

Water Projects and Women's Empowerment

By Deepa Joshi (India) and Ben Fawcett (United Kingdom)

[Paper presented at the 27th WEDC Conference, People and Systems for Water, Sanitation and Health, Lusaka, August 2001.]

During the last decade, great claims have been made for both the theory and the practice of women's increased participation in the management of domestic water resources. This is said to have contributed both to increasing project efficiency and effectiveness as well as to empowering women (Cleaver, 1997). An extensive analysis of policy and project literature reveals that the domestic water sector interprets the following forms of women's participation in water projects at the community level as contributing to women's empowerment as well as to project efficiency:

- Women's roles in skilled work in project implementation and management
- Women's representation in community decision-making forums
- Women's increased awareness of the health and hygiene aspects of water management
- Women's participation in productive income generation activities made possible through time saved in fetching water

Sector professionals claim that water projects, which meet these achievements at the community level, result not only in positive service outcomes but also in positive gender outcomes (Dayal et. al., 2000). However, research critics with a gender focus resent these claims of success. They suggest that such prescriptions may have contributed to project efficiency at a high opportunity cost of women's participation, but have done little in empowering women and therefore in addressing gender issues. There is further criticism that such interventions 'homogenize women as a unitary social category and immobilize women in their domestic roles as water producers' (Jackson, 1997). Another basic failing of this approach is the fact that it misinterprets the theory of gender and thus identifies 'gender' as 'women', thus separating and isolating women from the context of social relations, which is what gender is essentially concerned with (Baden and Goetz, 1998).

This contradiction between the opinions of water sector practitioners and gender theorists remains, as there is little substantial information which can prove how empowerment has been affected, and data is sparse concerning the perception that local women and men have of the empowering roles of these approaches (Cleaver, 1997). This paper attempts to address this dispute between theorists and practitioners by analyzing each of these four claims of gender successes at the community level, through the perceptions of village women. Do policy and project approaches aimed at enabling increased women's participation realistically contribute to the empowerment of women in poor and disadvantaged communities?

Participation and empowerment

Before we analyze the assumed outcomes of participation in terms of empowerment, it is useful to clarify the commonly held notions of these terms, used liberally in the wording of water policies and guidelines. However there is little clarity in the use of the terms. In fact, theorists claim that the terms are used in ways which completely ignore their political meanings and their deep-rooted purposes in the context of development.

Participation means different things to different people. While the concept and the term is much eulogized as enabling a sharing of power, in reality, participation often means

involvement in externally conceived projects, via contributions and benefits (Wallace, 2000). The theoretical concept of empowerment is more deep-rooted in the notion of power. Empowerment expresses the interests of those long distanced from power and authority to challenge and define the agenda for development on the basis of their own priorities and interests (Kabeer, 1994). However, often, empowerment is no more than a substitute word for integration in processes whose main parameters have already been set by a minority at the top (ibid).

Do all women participate in water projects at the community level?

In analysing these terms in practice it was observed in water projects in North India that there are structural barriers which inhibit *all* women from uniformly, effectively and strategically participating in water management. These constraints are deeply impacted by the social variables of class, caste, age and ethnic background, which vary in their degrees of intensity in specific local situations.

Box 1: The unseen women who do not participate

Deepa Devi, in her mid-thirties lives alone with her two children. Hers is the lone scheduled caste family in Chuni village; all other families are higher caste Kshatriyas. Her husband works in a far away city. The World Bank water project, SWAJAL, came to her village and brought with it possible benefits of non-formal education, income generation programmes and hygiene education. Deepa did not attend any of these training sessions. She said she was not aware when they took place and she was not informed. The higher caste women in the main hamlet said they had informed her but she did not come. Even if she was called, would she as a single lone householder have had the time to attend these meetings? Deepa's husband is barely able to send her some Rs200-300 (US\$4-6) a few times a year. Her children are still too small to help in the labour-intensive agriculture. But much more importantly, socially by way of caste, Deepa's mere presence and touch are polluting. Would the higher caste women in the village, who abide by the social norms of pollution, invite her for sessions of stitching and literacy in closely packed rooms? It is another matter still, that Deepa's household was neither connected to the water supply nor did they receive the subsidized sanitation promised by the project.

This is one example, which shows how caste, class and family composition determine how certain women cannot participate. There are many more examples of such situations.

Who are the women who do participate, why and how have they participated and how have these processes been empowering to them?

Women's roles in skilled work in project implementation and management

Women's entry into the male domain of technological inputs has been heralded as a major victory. In certain instances, this has been rewarding to the women involved. This has been observed especially in donor funded and managed urban slum projects. In such local contexts, the restriction on social mobility for women is already reduced so that the opportunity and environment exists for poor women to work outside the home.

Box 2: Participation to women's benefit

Ms Mani, a deserted mother of two says, 'I had to work very hard as a helper and the contractors would abuse me and also pay me little for my work. Now I can build a latrine myself and earn Rs 150 a day. I am master of myself. I have more dignity, respect and am proud of my improved status in the community' (Kerala's women masons in the Dutch bilateral programme, Mathew, 1998).

