

# Women and Water-Resource Management in Africa

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Most countries in Africa have large regions that suffer acute water shortages, either periodically or on a permanent basis. Consequently, in most of the continent, effective water-resource management is of critical importance.

Although research in the 1990s has demonstrated that African women are active participants in economic development, there has been relatively little systematic factoring of gender considerations into resource-allocation decisions. Despite substantial evidence of the economic profitability of this approach, traditional assumptions about the domestic roles of women continue to guide policymakers.

Inherently conservative attitudes of environmental planners and water-resource managers toward mainstreaming gender concerns into their analyses reflect those of the broader society. Another reason is a continued, deeply rooted resistance to power sharing: this resistance finds its origins in a desire to maintain the status quo and to see women as passive bystanders. It provides a means of reducing political controversy around allocation of water resources because, by minimizing or discounting the specific needs of women, water-resource managers are able to remove at least one potential source of conflict over water allocation.

Water-resource planners, representing both national governments and donors, have focused their attention on women's reproductive, primarily domestic, responsibilities. This has been a fundamental error because women's strategic interest in water is closely associated with their productive roles (which, in turn, are often synchronous with their reproductive tasks). In overlooking this reality, planners have seriously undermined the capacity of women to make a substantial contribution to national-development processes, and this has led to significant losses of water resources in Africa.

## Women's reproductive roles

The term reproductive is used here in the sense of social rather than biological reproduction. It refers to all of the services provided by women to ensure the healthy maintenance of their families, including cooking, cleaning, and child care. Because reliable and convenient access to potable water is important in helping women fulfill these tasks, donors and governments often assume that women's primary strategic interest in water relates to their domestic roles. Significant research on women and water has been undertaken from this perspective, focusing especially on:

- access to water;
- decision-making related to water use; and
- family health and water and sanitation.



## **Access to water**

An average household in developing countries consumes about 40-60 L of water daily for drinking, cooking, cleaning, personal hygiene, etc. Meeting this need usually entails several trips for women and children to water-collection points, sometimes involving several hours. In some mountainous regions of East Africa, women spend up to 27% of their caloric intake in fetching water. Many traditional rural water sources have become contaminated as a result of human and animal waste and agricultural runoff. Especially during the dry season, rural households often collect their water from contaminated sources.

In urban areas, the situation is not necessarily better, and when household cash resources are meagre, it may be worse. For example, in Nairobi, slum dwellers buy water from vendors or collect it from communal water points, which are often highly unsanitary, and in Mombasa more than 60% of slum dwellers have no access at all to clean water (Government of Kenya and UNICEF 1992). In Kumasi, Ghana (as in many other African cities), water connections are shared by numerous families, and hygienic conditions are inadequate. The poorest families are forced to purchase water from more prosperous neighbors who have access to water connections. Generally, in slum areas in African cities, there is considerable water contamination. Human and other waste is dumped into streams and drainage ditches or dries and becomes airborne, thereby creating a serious health hazard.

Sustainability of water and sanitation systems is often problematic in the absence of year-round use of the systems. In some cases, to save time, women will use closer sources of water, even if the water quality is not optimal. In other cases, the financial contributions needed to maintain the system may become too burdensome for communities after donor support has ended, and systems may remain in disrepair for long periods. Lack of local expertise to repair and maintain systems also continues to be a problem, as does unavailability of spare parts.

## **Decision-making related to water use**

Because most of the World Bank studies did not examine differences in the views of men and women, it is difficult to determine whether gender-based preferences were present. Studies that have desegregated gender attitudes toward payment for water have reported mixed results. Cite evidence from Tanzania and Haiti that suggests that, in general, women were more willing than men to pay for access to public taps, whereas in India and Nigeria, women were not prepared to pay as much. Women's limited decision-making influence over household finances may make them reluctant to suggest greater expenditure on improved access to water, particularly if this expenditure would primarily benefit the women by easing the burden of their household work.

Cultural patterns may also have an impact. Research in Tanzania revealed that even when water was readily available, women hesitated to use it to keep their children's faces clean because this was not considered a priority and went against the wishes of their husbands. A study in Kenya (Government of Kenya and UNICEF 1992) noted that there is evidence that in some communities men will give precedence to the building of a corrugated iron roofed house, purchase of a bicycle or marrying of a second wife over the supply of basic house hold necessities such as food and water. It is evident that prevailing cultural role expectations for both men and women can have critical importance in determining attitudes toward water-resource use and management.

African women's capacity to have input into water-resource use and management is further hampered by their lack of exposure to science and technology. To make informed choices and decisions, potential beneficiaries of water systems should have basic knowledge and understanding of the technologies involved. Women are particularly disadvantaged because of their lack of confidence about technological matters and because of negative male attitudes toward female technical knowledge.

## Family health and water and sanitation

Health education has been an important entry point for women's participation in water projects. Although measurement of the effects of good water and sanitation on health is methodologically complex, there is some evidence that when there is significant improvement in a community's level of water and sanitation, the impact on health can be substantial (Government of Kenya and UNICEF 1992).

As a result of the sexual division of labour, women are often at higher risk of exposure to waterborne diseases. Washing clothes, bathing children, drawing water from surface sources, and, in some regions, working in flooded rice fields all increase rural women's risk of exposure to disease-ridden water sources. Cultural preferences, shared by men and women, can also have a negative impact. A study in Egypt showed that women (and men) believed that canal water lathered clothes more effectively and made them whiter, so they preferred to wash their clothes in the canal (where risk of exposure to schistosomiasis was high), rather than washing them under a tap or in a washing machine.

African governments and donors have tended to see the maintenance of family health through safe water and sanitation as primarily a female responsibility. For example, in 1987 the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women held seminars in Ethiopia and Kenya that focused specifically on women, water supply, and sanitation.

These seminars moved beyond a purely functional perspective on women's involvement because they emphasized the need for women to become key actors in water supply and sanitation, with input into decision-making and knowledge about technical maintenance of local water and sanitation systems. At the same time, however, they focused heavily on women's role in cleaning the environment and in looking after family hygiene and on educating women about water and sanitation issues. To some extent, this reinforces the notion that women have a special responsibility for family sanitation and hygiene. Such efforts do not address the more fundamental issue - that water and sanitation facilities, which are used by both men and women, should be a joint responsibility, not only in terms of sharing of labour input but also in terms of sharing of decision-making and associated power.

## See also

Women and Agriculture

Women and Biodiversity

Women and the Environment

Women and Water: The Forgotten Glass Ceiling

## References

Water Centre <sup>[1]</sup>

International Development Research Centre <sup>[2]</sup>

## **External Links**

UNDP MENA Region <sup>[3]</sup>

UNDP Africa <sup>[4]</sup>

UNIFEM Africa <sup>[5]</sup>

## **References**

[1] <http://www.watercentre.org>

[2] <http://www.idrc.ca/en>

[3] <http://arabstates.undp.org>

[4] <http://www.undp.org/africa>

[5] <http://www.unifem-saro.org>

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