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## **Gender and Women in Water Policies in the Arab Region: current situation and opportunities for the future**

*by*

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### **Introduction**

- For the Arab World water is increasingly recognised as a strategic resource that is the key to economic development and crucial for sustainable development.
- In most of Arab countries, water is becoming a catalytic entry-point for fighting against poverty and hunger, safeguarding human health, reducing children mortality, promoting gender equality and protection of natural resource.
- For the Arab Region, the finite and vulnerable nature of water shared across international borders needs and should be managed through an integrated participatory approach to ensure efficient use and protection against misuse and overuse of water resources and, thereby, satisfying the increasingly water demand under the finite limited water resources.
- Nowadays, work on water management is on increase. Water management involves the participatory approach of empowering communities, especially women to provide protect and safeguard their own water resources.
- In the water sector, gender mainstreaming goes further. Technically and politically, it is well recognised the essentiality of gender to sound development practice and at the heart of economic and social progress. Development results cannot be optimized and sustained without explicit attention to the different needs and interests of women and men.

## **The Challenging Issues:**

- the finite and vulnerable nature of water in competing water demands and conflicts between water users
- rising populations
- natural resources degradation
- increasing levels of poverty and livelihood vulnerability

## **WOMEN AND WATER RESOURCES**

- In the Arab countries, women constitute the largest group of direct users of water and beneficiaries of improved water services.
- Women are a mainstream interest group in water management to provide, protect and safeguard their own water resources.
- However, both, men and women, should be involved and have an equal voice in managing the sustainable use of water resources and sharing of benefits.
- Involving women and people from the lowest community in water management efforts, nowadays are growing up yet the area of gender and the role that women play in water management in the Arab Region is not yet receiving the attention it deserves.
- Studies from different MENA countries show evidence of a gender bias in intra-household consumption and investment in human capital. Women bear the greater burden of poverty by being the last ones to eat, the first ones to be taken of school if need be, and the least likely to seek treatment for a medical condition in times of financial constraints.

## Gender Approach to the Water Sector

The need for mainstreaming gender in Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) has been validated, highlighted and stressed by several issued statements, by international events, beside many other regional and national conferences dealing with the water sector, recognizing the following two facts:

- by the adoption of a gender approach, both efficiency and equity goals could be promoted;
- the human and social dimensions of water management are to be the cornerstone of new initiatives.

However, around these facts, several questions were raised including:

- *How is such policy to be implemented?*
- *What follows at the operational level?*
- *What are “gender sensitive infrastructures and services”?*
- *How can we strengthen the role of women and how to ensure they have an equal voice and choice? and, as a priority question;*
- *What are the basic conceptual underpinnings of the gender approach?*

## COMMON GENDER PROBLEMS IN THE WATER SECTOR

### - Traditional cultural norms:

- *the centrality of traditional cultural norms as a rationale for gender inequity*
- *cultural norms and customs of the community are often not congruent with the principles of gender equity.*

### - Self-esteem and public participation skills:

- *low self-esteem displayed by women where public functions were concerned*
- *major efforts should be taken to improve not only the women’s capacities and skills, but their appreciation for their capacities.*

### - Gender inequity in employment:

- *Such problem can be generalized not only at the community level, but it is also widely found in a range of institutions dealing with the water sector.*

### - Gender differentiation in irrigation management:

- *Women’s participation in the irrigation sector is always in increase without a corresponding increase in decision-making power.*

### - Capacity building needed at various levels:

- *At project management level, many managers do not understand gender issues and do not really know how to mainstream them in their work.*
- *At community level, various kinds of skills need to be developed among women and men to enable them to effectively participate in public affairs.*

### **-Understanding of Gender and Gender Mainstreaming**

- *Gender is often thought as side-streamed rather than mainstreamed.*
- *It is related to how we are perceived and expected to think and act, as women and men, because of the way society is organized, not because of our biological differences.*
- *Equally, it should be understood as a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres.*
- *The gender approach requires an open mind capable of leading and organizing both men and women to work together in complete harmony.*

**Mainstreaming focuses on developing institutional mechanisms and strategies to effectively implement a gender-oriented approach in all areas of the mainstream.**

#### **Mainstreaming is:**

- **promoting the full and equal participation of women in decision-making in all areas and at all levels;**
- **using gender analysis on a routine basis to identify the differential access to and impacts on women and men of all projects, programs and policies;**
- **using such analysis to devise measures to bring about equal participation and equal benefits for women and men.**

**Mainstreaming involves changing gender relationships between women and men in order to achieve more equal sharing of power and responsibility, benefiting both women and men.**

## **Gender mainstreaming: gaps and weaknesses**

**Generally, gender mainstreaming is not well defined.**

**An effective gender mainstreaming requires:**

- clear objectives and targets on gender equality;
- gender analysis;
- monitoring and reporting;
- resources and capacity, tools and dialogue of gender equality

**Insuring that gender equality is fully addressed, a new way forward is needed that:**

- links gender equality with other development goals and objectives,
- brings gender knowledge and expertise into the mainstream
- makes much better use of local knowledge and resources.