However, such successes often come to a halt with the termination of project support.

Box 3: How sustainable is women's participation after the winding up of project support

In the Dutch bilateral programme in Kanpur, women had been trained, organized and registered as a cooperative of masons and hand-pump mechanics with the local municipal corporation. During the project period there were ample work opportunities for these women, and the claims of women's empowerment appeared relevant. An evaluation of the same cooperatives five years later revealed that they had become completely neglected and were no longer functioning. The women explained that when the project staff left, they were unable to compete with the close bond that reemerged between male contractors and the municipal corporation staff. The municipal corporation staff mentioned that most of the male contractors are local mafia leaders and, with the veil of the project lifted, they could no longer afford to ignore these powerful men.

In rural areas, where subsistence is agriculture-based and dependent on women's intensive labour inputs, women's involvement in technical construction work in water projects is often a one-off event, with little scope for replication. Here women's involvement is often harnessed to meet project efficiency goals. Either as voluntary workers or even when paid, women's occasional, isolated engagement in the implementation, and more frequent involvement in the upkeep of water points redefines their position at the lowest level of water management. This role is of little consequential value in determining gender equality and equity.

Women's representation in community decision-making forums

In the World Bank supported SWAJAL project, official norms specified that women must constitute one-third of the village water and sanitation committee (VWSC). It was also specified that the treasurer of the VWSC should be a woman, who was literate and therefore capable of managing the project funds at the village level. Project policy specified that this process required NGOs to enable the community to nominate members through a participatory process, which would enable a prior understanding of the proposed responsibilities.

Box 4: Women's participation in VWSCs; how empowering are the process and the outcome?

The video filming of the VWSC selection process in SWAJAL villages revealed that on the formal day designated for this activity, women rarely spoke to express their views. Most women were nominated to these committees by project staff or by the men, while they sat in subdued silence, those nominated barely able to contain the embarrassment of public acknowledgement. Eight months since her nomination as a VWSC member, Kalawati Devi, of Nagir village was clueless about her roles and responsibilities and she was not exercising them. Her social position as a young daughter-in-law, and her pregnancy during the time of

her nomination, did not permit her to stand in front of the other males in the village, let alone to talk or express her decisions.

In the same village, Hira Devi seemed an appropriate choice as the treasurer as she was one of the very few literate women. However, being literate did not change her social situation. Her husband has migrated to the city and she struggles to manage her fields, animals and five children. She was thus unable to go from house to house collecting community contributions, to go the nearby town bank, to keep records, to make purchases for construction work or even to pay the labourers every week. Above all, project guidelines define that the work of the treasurer is to be voluntary. A community worker who is remunerated for the position is actually doing this work, under the direction of the VWSC President, both of whom are males. On paper, Hira Devi is still the treasurer.

In another village, an all women's VWSC was heralded as a major gender success. Talking to the women they said, 'When we realized that the men were not interested in this project, as it was only about water and also there was no opportunity to earn money, we decided to take it up ourselves as we do need the water. It is okay that the men did not participate, after all someone has to earn money and it is their social role as well.' Another woman said, 'I have spent so much time and energy on this project and this shows in the neglect of my work at home and in the fields. If you cannot talk on my behalf and ask project people to pay me, why are you asking me if this is unfair? It is not fair, but what can I do about it? This is what we women in the village must pay for getting water'. In this village, the only paid member of the VWSC is the male community technician.

In striking contrast, in Chuni village, Menaka Devi was an active and functioning treasurer and did everything that was demanded of the job. Menaka Devi's husband is a pensioner from the Army, working again in a private firm. She also works as the non-formal education teacher in the crèche run by the NGO and is paid for this work. Her four children are big and help her in both the house and field. She is enthusiastic, strong and few men in the village can challenge her. However, despite the fact that she honestly and diligently worked to make this the first village to complete the project, she was also one of the most vocal in declaring that Deepa Devi, the lone scheduled caste woman should not have access to any project benefits.

Women's increased awareness of the health and hygiene aspects of water management

The concentration of hygiene education and awareness on women continues to perpetuate the gender inequality in roles for women as home caretakers.

Box 5: Imposed hygiene education and empowerment – what are the links?

In the SWAJAL project, women are subject to a participatory healthy home survey, where homes are evaluated as being clean or dirty, and water storage practices are identified as hygienic or unhygienic, initially by NGO field staff and later by village women representatives. Women having clean homes and showing hygienic practices were acknowledged publicly. It was considered that clean homes and safe practices of handling water should also be highlighted as responsibilities for men, as fathers and homemakers. Further, for the many very poor women with dilapidated houses, not only were the project guidelines of cleanliness impossible to achieve, but the very idea of keeping their homes clean in this fashion was clearly not a survival priority.

