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The Dynamic Role of Gender and Social Inclusion: Achieving Internationally Agreed Water-Related Goals



Once upon a time. Traditional water harvesting has been used for ages to collect runoff water and recharge ground water. Daryapur Block, Amravati district, Maharashtra. ©Vijay Kutty

Water—policies, programmes and people

Water carries political, cultural, religious, social, economic and environmental significance in our lives. Access to safe drinking water and sanitation has far-reaching consequences for achieving equality and creating an inclusive society. When government policies and programmes focus upon the well-being of the socially excluded and vulnerable—especially women and children—they become instrumental in bringing about necessary changes and addressing the most formidable challenges. Combined with thoughtfully designed regulatory and environmental frameworks, policies and programmes are the key drivers for engaging people, which allows them to understand problems and be part of the solution. People then become the force to holistically contribute to improving their own circumstances. Civil society organizations and the private sector—when keeping sight of the principles of participation, equity and transparency—become the most capable facilitators in the improved and sustainable management of water—a resource so vital to human life.

The challenges

The world's need for food and energy is directly proportional to the growing global population, estimated at 7.6 billion in 2017.¹ Agriculture accounts for almost 70 per cent of total freshwater withdrawals globally.² As per 2015 estimates, the world energy demand will grow by as much as 20 per cent by 2035, with water consumption required for energy generation and production expected to increase by 85 per cent.³ Water crises rank fifth on the list of global risks⁴ and pose especially acute challenges and implications for women and other vulnerable and excluded populations.

- Globally, only 16 per cent of the national water resource plans mention women as primary participants in climate adaptation.
- India ranks 148th among 193 countries in terms of representation of women in government and parliament. In regard to local leadership, women constitute 46 per cent of representatives in the Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Collectively, women spend 200 million hours each day fetching water⁵ and those without a toilet spend over 97 billion hours each year searching for a place to defecate.⁶
- In India, on average, a woman traverses 8,700 miles a year to fetch water,⁷ carrying over 88 pounds of water daily to meet her family's needs.⁸
- As per research conducted in Bhopal, India, 94 per cent of women interviewed said they had faced violence or harassment when going out to defecate, and more than one third had been physically assaulted.

Geopolitical dimension

The twentieth century witnessed rapid development of transboundary water resources. Major dams, irrigation canals and water diversion facilities have been built through uncoordinated and unilateral water development projects. The implications are the decline in water availability to some populations, resulting in limited water supplies for agriculture and human use. As per available estimates, water consumption has increased at twice the rate of population growth, requiring the development and implementation of a new paradigm for water planning and use, especially for equitable socioeconomic development and accessibility.

Environmental dimension

Climate change, coupled with population growth and urbanization, poses major challenges for water supply systems. It is estimated that over the next 10 years, climate change and resulting weather extremes will affect around 175 million children a year. We need to increase equitable access to sustainable water sources and improved sanitation, so that in times of both stability and crisis, every child is given a chance to survive.

Cultural dimension

The value of water to the human spirit has been celebrated throughout the history of civilization. The two principal issues pertaining to the cultural and religious dimensions of water are (i) access to sources and communities' appreciation of their significance, as well as its relevance to cultural and religious context; and (ii) pollution. Including cultural and religious values in integrated water resources management framework is a key to success.

Human development

Water and sanitation are basic for survival, health and well-being. Improved water supplies and sanitation, and better management of water resources boost countries' economic growth and contribute greatly to poverty reduction. Unfortunately, 844 million people are still without the basic commodity of safe, clean and readily available water necessary for a decent life.⁹ The water challenges mirror gender inequality, while norms and practices related to water can exacerbate existing gender hierarchies.¹⁰

- If the walking time to fetch water is reduced by just 15 minutes for pregnant women, it will result in reduced risk of under-5 mortality.
- By 2030, 69 million children under 5 years of age could die from “preventable causes”, such as lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).
- In India, 37.7 million people are affected by waterborne diseases annually, costing the economy 73 million working days every year.

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) policies, as well as gender inclusive programmes, can have a strong influence in furthering gender equality and women’s empowerment.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The United Nations SDG 6 for water and sanitation calls for universal and equitable access for all by 2030. Its targets 6.1 and 6.2 are measurable by access to safely managed drinking water and sanitation services, coupled with hygiene promotion and an end to open defecation. Special attention is paid to gender and social inclusion, which brings sustainability into focus. Other targets respond to the environmental considerations and needs, along with a focus on international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation-related activities and programmes.

The International Decade for Action, “Water for Sustainable Development”, 2018-2028: Key recommendations

The centrality of water to sustainable development, with a distinct focus on gender and social issues, is critical to achieving the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets. The decade—from 2018 to 2028—will witness action in this direction, as well as cooperation and partnership between all stakeholders. Some key recommendations to bring focus on gender and social inclusion to achieve water goals are summarized below.

