

Equity and Gender 2: The Water Context

All over the world women are seen to share a special relationship with water, understanding its cultural social and life sustaining values. India is not an exception to this. Poor women across the country, especially in rural and tribal India are seen walking miles on end in search of water, often managing to collect only a pot-full. Moreover lack of access to land denies the rural women in claiming rights over water for production or becoming active members of the water users associations that are getting formed in the new policy context.

In urban slums women are seen queuing up before the public stand-posts or tankers and have little or no access to sanitation facilities. The nexus between lack of civic amenities such as water and sanitation and violence against women is evident in the urban slum context.

In both the urban and rural context school going girls are seen to be dropping out to collect water and look after their siblings.

At the meso and macro level in the water sector we see very few women participating in the decision making processes. Very few engineers and other professionals in the bureaucracy are women or think about gender and equity concerns in the sector. Not surprisingly, then water sector is gendered and so is the terrain of water deprivation and water security.

In arguing for a radical potential for a link between gender and water we are not claiming that women somehow share a natural affinity with water, but rather that it is not possible to understand the various dimensions of the crisis in the water sector in the fullest sense in the absence of a gendered understanding of resource access and use. To focus on the inequality based on gender in this context is not to imply that an analysis starting from class, caste, racism, and ethnicity would be any less important or irrelevant. Neither does it try to undermine the enormity of the problems that the water sector itself is besieged with. In this unit what we have tried is to show how all of this is in fact organically linked to each other.

Gender Inequities in water: Intersection of caste and class with gender

Access to water is mediated by a range of social, technical and production relations. Social stratification that exists across caste, class, gender and ethnic groups or other minorities manifests in every aspect of social life and water is not an exception. Ownership of property and technology, access to knowledge and information and access to decision making processes are all mediated by the different levels of stratification that we see in society. In the case of water we see the following

Caste is a strong mediating factor when it comes to access to water for drinking and for production as well. Caste intersects with both class and gender and creates an exploitative form of exclusion. Rules of purity and pollution still dominate practice in India. For example, during the 1980s drought in Maharashtra, Rao (1996) cites instances of rich, upper caste farmers reclaiming wells being used by *dalits* by ritually ‘purifying’ them, thus compelling *dalit* women to walk farther in search of potable water. In another instance in Maharashtra violence against dalit women was reported in the severe drought that hit the entire state in 2002. The intersection between gender, caste and class in determining women’s access to water is more acute during periods of drought when poor women not only experience vulnerability *as a class* (largely as the result of male out-migration), but

already vulnerable women, such as *dalits*, *adivasis* single women or the elderly face even greater exploitation.

Ownership of land and associated technology, access to commons

Access to water for production is mediated through ownership to land or the technology to pump water. In rural India, land ownership largely rests with men, so access to water for women is mediated through men. The landless do not have access to water for their means of livelihood. Here we see that class and gender intersect and mediate access to water. Statistics also shows that class also intersects with caste when it comes to ownership of productive resources such as land and water. The state on its part has not regulated this private property regime thereby perpetuating inequities across class, caste and gender.

Often it is assumed that common property is public property, with access to all communities equitably. However social discrimination often does not allow easy access to the poor and dalits and women from both these groups are affected even more.

Open access resources such as streams, rivers, seas or oceans which are understood as public resources often are not available for the poor. On the other hand unregulated use of these open and public sources is leading to their pollution and degradation. Again the state instead of providing support to the poor has been leasing out these public sources to private industries.

Access to water markets too is mediated by your social location. Water markets depend on you ability to pay and negotiate in the unrestricted markets. Here to social inequities do inhibit access to water.

Manifestations of gender inequities in water sector

Manifestations of these inequities can be seen in different ways (activities, access/control and decision making, knowledge)

Activities

In the domestic water sphere it is the women who spend a large amount of their time on collection and utilisation of water. Many a time little girls have had to quit school to collect water and assist their mothers in these household tasks that require a lot of time.