Women's participation in productive income generation activities

It has already been identified that if any time is saved in water collection, this may simply be spent in attending meetings and awareness programmes, cleaning and maintaining standposts and collecting user fees (Kamminga, 1991). Further, the demand responsive approach of the SWAJAL project defined that individual household connections would be provided to those who could pay more. This ensured that women from richer households had greater opportunities for saving more time. Even if it is assumed that improved water availability results in effective and uniform time saving, not all women are able to participate in project income generation programmes and not all women benefit from this process.

Box 6: 'We sewed and saw our differences, but we can do little to change this'

An analysis of the sewing training in Chuni village as an income generation programme revealed that the programme had been of productive use only to the richer women in the community who also had sewing machines to practise the new skills. Six months later, most women, obviously the poorer, without sewing machines, who had attended the training, had forgotten what they had learnt. The bitterness that these women felt in realising their inequalities with other women was clearly evident. They said that women like Deepa Devi had been better off in not attending the training.

It was another matter that there was no thriving market and demand for products that women made through income generation programmes. Also, given the social reality of their exclusion from public domains, women cannot gain an equal foothold in established forms of local and macro businesses. They remain pitifully dependent on NGO benevolence, which varies from place to place.

Box 7: What labour, what income

In another SWAJAL village, Roulikhet, women have been trained to weave woolen dhurries through NGO mediation. These women were provided with raw wool, which they had to make into threads and then weave. For each dhurri they made, which took them about a month, they were given Rs15 (US\$0.3) by the NGO. The NGO then sent these dhurries to a neighbouring city for fine finishing and sold them in another city. The women were unaware of either the production cost or the profit-margin.

The social reality of women's unequal access to and control over money also determines that women are not always able to control what they supposedly earned. Most critically what was actually earned by women through taxing, time-consuming work was pathetically insignificant, and could not bring about any positive change in their position and condition.

Conclusion

In accordance with the popular notion of participation, women have become involved in externally conceived projects and have undertaken new roles in project implementation, been represented in community decision-making forums, become more aware of health and hygiene aspects of water management and participated in income generation activities. To be able to do this, women had to invest time and scarce resources in water projects. However, in contrast with the assumptions of project designers, not all women have participated in water projects, fewer women have benefited economically and very few have gained social empowerment. More critically, most projects have no indicators to measure

empowerment. Thus the claim that empowerment is a substitute word for participation, defined by a minority at the top, is justified.

Box 8: Who defines empowerment?

In an exercise of gender-role reversal in Chuni village, women were clearly uncomfortable and some even expressed displeasure with the notion of gender role reversals. They did not feel that changing their work from carrying water to working as masons would contribute anything positive to what they considered as their already demeaning existence. In their perception, when the larger universe remains the same, how could solitary changes like changing work-roles positively impact upon their position?

It is evident through this paper that women cannot be homogenized as a single social category. Further, increased involvement of women at the community level does not enable them to achieve the space and support that is necessary to change decisions to their benefit. In this context, women are not empowered through these forms of participation. Empowerment cannot be achieved by separating and isolating women from the context of social relations in which they live, as women cannot on their own resolve their subordinate position and condition. Further efforts at empowering women cannot be sustained if interventions are isolated at the community level. 'Gender inequalities do not operate within a social vacuum but are products of the way in which institutions are organized and continuously reconstituted' (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1999). In other words, agencies involved in development work, including water projects, need not only to be aware of the social realities in the communities with whom they are working, and to strive sensitively to bring about real changes in men's and women's lives there. They also need to examine and deal with the inequalities and inequities in their own agency values, principles, structures and practices. Only then will they be able to better support their work with poor communities and only then can we claim to be really empowering women through our work.

References:

- Baden S and Goetz AM, 1998. Who needs sex when you can have gender? Conflicting discourses on gender at Beijing. *Feminist Visions of Development, Gender Analysis and Policy*. Routledge.
- Cleaver F, 1997. Gendered Incentives and Informal Institutions: Women, Men, and the Management of Water. *Proceedings of the Workshop on Gender and Water*. International Water Management Institute, Sri Lanka.
- Dayal R, van Wijk C and Mukherjee N, 2000. *Methodology for Participatory Assessments With Communities, Institutions and Policy Makers, Linking Sustainability with Demand, Gender and Poverty*. IRC and Water and Sanitation Program, The World Bank.
- Jackson, C, 1997. Gender, Irrigation, and Environment: Arguing for Agency. *Proceedings of the Workshop on Gender and Water*. International Water Management Institute, Sri Lanka.
- Kabeer N, 1994. *Reversed Realities, Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. Verso.
- Kamminga E, 1991. *Economic Benefits from Improved Rural Water Supply*. Occasional Paper 17. IRC, The Netherlands.
- Kabeer N and Subrahmanian R, 1999. *Institutions, Relations and Outcomes*. Kali for Women.
- Wallace T, 2000. *Lecture on Social Difference and Gender*. Oxford Brookes University, UK.