Women in leadership roles

There is a close relationship between peace and water cooperation. Women are well-positioned to lead this effort, since they are rated more positively than men in crucial global leadership traits. Based on research conducted by the Zenger Folkman Company, women excelled in 12 out of 16 differentiating leadership competencies. They are considered better at nurturing competencies such as developing others and relationship building. Competencies with the largest differences between males and females were taking initiative, practicing self-development, integrity/honesty, and driving for results.¹¹ Involving women can make water projects six to seven times more effective.¹²

Water For People¹³ brings women and girls into leadership roles at all levels. Girls lead school water and sanitation committees. Women work in water and toilet sales, are water system mechanics, and lead the microfinancing of toilets. Women serve as presidents of their district WASH offices and community water committees. An inclusive culture that engages women in the design, operation, and maintenance of water and sanitation systems leads to better responsiveness and customer satisfaction. As satisfaction increases, so does willingness to pay for services and maintenance of water systems, which is key to sustainability.

The real change agents: engaging those affected by vulnerabilities

Engaging local communities, especially those in disadvantaged situations, as well as local institutions and governments, is the key to building resiliency and finding solutions. Gender-sensitive and inclusive programmes help reduce time wasted and health burdens through improved water service, leading to more time for income-earning and more balanced gender roles.

Water committees are critical partners in promoting behaviour change and overseeing tariff collection, water quality assurance, maintenance, repairs, and hence sustainability.

In Blantyre, Malawi, Water For People supports Water Users Associations (WUAs), which employ water sellers in low-income urban and peri-urban areas. In rural Chikwawa, Water For People supports Borehole User Associations (BUAs) that oversee volunteer water committees. There is strong representation of women in both WUAs and BUAs, as well as the community water committees they support. In addition to participating in policy decisions on the boards of directors, women are actively involved in the maintenance of water systems and record-keeping. Their participation in leading positions in water associations and committees is between 50 and 70 per cent. Women's leadership on these committees motivates communities to take responsibility and ownership of their water systems, allowing for better sustainability.

The power of children and youth

India has the world's largest number of 10 to 24-year-olds, with 242 million young people.¹⁴ Youth embrace the potential and responsibility to become agents of change and ultimately improve the world's water situation, especially in fragile and conflict settings.

In the Basantpatti village of Sheohar, Bihar, 80 per cent of families and the local middle school did not have a toilet. The Sheohar Program is carried out jointly by Water For People and One Drop. In May 2016, it worked with local partners to construct a toilet block and a drinking water station at the middle school. Female students gained access to a changing room, basic menstrual hygiene products and an incinerator. Consequently, student attendance has increased by 30 per cent (from 55 to 85 per cent) and school dropout rates decreased by 30 to 35 per cent. By the end of June 2017, approximately 45 per cent of students successfully motivated their parents to build household toilets. Cumulatively, school, community and financing strategies resulted in almost 70 per cent of households in the village constructing toilets.

Stakeholder engagement

Several actors can take steps to enhance social inclusion and gender equality, while supporting actions for change. The private sector has a strong role to play in financing water initiatives, expanding literacy and skills building, thus creating a favourable environment for women to enter the labour market.

Decentralized monitoring of the SDGs

Monitoring the SDGs is essential for enabling policy and decision makers at all levels of government to identify challenges and opportunities, ensure accountability and generate political, public and private sector support for further investments.

In India the NITI Aayog is mandated to present the Voluntary National Review Report on the implementation of the SDGs. India has already developed a draft list of national indicators, pointing out that the disaggregated data is vital to monitor, formulate specific policies and programmes, and resource allocations for specific disadvantaged groups and geographical areas.

The decade-long commitment to the achievement of internationally agreed water-related goals reinforces the SDGs vision of an inclusive water secure world by 2030. While we promote equitable, inclusive and sustainable development, giving a voice to the socially excluded and most vulnerable, they will set a movement to ensure that no one is left behind for generations to come.

For more information about the organization, visit the Water For People website at: www.waterforpeople.org (<http://www.waterforpeople.org>).

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Notes

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The quest for **WATER**



(/issue/quest-water)

OTHER ARTICLES

[Foreword \(/article/foreword-7\)](#)

[Achieving Universal Access to Water and Sanitation \(/article/achieving-universal-access-water-and-sanitation\)](#)

[Water for Sustainable Development \(/article/water-sustainable-development\)](#)

[Strengthening and Revitalizing Global Partnerships to Achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 \(/article/strengthening-and-revitalizing-global-partnerships-achieve-sustainable-development-goal-6\)](#)

[Youth and the Integrated Management of Water Resources \(/article/youth-and-integrated-management-water-resources\)](#)

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