“It is estimated that over 10 million person-years are spent by women and female children carrying water from distant sources every year” (WaterAid/WSSCC 2003: 3).

Who collects water for households?

According to a study commissioned by UNICEF almost 15 years ago (undertaken by the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission, 1990), the principal collectors of water in Indian households are women, usually between the ages of 15-35 years, collecting about 192 litres of water/day for an average household of seven members. Women’s role in water collection varies with age as follows:

Women 15-35 years: Collect 63.6% of household water
Women 36-50 years: 16.2%
Women 51+ years: 2.0%
Women < 15 years: 4.0%
Men: 14.0%

(Source: Venkateswaran 1995: 133)

According to a 1996-97 national baseline survey on water and sanitation undertaken by the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), Delhi, for the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission, water is collected by:

Adult females: 41%
Adult male: 6%
Old: 32%

Regional gender differences in water collection are significant – in the states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Meghalaya, up to 17 per cent of men in the sample fetch water (IIMC 1998).

As far as productive water is concerned, we see women extensively involved in irrigated agriculture. More than 55% women in India are involved in agricultural activities as labourers. Women are also involved in other livelihood activities concerned with fisheries or small scale cottage industries.

Access or control over water

We have seen in the earlier section how women's access to water is mediated by their caste, class, household, their husbands and other men in the household. Few studies have been done to understand women's independent access to water resources. Drinking water and other domestic water is considered as a welfare arena hence it is assumed that within a household, women have equal access to domestic water. So the question of access and control remains limited to class and caste differences. However within the various classes and castes too we see discrimination amongst women in using water.

Water for production is directly linked to ownership of land. Women's ownership to land is very limited and data in Maharashtra for a few districts shows that it is not beyond 11%. Productive water then remains in the domain of men of certain castes and classes.

Decision making

Decision making in the water sector is determined again by which social group you belong to and whether you own resources. Legitimacy and respect to participate in decision making comes from these different locations of people. Most of the water committees are therefore dominated by certain groups of men. A recent study done in Maharashtra showed that only 11% women were members of the Water Users associations for irrigation and only 3 women

could be selected to be on the decision making bodies for WUAs. In the domestic water sector the representation for women on village water and sanitation committees is 33% and in Maharashtra this is 50%. But a recent study conducted by SOPPECOM shows that although women are represented on the committee, often they are not taken very seriously when it comes to making crucial decisions around finances, water allocation etc.

Knowledge

Like access to water is mediated through your class, caste and gender location, so is access to knowledge. In the water sector which is still so dominated by technology and now institutional management, knowledge of the poor and the users of water is often not considered as important. For example women's knowledge regarding the different sources fit for drinking water is often not valued in the planning process. We have several examples where the mainstream drinking water scheme caters to domestic uses other than drinking water. So women continue using the same old sources which probably are at a distance and therefore do not contribute to their drudgery reduction.

If we were to chart a graph along these four axes what we will see is that those who spend a lot of time on activities around water, for example like walking long distances for water, collecting it, utilising it for domestic purposes or for productive purposes, in fact are not getting commensurate benefits in terms of access or control over either the resource or decision making around the resource.

A gender analysis of the water sector would help practioners and students to understand this better.

Why water is also a women's issue

We have already looked at how the water sector is gendered. It is these very reasons that compel us to look at the different social groups and ensure their participation in the water sector.

Women spend considerable amount of time in work and activities around water both in domestic and productive spheres; women's access or control over water resources is very limited despite the amount of work they do around water; women's participation in decision making too is limited as they are not members of the key decision making and planning processes from the micro to the macro level; women's knowledge and experiences are rarely valued in water resource planning and management.

All of these reasons combine to make water a women's issue. But most importantly water is a women's issue just like it is any body else's. As equal citizens in society they need to be part of the planning processes and also accrue of the benefits of that planning.

