



Women: Agents of Change Implementing the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation

This session demonstrates how women's civil society combines water and gender to effectively contribute to the development of their communities and countries. It shows the added value of the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation as a means to accelerate the social and economic empowerment of women and to tackle poverty at the root. It in particular addresses the challenges that women's organisations face in their work, with the aim to contribute to a transformative, women inclusive development agenda.

Case studies:

- Armenian Women for Health and Healthy Environment (AWHHE), Armenia
- National Women's Movement (NVB), Surinam
- Soroptimist International Union of Kenya
- Tegemeo Women Group, Tanzania
- WPLUS, Nepal



Women's role in development

A participatory and inclusive approach to jointly create “The World We Want” is central to the on-going process of shaping the post-2015 development framework. The overall goal is to eradicate poverty by pursuing sustainable and inclusive economic and social development that benefits all without distinction, while protecting the environment and natural resources that we depend on for our well being.

In July of this year, the SDG Open Working Group has proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals that are to be achieved by the year 2030¹. This ambition requires determined action at all levels, and by all stakeholders, whereby the different stakeholders have common but differentiated responsibilities.

Women have been named as a crucial stakeholder group since the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (1976 – 1985). The central role of the Major Group Women in achieving sustainable and equitable development was reconfirmed during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, Rio de Janeiro 1992), and at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). It rings through in the major development gatherings since, notably the World Summit for Sustainable Development (2002, WSSD Plan of Implementation) and the Rio+ 20 outcome documents (2012) that recognise gender equality and women's empowerment as a priority area, with the Framework for Action including specific references to women's empowerment and gender equality in all 12 thematic areas². Notwithstanding this long-time acknowledgement of the importance to involve women, the potential of women's contributions to development remains largely untapped to date³.

Social differences between women and men result in gender roles that may vary substantially between countries, cultures, ethnicities and generations. Gender related differences determine the consequences of policies and directives for women and men and influence their possibilities to lead productive lives. Distinct gender roles furthermore determine the possibilities for women to participate in public life and hence their possible contributions to society.

Women will only be able to contribute meaningfully if we structurally address the underlying causes of gender inequality and thus create an enabling environment for their action. Women's empowerment and strengthening women's civil society groups are therefore an intrinsic element of a transformative development agenda.

¹ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

² poverty eradication; food security, nutrition and sustainable agriculture; energy; water and sanitation; sustainable cities and human settlements; health and population; promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection; oceans and seas; Small Island Developing States; disaster-risk reduction; desertification, land degradation and drought; and education.

³ Dushanbe Gender Forum to the High Level International Conference on Water Cooperation, 2013, www.womenforwater.org



The Gender – Water –Development nexus

A significant body of research indicates that women's empowerment and gender equality have a catalytic effect on the achievement of human development, good governance, sustained peace, and harmonious dynamics between the environment and human populations⁴. This in particular holds true for the broad water domain given that water is the key to life and a powerful catalyst for development in itself.

Access to safe water and adequate sanitation improves the living conditions for the poorest segments in society and increases their chance to develop themselves. Water is also essential to achieve food security, energy security and health and to preserve our ecosystems that guarantee the continuation of life. This makes sustainable and inclusive water management one of the most powerful drivers for development. The importance of good water governance for furthering sustainable and equitable development is rising as population densities and climate change interact to produce more regions in acute water stress⁵.

To underpin the importance of water for development and the urgency to achieve the internationally agreed water related development goals, the United Nations General Assembly has in December 2004 proclaimed 2005 – 2015 the International Decade for Action *Water for Life*⁶. The goals of the decade are to ensure a greater focus on water-related issues at all levels and to stimulate the implementation of water-related programmes and projects. The resolution specifically calls for the participation and involvement of women in water-related development efforts, and the furtherance of cooperation at all levels⁷.

In 2010 the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council recognized the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation as a human right. A handbook has been developed for State actors to translate this principle into reality⁸. The Handbook gives due consideration to the roles of non-state actors, and to participation as a human rights principle stating that: *“The human rights to water and sanitation can only be realized effectively through full, free and meaningful participation in decision-making processes by people affected by the decisions. Participation ensures better implementation and enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of interventions, offering the possibility of social transformation. Participation must be an integral part of any policy, programme or strategy concerning water or sanitation.”*

⁴ UN Women (2013): A transformative stand-alone goal on achieving gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment: imperatives and key components.

