanced allocation of rights to water



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and irrigated land is most obvious where female- and dual-farming systems already prevail. Examples can be seen in southern and eastern Africa, West African wetlands, and, often, on homesteads. Recent interventions that have attended to gender have proved to be smooth and effective. Not only in African countries, but also in India, small schemes that irrigate women-cultivated homestead lands have been successfully constructed for and managed by women's groups. A major challenge today is to develop and widely disseminate affordable, small-scale land- and water-management technologies, such as treadle pumps, bucket drips, and water harvesting techniques. With these technologies more poor rural women and men can obtain access to larger quantities of water. Synergy with marketing, input provision, and other rural development efforts should foster more productive use of the water.

At the other end of the spectrum are the male farming systems, such as the large-scale canal irrigation schemes in Pakistan and India. In these systems, women are primarily unpaid family laborers who perform transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. At best, when husbands are absent, wives can help to irrigate the land or fulfill canal maintenance obligations. Thus, the local farming system excludes the majority of women from decisionmaking positions in the household enterprise. Women's categorical exclusion from community-level, male-dominated irrigation institutions is virtually uncontested.

Even where male farming systems dominate, a minority of women farm in their own right. They belong not only to de jure and de facto female-headed households, but also to male-headed households, especially if land is in married women's names and farm sizes are small. These women often have no formal water rights and may face strong taboos against farming, irrigating, and interacting with "strange men" for input purchase and marketing and in the water user associations. Either male relatives or neighbors take tasks over, or the women do the work themselves, contesting social norms. This dispersed minority of women farm managers and irrigators in male farming systems needs support for achieving stronger water rights and gaining membership and leadership positions in water user associations. The economic empowerment of the majority of women through water-based farming is only feasible if the range of conditions for profitable, women-controlled enterprises is addressed in a holistic way. Women's access to land and forward and backward linkages are as important as women's access to water.

WATER RIGHTS UNDER GROWING WATER SCARCITY

In rural areas in developing countries, a single water source is typically used for multiple purposes, such as irrigation, livestock, fisheries, washing, and, often, for drinking as well. Communal rules for water access are set and implemented through highly complex interactions among the various user

groups and local authorities. Technical, institutional, and legal interventions by outsiders may strongly impinge upon local arrangements. Upstream water takers and polluters who share the same river basin further affect local water availability, use, and regulation. From local to basin level, large-scale water users and administrative, political, or economic elite tend to dominate these interactions, excluding the weaker segments of society. Poor women's multiple water needs for their own welfare and that of their families often and blatantly get overlooked.

New opportunities have emerged to redress this neglect. The last decade has seen substantive efforts worldwide toward integrated water governance in order to address growing competition for adequate, clean water. This has been accompanied by new, formal, legal frameworks and new water management institutions at basin level that call for genuine representation of all water users' interests. Community-based integrated water management institutions and local water tenure arrangements in rural areas are to be linked with these new basin-level institutions. Poor women's water needs should get utmost priority from local to basin level.

In sum, the agenda for gender-inclusive and pro-poor water governance in rural areas entails

- Abolishing the excessive labor and cash costs incurred by poor women and men in meeting basic domestic water needs, while fostering equitable sharing of costs between men and women;
- Developing and disseminating affordable technologies to more poor rural women and men so that they have access to more water collectively and individually;
- Collaborating with other gender and rural-development initiatives to foster women's independent entrepreneurship and make the range of water-based, income-generating activities more profitable;
- Informing poor women and men about new water-governance initiatives from local to basin level and including them effectively in the design of new institutions; and
- Ensuring, under competition for water, that water is reallocated from large-scale users to small-scale users, to meet both women's and men's water-related basic needs for health and income.

For further reading see Douglas Merrey and Shirish Baviskar, eds., *Gender Analysis and Reform of Irrigation Management: Concepts, Cases and Gaps in Knowledge*, workshop proceedings (Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute, 1998); Barbara van Koppen, *More Jobs per Drop: Targeting Irrigation to Poor Women and Men*, (Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 1998); and R. Pradhan et al., eds., *Water, Land, and Law: Changing Rights to Land and Water in Nepal*, workshop proceedings (Kathmandu,

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