## **Gender mainstreaming in water resources management: the barriers**

**These barriers include:**

- refuse husbands to attend meeting that addressed issue of safe water,
- discrimination, subordinate roles, weak leadership,
- lack of mobilization,
- lack of time and failure to see the benefit of their participation.

**Thus cultural constraints often make it difficult for women to be active trainees or promoters in rural water supply programmes.**

## **GENDER ISSUES AND IWRM**

**Despite the fact that gender issues are a crosscutting theme in IWRM sector, yet, all too often in international and national IWRM programs they are of little consideration.**

**In the IWRM sector, the concerning programs and the implemented programs are usually characterized by the lack of certain issues that could be expressed through the following questions:**

- is planning for the project based on an integrated analysis of productive and domestic uses of water?
- Does this analysis recognize the different needs and priorities of women and men?
- In assessing the tradeoffs between competing demands for water, have the different capacities of women and men to express their needs been taken into account?
- Do project activities include measures to ensure that women's voices will be heard?

## **To fulfill the gaps: required initiatives**

- Raising the profile of gender issues;
- Looking for ways to increase demand for inclusion of gender perspectives in the broad areas of technical support, research and networking;
- Devoting specific attention to specialists and expertise;
- Promoting the development and advancement of women professionals.

## A GENDER POLICY

**For the establishment of an effective gender policy in the water sector, the following guidelines should be very carefully identified:**

- What is a gender policy?
- Why to develop a gender policy?
- What are learned lessons from experience?
- What are the distinct components important for an effective gender policy?

## WHAT IS A GENDER POLICY

It is a public statement of a country's or an organization's commitment to implementing gender issues and outline what this means in the context of the organization's work.

It relates to either, the organization's work or the internal organization's staffing and culture or, more usually, to both.

## WHY TO DEVELOP A GENDER POLICY?

- The development of a gender policy is a useful and common starting point for mainstreaming gender issues in an organization and its work.
- Generally, it provides both the organizations staff and the stakeholders the opportunity in mainstreaming gender seriously and effectively in the water sector covering the sectorial waster uses and management in an integrated approach.
- For the organization that has already taken some steps towards promoting gender sensitivity, it gives the opportunity to consolidate and formalize the steps they have taken and to guide their future plans.

## POLICY COMPONENTS

**Three distinct components are important for an effective gender policy:**

- *situation analysis* : examining gender issues concerning beneficiary groups and concerning the organization itself. The latter includes an examination of staff knowledge, skill, commitment and practice in relation to gender issues;
- *the policy itself* : this should be fundamentally devised on the basis of the situation analysis;
- *action plan* : this sets out in detail how the policy will be implemented over a special time period, including activities, budgets, responsibility and indicators for monitoring and evaluation.



## THE IMPACT OF GENDER ROLE ON WATER RESOURCE POLICY

**This can be viewed in the following two fundamental ways:**

- *first*, policy relating to the sustainable management of water resources relies on a broad base of stakeholders participation and consultation. The diverse gender roles of men and women in the management and control of water resources require that they are viewed as separate stakeholders groups;

- *second*, the development of water resources management policy can impact upon men and women in different ways. Gender-sensitive water resources policy will address the equality of access to the potential benefits of water resource development from the perspective of both men and women.

## GENDER WATER POLICY AND ENVIRONMENTAL WATER DEMAND

• In most countries of the Arab World, water for nature is typically a residual category in policy thinking with the result that water demand for environmental quality and ecological integrity goes unmet.

• In this regard, several key issues are raised up among them:

• *how to sustain healthy ecosystems the time most countries are not able to satisfy the increasingly water demand for agricultural, industrial and municipal uses?*

• *How to achieve the balance between preserving nature both land and water and using it for human needs to feed the growing population?*

• *How can women receive both equitable benefits and entitlements from the products of water and land, and how can they best participate in preserving and maintaining water for nature?*

• The lessons learned from the Region clearly indicate that, in dealing with natural environment, little focusing was directed on how the responsibilities and tasks are divided between men and women.

