



# Women's roles — a policy overview

Borjana Bulajic

## Conferences & commitments

In 1976, the United Nations launched the UN Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. At global conferences held in 1975, 1980, and 1985, the important linkages between the role of women in development and the protection of natural resources was recognized. Also emphasized were the importance of the total integration of women in the development process and the need for their participation in national and international ecosystem management.

During the 1992 Dublin International Conference on Water and the Environment, four guiding principles were adopted. Principle 3 states: 'Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water'.

The UNCED process affirmed women's roles in ensuring environmentally sound management. Two major documents — the 'Rio Declaration on Environment and Development' and 'Agenda 21' — affirmed the important role of women in environmental management and sustainable development, and recognized that, without the integration of women's contributions into development decisions, sustainable development cannot occur.

**Borjana Bulajic, guest editor of our 'women and water' issue in 1992, asks where are we going in relation to natural resources management and sustainable development, while in the marginal columns we list some recent major conferences and commitments.**

**W**ater resources is one of the main pillars of natural resources and sustainable development. Over recent years, international concern over the state of the world's water resources has deepened; it is widely recognized that water is an increasingly scarce and finite resource and that growing water scarcity and misuse of freshwater poses a serious threat to sustainable development. Cities are unable to provide adequate drinking-water supplies. Waterlogging and salinization are diminishing the productivity of irrigated land. Decreasing water flows are reducing hydroelectric power generation and pollution is threatening fish and wildlife habitats.

In both urban and rural areas, water sources are being threatened. In urban areas, the vast population pressures on basic infrastructural services, and vehicle exhaust and industrial pollution severely degrade water quality. In rural areas, deforestation and degradation of agricultural soil alters the water cycle, threatening the continuity of river and groundwater recharge and increasing the danger of flooding. Chemical inputs from agricultural run-off into surface waters

and eventually into groundwater sources are poisoning domestic water supplies. In rural areas, the lack of human-waste disposal places billions of people at risk.

The principal victims of environmental degradation are the poorest of the poor, and the majority of these are women.

Environmental degradation is one factor that restricts the ability of women to overcome poverty. This circular relationship between poverty, resource degradation and women's roles in environmental management shows how the interests of poor women and the goals of sustainable development are mutually reinforcing. Actions designed to conserve natural resources and rehabilitate degraded and polluted environments can simultaneously give women back their control over scarce resources and are also a means to a better livelihood. Likewise, programmes which aim at improving the status of women and which empower them to take control over their own productive and reproductive lives would lead to sustainable environment practices.

The main constraints with which women are still confronted in achieving full integration and participation in natural/water resources management are their lack of: education and training; participation in planning, programming and projects; information and awareness-raising methodologies; financial means; and technology choice.

### Feasible change?

Policymakers, planners and project managers lack both a comprehensive database on women's involvement and the capacity to plan for, and implement, appropriate interventions to promote women's participation.



Ron Gilling/Panos Pictures

## gender and water — six years on

The water-resources management models of the past will also have to be modified. Current and projected problems with freshwater resources arise from the pressure to meet the agricultural, settlement, food, and industrial needs of a fast-growing global population. The role and place of water in the socio-economic, cultural and political system varies from country to country — there is no standard solution. Efforts must focus on two parallel goals: improving everyday life and living conditions, and long-term planning for an environmentally sustainable future.

Often development practices have had unexpected side effects due to the lack of consultation and participation at the local level, especially from women. An important contemporary issue is to ensure that policymakers and planners learn from these mistakes. Until women and sustainable development are seen and taken as the indispensable foundation for long-term economic and social growth, difficulties in adopting strategies to minimize environmental impacts will continue.

### Resources management

Women are the principal collectors of water, determining which sources are to be used and the quantity and hygienic condition of water available — this is real domestic supply management. Women want to participate early on in the procurement of a new or improved water system, and there are more and more success stories of long-term sustainable projects with effective women's participation.

Women also play a pivotal role in environmental sanitation. They take primary responsibility for the hygienic operation and maintenance of sanitation facilities. Women, as the primary preparers of food in the home, are responsible for food hygiene and for passing good habits to children. It is women's behaviour in relation to water collection, storage, utilization, waste disposal, human-waste disposal, and solid-waste disposal, as well as in food handling and hygiene practices which determines the state of health and well-being of the entire family.

The rural poor rely directly on rivers, lakes and unprotected shallow wells for their water needs. They are the least able to bear the cost of simple preventive measures such as boiling water — the fuel



Health education in Ghana. Women's food-handling and hygiene behaviour affects the entire family.

to boil that water must be gathered, or purchased. As environmental degradation intensifies, gathering fuelwood becomes more time-consuming and buying its equivalent becomes more expensive. In many cities, in peri-urban areas, many poor households must buy water from private vendors, a very expensive option.

This limited access to water forces women and children to spend eight or more hours every day fetching polluted water from supplies that become increasingly distant because of frequent drought conditions. In fact, the nutritional level of children is often negatively related to the distance the mother must walk for water. Poorer women who spend more time on income-earning activities have less time for water collection and often have to accept water of lower quality, which threatens their health and welfare.