⁵ Jeffrey Sachs (2005): The end of poverty; how we can make it happen in our lifetime

⁶ Resolution 58/217; <http://www.un.org/es/comun/docs/?symbol=A/RES/58/217&lang=E>

⁷ <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/background.shtml>

⁸ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/WaterAndSanitation/SRWater/Pages/Handbook.aspx>

The SDG proposal¹ that is up for negotiation by the UN Member States, contains a dedicated gender goal (SDG # 5) and a dedicated water goal (SDG # 6):

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

5.1 end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

5.2 eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

5.3 eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations

5.4 recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

5.5 ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life

5.6 ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences

5.a undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance, and natural resources in accordance with national laws

5.b enhance the use of enabling technologies, in particular ICT, to promote women's empowerment

5.c adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

6.1 by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all

6.2 by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations

6.3 by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater, and increasing recycling and safe reuse by x% globally

6.4 by 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity, and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity

6.5 by 2030 implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation as appropriate

6.6 by 2020 protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes

6.a by 2030, expand international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water and sanitation related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies

6.b support and strengthen the participation of local communities for improving water and sanitation management



Women leadership in water

The UN Women position paper on the SDGs⁴ points to the importance of a comprehensive approach that addresses the structural foundations of gender-inequality. Crucial areas that were omitted in the MDG3 target and implementation include women's limited asset and property ownership and their unequal participation in private and public decision-making. Voice, leadership and participation are a key component of the envisaged transformative gender goal and should be mainstreamed throughout the development agenda including the water goal.

In many societies and cultures women are the traditional water carriers, and their influence in decision-making around water is limited. The positive results of involving women in the design and planning stages are multiple, from reducing corruption and increasing management transparency to better financial management and empowering women by example. A World Bank evaluation of 122 water projects found that the effectiveness of a project was six to seven times higher where women were involved than where they were not⁹.

The central role of women in the provision, management and safeguarding of water is anchored in the Dublin Principles for Integrated Water Resources Management¹⁰.

Dublin Principle 3: Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water

This pivotal role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of water resources. Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them.

Women leadership in water is accepted more readily than leadership in other spheres, in particular if they manage to bring the resource to their communities increasing welfare and wellbeing. This makes water a good medium to further women's empowerment and to position them as advocates for other issues such as property rights, reproductive health, HIV-Aids etc.

Women for Water Partnership, UN Women and UNW-DPAC have partnered to jointly promote women leadership in water at all levels and to create the enabling environment for women's equal participation in decision-making in water and development issues at international, national and local level. The focus in this partnership is on the role of women's civil society in this process and the strengthening of national and local actors to effectively contribute.

⁹ http://www.unwater.org/fileadmin/user_upload/unwater_new/docs/water_and_gender.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/hwrrp/documents/english/icwedece.html>



WfWP: turning women's capabilities into capacities

In the Women for Water Partnership women's civil society groups from all over the world join forces to achieve progress in the gender-water-development nexus. The membership ranges from rural women, academia, women water professionals and businesswomen to service organisations and special interest groups. WfWP builds on an understanding that the pathway to change is through the systematic empowerment of the grassroots so that they can effectively partner with relevant authorities and stakeholders (public and private) at district to national level to bring about changes from within. This is a gradual process with intermediate development stages.

Grassroots women's groups have vast human capital, but hardly any financial capital and little to no collateral; hence they have limited possibilities to participate meaningfully in policy processes and to contribute their knowledge and experience to the development and implementation of programmes and projects. To turn the capabilities of women into capacity WfWP has bundled experiences and perceived needs of member organisations into a set of empowerment tools that combine financial, technical and moral support. Lobby skills and creating the evidence base for targeted advocacy are intrinsic elements of this empowerment process. In addition, the WfWP network itself provides a platform for women from various backgrounds to cooperate, share and render mutual support. The international name and fame of WfWP is an important asset for member organisations, especially in situations where women's participation in public life is not readily accepted. With time the support of the WfWP network gradually decreases as the individual organisation gains face and recognition.

The strengthening of and support to member organisations has resulted in effectively influencing national policies and in a myriad of concerted actions and local projects that accelerate the implementation of the internationally agreed, water-related development goals while at the same time positioning women and women's organisations as agents of change.