Assumptions about women that shape policy

Several assumptions about women's roles in the drinking water and sanitation sector have shaped policy making in this sector. These are discussed below

Women as nurturers and caretakers

This is seen as an inherent quality in women, so women are expected to be kind and caring and think about the welfare of their households. This understanding about women is also extended to the public arena and water sector is no exception to this. Women's relationship with water is therefore understood as special and the belief that all women across diverse

groups have a better understanding of the health and hygiene needs of the household (Cleaver and Elson, 1995; Meinzen-Dick and Zwartveen, 1998). As torchbearers of health and hygiene needs of the household they are expected to be maintaining the toilets and public hygiene too. This is borne well by the study findings in the World Bank aided project SWAJAL in Uttar Pradesh. It was seen that women as technicians for hand pump repairs were a convenient target because one could appeal to their voluntary labour or get these jobs done at very low costs (Joshi, 2002).

Women's roles are static

Until recently much of gender planning around natural resources has been placed in the context of women's current tasks of collecting fuel, fodder, water and related survival tasks. Gender planning done through these conceptual frameworks has largely focused on reducing the time spent by women in these survival tasks. In the water sector women are thus seen as those who spend hours collecting water for domestic use. In fact various studies do point to how women's tasks revolve around collection of water and the impact that has on their health and livelihoods. Time spent on collection of water for domestic use has meant reduced opportunities for women to participate in 'productive' activities. This static notion of women's roles in survival tasks has translated into policy prescriptions that in fact perpetuate the existing gender roles. In the case of water a natural fall out of the above assumption has led to a creation of two separate spheres- the 'domestic' and the 'productive' the first represents women and the second representing men (Zwartveen, 1997; van Koppen, 1999).

Women as contented members of a household

There is a vast body of literature that points to intra-household differences in access to resources like land, water, food, health care and decision making practices (Agarwal, Naila Kabeer etc). Any scheme or government programme targets the household as a homogenous unit, with little recognition to the intra-household conflicts and differences. In the water sector for example often water use rights or membership to water committees are restricted to the head of the household.

Women as a homogenous and unified category

The other assumption is that women are a unified category with no difference in terms of their actual needs, perceptions and preferences. Women belonging to different castes and classes and other social groups often have different requirements. Moreover, women from different groups may be in conflicting situations with each other too in terms of their water needs. For example a dalit woman probably would be in conflict with an upper caste woman when it comes to drinking water.

Women as beneficiaries rather than partners

A review of the programmes in the drinking water schemes in India brings out that women have largely been viewed as beneficiaries rather than as partners. Their participation is often reduced to "*labour utilization*" (particularly in drought relief work) and "*consultation with communities*" has meant consultation with men as heads of households and community leaders' (cited in Ahmed, 2005). Domination of standardized universal structures of institutions and cost recovery mechanisms and project implementation plans are in fact the most restrictive aspects from the point of view of women's active participation in the sector.

Approaches for gender water advocacy

Closely following on these assumptions is the different approaches that have been followed by the various decision makers in the water sector. These include, the State, NGO's and donors primarily.

There have been various experiences from across the country on organising women for water related issues. These experiences range from organising women to improve their access to domestic water to organising them for getting a share in the productive water. Activities here include capacity building of women for their effective participation in the planning and decision making process, skill training in hand pump repair or other technical aspects of water management. All of these programmes have had varied impacts on women that range from better access to water thereby reducing the time and energy spent by them to collect water for domestic purposes; presence of women in public water management programmes; active participation in maintenance of water infrastructure and collection of tariff etc. But largely women's participation has remained limited to the domestic sphere and within this limited to maintenance of infrastructure and collection of tariff. Women have barely got into the planning processes.

In broader struggles around water we have seen women's role limited to presence in large numbers but not being considered seriously in the process of decision making.

This duality of increased work, but no commensurate benefits, whether in the form of enhanced resource access or participation is the reality of women and the water sector.

In this section we shall take a quick review of some of the approaches used for gender water advocacy.