With increased development, the contamination of surface water and groundwater in developing countries has also increased. Surface water is contaminated by sewage and chemical pollution from industrial toxic wastes. Ninety-five per cent of urban sewage is discharged into surface waters without treatment; exposure to bacteria, parasites and viruses from raw sewage in water supplies results in a more serious public-health threat than exposure to toxic contaminants.

Exposure to industrial-chemical pollution also seriously affects the health of women and children in the South. Marine organisms consume heavy metals

### ... commitments

The UN Conference on Women of September 1995 adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action which recommends that women be actively involved in decision-making at all levels; integrate gender concerns in policies and programmes; and strengthen or establish mechanisms at national, regional and international levels to assess the impact of development and environment policies on women.

At the Second UN Conference on Human Settlements, held the following June, delegates adopted the Habitat Agenda and Istanbul Declaration. Their preambles, goals, principles, and commitments address both gender equality and water-resources management.

The nineteenth Special Session of the General Assembly to Review and Appraise Agenda 21, held in New York, in June 1997, pointed out that diminishing supplies of ocean water were impeding sustainable development and that deforestation, desertification and over-irrigation were taxing groundwater supplies and threatening water resources. Rapid urbanization and

... continued

## ... commitments

inadequate infrastructure meant that up to one third of the world's population did not have access to potable water or modern sanitation facilities.

Member States adopted a 'Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21', committing themselves to ensuring that the review of its implementation in 2002 should demonstrate greater progress.

During 1997, intergovernmental bodies such as the Economic and Social Council, the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Sustainable Development, focused on water resources management and gender issues. The political commitment by Member States was explicit.

and synthetic organic chemicals that accumulate along the food chain. Mercury in seafood ingested by pregnant women has been linked to cerebral palsy in infants, and exposure *in utero* to polychlorinated biphenyls from contaminated fish is associated with poorer short-term memory functioning in childhood.

The main goal of W&S interventions is to improve the health and well-being of human beings. It is only through the hygienic use of facilities, however, that improved systems can deliver real health benefits — thus human behaviour is the key to improved health. And because women are central to all aspects of water management, sanitation, and personal and household hygiene, women's roles in influencing family hygiene-behaviour patterns are crucial.

## Research and training

What is needed is a structural and attitudinal change in institutions including new integrated management systems in human, financial and natural resources. One of the ways to achieve this is through increasing attention to women in human resource development (HRD). At the heart of HRD is training and research. It is important to make explicit provision, within the section of institutional arrangements for water-resource management, to help countries incorporate women in research and training as well as capacity-building programmes. It is important that governments be enabled not only to desegregate by gender the specific monitoring indicators already identified but also have the capacity to identify new and crucial gender-sensitive indicators.

We have entered an era in which policies will have to be reformulated for all water activities to ensure sustainable development and rational utilization of resources. Women as users, consumers, managers and collectors of water are part of the problem — and the biggest part of the solution — for the water resources management-environmental sanitation-sustainable development relationship.

## about the author

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INSTRAW will continue to focus on the structuring and implementation of policies to reach out and involve women in the water sector — a prerequisite for sustainable water programmes.



'The nutritional level of children is often related to the distance the mother must walk for water'

Jorgen Schynte/Still Pictures

## webwatch

In many parts of the South, specialist literature on water supply and sanitation is hard to come by — and the Internet is becoming a vital source of up-to-date information. We are delighted to launch a regular guide to help you get the most from the 'net'. We start with some of the most useful websites on 'Gender and water'.

### ● Briefings on gender and development (BRIDGE)

Information-analysis service specializing in gender and development issues, aiming to assist development professionals in both government and NGOs to integrate gender concerns into their work. produces issue papers, sectoral surveys, country gender profiles, and annotated bibliographies. Based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex.  
<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/research/bridge/index.html>

E-mail: [bridge@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:bridge@sussex.ac.uk)

### ● Gender issues network (GENNET)

Designed to facilitate sharing of ideas, research results, and new developments concerned with gender issues in relation to the W&S sector.  
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/cv/wedc/garnet/gennet.html>

E-mail: [wijk@irc.nl](mailto:wijk@irc.nl) or [francis@irc.nl](mailto:francis@irc.nl)

For the Development-Gender e-mail network contact: [v.clowes@uea.ac.uk](mailto:v.clowes@uea.ac.uk)

### ● Gendernet (World Bank)

Pilot WWW site (under development April 1998) presenting WB materials on gender issues. Includes section on WB policy and projects, guides to incorporating gender into project design; country-level profiles.  
<http://www.worldbank.org/gender/>  
See also: Checklist of strategy options for incorporating gender into water and sanitation  
<http://www.worldbank.org/gender/tools/watersan.htm>

### ● Global Fund for Women

Resources to seed, strengthen, and link women's groups around the world.  
<http://www.igc.apc.org/gfw/>  
E-mail: [gfw@globalfundforwomen.org](mailto:gfw@globalfundforwomen.org)

### ● United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem)

Includes full text of Unifem documents and links to related materials.  
<http://www.undp.org/unifem/>  
E-mail: [unifem@undp.org](mailto:unifem@undp.org)

### ● Womenwatch, UN

Internet site providing a gateway to UN information. Joint initiative of Unifem, Division for the Advancement of Women and International Research (DAW), and the Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.  
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/>  
E-mail: [womenwatch@un.org](mailto:womenwatch@un.org)

● For more links, try the ELDIS site:  
<http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/eldis.html>