## **The analysis of the situation**

### **In most of the Arab countries:**

- Weakness still prevails at both government, private and individual levels.
- Lack of gender sensitivity in recognizing women as participants, change agents and beneficiaries.
- There are some positive changes in law that gender is being worked in the government sector, but, written concepts are yet to be put in practice.
- Policy and practice seem in isolation and that much of the project work run by agencies and communities is characterized with little gender sensitisation as well as a low awareness and understanding of gender inequality.

## **What are the actions to be taken and what is needed to be done:**

**In most Arab countries, the mainstreaming of gender approach in the water resources and the irrigation sector is a top priority on the agenda of irrigation policy makers, irrigation leaders and researchers, yet the implementation of gender in the running projects and programme is still weak and is in need to the following:**

- governments, non-governmental and donors organizations involved in water management should address gender issues in their water programmes, through their policies procedures, strategies and human resources development;
- training programmes targeting women are essential so those women can take the lead and manage water programmes after the completion of the project;
- it is of paramount importance that training modules for all categories should have a gender component tailored towards their specific job performance;
- building capacity programme for gender mainstreaming having a system's framework for a better understanding of the different dimensions of capacity for gender mainstreaming, not only to build knowledge bases and share experiences, but, also, to empower and builds the confidence of all staff;

### **Gender Mainstreaming - Capacity Building programme**

#### **Six main teams for learning:**

- Gender mainstreaming;
- Gender and economic analysis;
- Process and advocacy skills;
- Programme and project entry points for gender mainstreaming;
- Strategic planning and development of organizer country institutions
- Mainstreaming strategies

-Development of gender sensitive materials for training to develop self-esteem and leadership skills for female staff and community members.

-Given the massive involvement of women in water resources development and management, in the agricultural activities and informal sectors of the economy it is only logical that their knowledge capacity be continuously developed and sustained. Society needs to enhance their capacity for increasing food production, safety palatability and maintaining food security.

#### **Measures must be taken to strengthen the position of women as key figures in water resources management in order to achieve poverty alleviation and food security. This implies the following:**

- ✓ improving women's access to education and to productive resources, i.e. land, credit and technologies designed to increase production and consumption of food producing crops;
- ✓ enhance rural women's skills in on-farm water use and management to increase crop water productivity, reducing on-farm water losses and gaining more water saving through training and simple educational programs;
- ✓ promote and develop agricultural techniques for women in terms of soil conservation and on field uniform water distribution;
- ✓ considering that women produce about 60% of the Arab world's food, greater efforts need to be made by governments, donor agencies and local financial institutions to ensure that women's efforts are maximized and sustained. In particular, rural women must be brought into the mainstream of bank lending programs in a way which recognises their specific needs;
- ✓ generally, human capital development is plagued with numerous problems including insufficient levels of investment, inadequate infrastructures, shortage in human resources and inconsistent policy approaches among others. Therefore, the state, civil society and the private-productive sector linkages remain vital in addressing the issues of female human capital development and empowerment.

## Conclusions

Women play a significant role in agricultural development, the management of water, fighting hunger and eradication of poverty.

Women cannot be ignored in sustainable development. Ignoring the women means putting more than 50% of the population out of production.

In the Arab countries, all actors in water management, government, civil society, non-governmental and donors organizations should assume a common responsibility of addressing gender issues at different levels on the development process, emphasizing the following:

- the water policy approach should be aiming to establishing a conducive atmosphere for women empowerment; to ensure their human capital development from the on-set, and within the same parameters as males;
- an appropriate human capital development, particularly in science and technology related disciplines, in order that the female gender can effectively further the struggles for poverty alleviation and to ensure a sustainable developed society; and finally
- Arab countries must devise strategies that incorporate the development of a mix of skills at higher educational levels for all and, in particular, as far as the female gender is concerned.

## What could be the appropriate approach to be followed?

In order to:

- achieving capacity building on gender mainstreaming on IWRM;
- sensitising organizations and Nile Basin governments on gender mainstreaming;
- strengthening gender training skills;
- establishing a fertile space for dialogue among the stakeholders and the decision-makers;
- developing regional data base on the best practices on gender mainstreaming and
- developing a plan of action for evaluation, monitoring and follow-up.