Welfare

Welfare approach understands women as beneficiaries of programmes and not planners in it. Women are seen as victims of water scarcity and therefore needing welfare schemes to address the scarcity and thereby reduce the drudgery.

Efficiency/Instrumental

The second dominant approach has been seeking women's participation so that it contributes to the efficiency of the programme. For example women are sought on the committees of the drinking water programme, because they collect water and the main users of water and they would therefore use it rationally. This is considered as an instrumental or an efficiency based approach. Here women's participation is seen only if it contributes to the programme.

Equity/Empowerment

The equity or the empowerment approach looks at women as equal citizens who need equal opportunities to participate in the planning of water resources management as well as in its access and control. It does not argue for women's participation based on women's contribution or need, but more because they are the citizens/residents/users of the resource. It argues for participation as both a means and an end at attaining equity and empowerment.

Water for Livelihoods: Main elements of a gendered framework for water sector restructuring

We now come to the last section of our discussion where we try and outline what we can propose as a demand for change. In this new vision 'Water for livelihoods' becomes the central theme. This is precisely because for women and the poor, survival is the central concern. For women in particular water can never be a fragmented resource. This includes water for multiple water uses such as domestic, agriculture, fishing small enterprises etc as well as minimum water for eco-systems. For them it is a resource which meets domestic requirements as well as one which fulfils the agriculture related or other livelihood related requirements. It is also a resource which for women has a cultural value. Water for women and the resource poor is therefore a single unfragmented resource which is necessary for fulfilling livelihood requirements. The proposed approach captures the perceptions and voices of women and the resource poor. These voices understand water in an integrated manner, as a resource which meets people's drinking water requirements as well as their agriculture and other income related needs.

For such a perspective to find ground we need to understand women differently and we need to look at the water sector from the perspective of livelihoods of resource poor and women.

Understanding livelihoods

Since the early 90's the concept of livelihoods, and more specifically sustainable livelihoods has entered the discourse of rural development. Robert Chamber has been one of the key proponents of this idea. DFID has later on gone to use it for its development programme titled sustainable livelihoods framework or popularly known as the SL framework. Here they define livelihoods as 'comprising the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future while not undermining the natural resource base'. This definition needs to be expanded to include needs beyond the basic needs of food, shelter, water and clothing. These would include satisfying health, education needs as well as those that are imposed on people as a result of the livelihood activity itself.

This definition of livelihoods looks at livelihoods in a holistic way and leaves no scope for fragmenting access to different assets.

Minimum assurance of water for meeting livelihood requirements of all therefore becomes the central programme in livelihood security. It goes without saying that for every human being life becomes more meaningful if he/she has access to assets and skills to engage meaningfully in certain activities to fulfill livelihood needs.

Reconceptualizing women

One of the first things that we propose in the alternative framework is the need to change the ways in which we understand women. It is a question of changing the entire worldview surrounding women- their interests, their perceptions, their ways of negotiating for access etc. In an earlier section we have seen how women are conceptualised and how this conceptualisation shapes water policy as well. A new understanding about women therefore becomes critical in our way forward.

Minimum water assurance for livelihood security for all

Water has always been acknowledged as an important resource that changes and enhances the value of land manifold. However, almost all conventionally accepted norms have looked at water rights as linked to landholding rights. This view will continue to dominate unless we redefine the concept of rights to water to include water for meeting all livelihood needs within the domestic and productive spheres. Right to water therefore should be understood as a matter of minimum assurance to all of water required for livelihood needs irrespective of their ownership of assets.

Significance of independent water rights

Operationalising independent entitlements in the name of women is often a complex process. Women after all are part of the household and their identities are closely tied with those of their households. Caste, class and household identities are important for women and therefore independent entitlements can be operationalised only for single women or women headed households. But yet asserting for per capita entitlements at least opens up opportunities for women to negotiate in case of a conflict. This was demonstrated by the experience in Khudawadi village in Osmanabad district of Maharashtra where a water users association situated at the tail end of a distributary resolved to allocate 15% of the water quota they received from the Irrigation Department to the landless and women's groups in the village. The women then organized to plant trees and cultivate fodder on barren lands using this water to meet their livelihood needs (Kulkarni S 2005).

