

## **GENDER AND ACCESS TO WATER <sup>1</sup>**

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### **Women and water: A special relationship!**

Much has been written about women's special relationship with water. Images of women head loading water and walking miles on end are well etched into our minds. 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 both the rural and the urban slum context. All of the hard work that women do around water gets categorized as care or nurture realizing little its significant contribution to production. None of this work thus translates into any significant gains for women in terms of either access to the resource or to the decision making process around it.

The question before us is how does one turn the tables in favour of women and the broader question of gender inequities. Would entitlements and quotas change the situation? Or do we need to look at deeper issues before we hurry to seek solutions. This brief article appeals to those in the water sector to understand the gender issues in its varied dimensions before setting out policy prescriptions.

### **Factors that determine women's access to water**

#### **Intersection of caste and class with gender**

Often the term access is used in the context of a concrete resource like land, water, credit etc. Access thus gets defined within the realm of the material without recognizing its association with other social, cultural dimensions. 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

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by the different levels of stratification that we see in society. In the case of water we see the following

In the Indian context caste is a pernicious system where the means of knowledge production and resources are controlled by the upper castes. The perpetuation of this system continues with the use of this symbolic hegemony (Chakravarti 2006). The perpetuation of this system has been possible through a systematic reorganizing of both the production system as well as the reproductive system which controls female sexuality. Thus we see how caste intersects with both class and gender and creates an exploitative form of exclusion. Water as a material resource is no exception to the interplay of caste with class and gender. 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 how social relations determined by class, caste and gender intersect to mediate access to both 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.

The above discussion tells us that access is determined by the class or caste or gender that you may belong to. Women are the most marginalised as they are exploited through the systems of caste, class and patriarchy. Thus any solution to improving women's access and addressing gender and social justice issues in the water sector need to be grounded in this understanding of discrimination.

Before we move onto what can be a possible way forward let us see how these inequities manifest in the water sector.

## **Manifestations of gender inequities in water sector**

Manifestations of these inequities can be seen in different ways and for the purposes of our discussion here let us look at the work women do around water, the access or control they have over the resource and the decision making and knowledge production processes that they participate in

### **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.

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.

The other important area that women are increasingly getting into the forefront is the arena of struggles against water privatization and its misuse. Be they struggles against dams and displacement, polluting water sources, privatizing rivers, bringing in hydel power projects etc women are at the forefront. In a sense they are taking the onus of saving the water sources and securing the futures of humankind. While we should not essentialise this, there is a need to understand and recognize this work as contributing to a sustainable society in which exploitation due to class, caste and patriarchal domination will not be there.

### **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 (Kulkarni et al 2008).

### **Knowledge**

Like access to water is mediated through your class, caste and gender location, so is access to knowledge and participation in knowledge making processes. 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 gender becomes important in the water context**

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.

### **Will simple solutions work then?**

Issues of gender inequities in water are complex and the solutions too have to respond to this complexity. Often policy prescriptions have come in the form of including women in water institutions or at best allocating water to women as entitlements in irrigation. While these are welcome and necessary steps, they are not sufficient to address gender inequities in the water sector. Many examples would show us that quotas in water institutions do not necessarily help women in

overcoming their caste, class and patriarchal barriers to participate effectively. The same barriers also do not allow them to use their entitlements productively. Thus quotas and entitlements also need to be followed with conscious efforts at the policy and practice level to engage with the complexity of the gender issues.

### **What should be the pathway for change**

Firstly this calls for challenging our belief systems and imagery around women. We need to see their work as beyond care and nurture and as contributing significantly to production. We need to see women's roles as dynamic and not static so they may be collecting water and using it for domestic purposes in the current context, but policy plans need to imagine a new world for them which goes beyond collection of water and its utilisation for domestic uses.

We also need to challenge our notions of women as a homogenous category which is often ready to ally for a common cause. Feminist studies, black feminism, dalit studies have all pointed out the need to understand the gender question within the diversity of caste, class race etc. Similarly it is also assumed that the household is a site of co-operation and thus a homogenous unit with common concerns and common joys. Again feminist studies have shown that a household is both a site of conflict and co-operation and intra household differences that discriminate against younger women and children are known.

Secondly we need to rethink how the goals of the water sector themselves are defined. Are they geared towards social justice and sustainable use is a question we must not forget to ask. Both sustainable water use from the point of view of the environment and the social justice need to be brought to the centre stage.

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.

The main argument of this paper is that while access and entitlements to both the resource and the decision making structures are an important step in furthering gender concerns in water, they are not sufficient by themselves as access is also determined by the social and

production relations. Thus a conscious effort is needed to reimagine a new world of more just and humane social relations.

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