

Water - Striking the Gender Balance

Water is inequitably distributed among men and women. More than half of the 1.2 billion people who do not have access to water are poor women and girls in developing countries. Women, who constitute 70 percent of the world's poor, suffer most from lack of water due to their pivotal role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water resources.

The burden to collect water over long distances is traditionally placed on women. African women may walk over six kilometers per day in search for water. In addition, women play an important role in influencing the hygiene behaviors of their family members.

Aware of these issues, the UN emphasized gender during 2008, which it declared the International Year of Sanitation.

Access to fresh water and sanitation not only improves family health, but also provides an opportunity for girls to go to school and for women to use their time for other activities.

The lack of a proper water infrastructure negatively impacts the access of women in developing countries to adequate housing, sanitation, electricity, water supply, transport, and education. Yet all too often decisions about the design and location of water facilities are made without their involvement.

A gendered analysis of water management must extend not only to domestic supply and sanitation but also to agriculture and food production and preparation. Women are responsible for over half of the world's food production. In developing countries, rural women produce between 60-80 percent of the food and are also main producers of the world's staple crops (such as rice, wheat and maize), which provide up to 90 percent of the rural poor's intake. Women are even more dominant in the production of legumes and vegetables in small plots.

In this respect, Anne E Ferguson, Director of the Women and International Development Program at Michigan State University, indicates the dangers of increased market orientation in water management. Water suitable for agriculture is declining due to decreasing availability of clean water and increasing competition for the water that is available. This situation brings about shifts in crop production choices along gender lines, forcing a reduction in irrigated agriculture activities.

Also, the fact that women do not have property ownership rights on an equal basis with men is not taken into account during water management reform processes.

The most egregious consequence of failing to provide safe drinking water and adequate sanitation services is the high rate of mortality among children from preventable water-related diseases. According to Pacific Institute President Peter Gleick, current best estimates appear to fall between 2

and 5 million deaths per year. Most of those dying from water-related disease are small children struck by virulent but preventable infectious diseases. The medium population path for 2020 leads to a projection that between 59 and 135 million people, mostly children, will die between now and that year from preventable water-related diseases. Similarly, the World Health Organization states in a report titled *The Right to Water* that lack of sanitary conditions contributes to about two billion cases of diarrhea with about four million deaths per year, mostly among infants and children.

The unequal distribution of water is pressing for children primarily due to the insufficient quality of water and its consequences in children's health and malnutrition. Children are entitled to special care and assistance because of their mental and physical immaturity.

Water is essential for an adequate health care infrastructure, including safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help children stay healthy. The Convention on the Rights of the Child specifically requires that readily available technology should be applied, and that adequate nutritious food and clean drinking water should be provided, taking into account the dangers and risks of environmental pollution.

By Denise Burke and Verena Schaer
Denise Burke and Verena Schaer are former ISN Editors.

1.1 Resources

1.1.1 Nongovernmental Organizations

The Right to Water, by WaterAid, Rights and Humanity and Freshwater Action Network
This website, launched on Human Rights Day 2003, was established by WaterAid and Rights and Humanity, in cooperation with FAN, as part of their contribution to the International Year of Freshwater 2003.

Vision 21: The People's Route to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for All, by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaboration Council (WSSCC)

This document outlines a vision for the 21st Century. Vision 21 is directed to achieving a world by 2025 in which each person knows the importance of hygiene, and enjoys safe and adequate water and sanitation.

Water Conservation Blog, by Ecological Internet, Inc

This blog serves as an internet search tool that provides access to reviewed water conservation news, information retrieval tools and original analysis and action opportunities related to water. Water Conserve is a project of Ecological Internet and is for noncommercial, educational purposes only.

WaterLinks: Linking Water Operations Throughout Asia

This website offers information on Water Operator Partnerships (WOPs) between water and wastewater utilities in Asia. The website provides resources on solutions for improved access to safe water and basic sanitation in Asia.

1.1.2 International Organizations

The Dublin Statement on Water and Sustainable Development

The Dublin Principles were adopted at the closing session of the International Conference on Water and the Environment (ICWE) in 1992. They have helped form the basis of many international initiatives concerning freshwater management. The four principles are: Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment; Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy-makers at all levels; Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water; Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognize as an economic good.

The Right to Water, by the World Health Organization

This publication explores a human rights-based approach to water. It outlines the scope and content of the legal definition of the human right to water. It examines the communities affecting and being affected by the right to water. Finally, it discusses the implications on the roles and responsibilities of governments and other institutions.

UN Water

This UN website offers resources on surface and groundwater resources, the interface between freshwater and seawater and water-related disasters. The website gathers information on UN entities dealing with issues related to water.

World Water Day 2009, by UN Water

The official website of the World Water Day 2009 presents a brief overview of the different themes that have been the focus of World Water Day celebrations. It also provides information on transboundary water, the special focus of this year's water day.

1.1.3 Research and Academia

Commitments on Water Security in the 21st Century, by the Centre for Water Policy and Development, University of Leeds

This publication by John Soussan and Rachel Harrison analyzes pledges and statements made at the UN Ministerial Conference and World Water Forum in March 2000. The main issues of interest were water security and supply to meet the basic needs of people, food security through improved water management and efficiency, ecosystem integrity and cooperation in water resource sharing.

International Water Association (IWA)

The IWA is an organization connecting government, corporate, individual and academic members with the aim of advancing the science and best practice of water management. The Association's official journal *Water International* aims to serve as an international gateway to the people, ideas and networks that are critical to the sustainable management of water resources around the world.

1.1.4 Media

Water, A Soluble Problem, by The Economist

This Economist article argues that more trading could help to alleviate water shortages.

The Water Debate, by the BBC

This BBC in-depth site features news articles and reports on water, water conflicts, water supply and water management.