Need for associated rights

Greater control over water will improve or be meaningful only if it is accompanied by greater control over rights to land, greater voice in farm decisions or with greater control of the proceeds.

Having the legal possibility of taking water is meaningless without the associated technology to subtract water from a source and convey it to irrigated fields. Thus it is the means to operate and maintain the technology and convert it into livelihood outcomes which is also important if rights are to be transformed into livelihood outcomes.

Rights to water therefore will have to include the right to infrastructure, skills and knowledge base to use the infrastructure and entitlements for positive livelihood gains.

Equity in voice: Need for expanding the definition of Water Users Associations (WUA)

One of the important aspects is rethinking on the present institutional structures in the water sector. The present institutions range from the Water Users Associations (WUAs) on Irrigation projects, village water and sanitation committees for domestic water and watershed development committees for watershed management. These would have to be redefined in the light of an alternative perspective which looks at water in a much more integrated manner. Decentralisation one of the key dimensions of the present water sector reform needs to be seen as sharing power and not mere delegation of tasks- fiscal and power devolution. It should also include representation based on citizenship or user ship rather than ownership of land or any other assets.

If water related institutions are redefined to include the different water uses and sources then membership to these institutions need not be tied to land ownership but would be based on citizenship. Functional committees would have to be set up for management of different sources but one overarching body at the village level would be critical from the point of view of planning. It is important to create a legal space for women to participate at one level although the socio-cultural barriers to participation are the hardest to overcome. Often these are associated with the formal rules of participation. The second issue is related to the nature of the organization. Very often participation in formal organization carries the baggage of spending time in meetings. Women weigh the benefits and the costs involved in such participation. Women are not able to spend that kind of time as often there is no one to challenge the present reproductive tasks that women are involved in. Also many of these meetings are not held at suitable times for women.

Integration of various kinds of water resources

Planning in the water sector has failed to understand the common pool character of water. Water has often been compartmentalized as surface water, groundwater, local and exogenous water. Each of these is handled by independent departments with little or no interaction with the other. This lack of integration is cited as one of the most important reasons for the crisis in the water sector leading to over extraction of groundwater and increased seepage and wastage of surface water too. If planned in an integrated manner the resource can be extended to a larger number of people with a closer control on quantum of assured supply available at an appropriate time. Integration of local and exogenous resources has the potential to overcome the limitations of both kinds of sources.

Pricing of water service and recovery of capital costs

The second issue is related to the question of pricing and recovery towards capital costs. Often it is assumed that water has only either a social or an economic value. This leads to polarized debates around water pricing. There is a need to develop a consensus on what is affordable for meeting livelihood needs of people. Does drinking water have to be free? Do people have to pay for the Operation and Maintenance costs? Debates cover the whole spectrum from full assistance to full cost recovery.

The whole concept of what is affordable is vitiated today by the very low rates that prevail in the canal irrigation commands and simultaneously, the very high rates of the water service outside canal commands. It appears through differing views that people would be willing to pay a price for irrigation water service if it is sufficiently reliable and offers reasonable control over timing and application. The underlying principle here is the reliability of the water service for the poor. In the absence of this, economic mechanisms of pricing and cost recovery would not work.

Pricing norms should bear in mind the differential capacity of different social groups to pay for water. A distinction has to be made between water for livelihoods and water for commerce. 'The concept of the minimum assurance of water for livelihood needs is closely tied to the concept of a basic water service that should be provided to everyone at an affordable cost and as a matter of right. Any extra service above such basic service would conceptually be extra service and should be tied much more closely to achieving economic efficiency (SOPPECOM, 2002).