

Presentation ‘Gender Perspectives in Integrated Water Resources Management’

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Introduction

Water is one of the most fundamental environmental resources. Sustainable water use allows for the protection of ecosystems and biodiversity through the retention of plant and animal species, the generation and conservation of fertile soils, and regulation of the climate.

Women and men perform distinctive tasks in water and environmental management. As a result and because of existing power relations between women and men, they are differently affected by water shortage and extreme weather events arising from climate change. Sustainable water and environmental management can be achieved when women’s and men’s tasks, rights, power relations and responsibilities are taken into account and when women and men are equally involved in the management of water and environment-related services.

As concerns on gender and water are crucial for environmental management, there is a need to incorporate gender and water perspectives as part of the list of concrete actions and recommendations that will be developed during the meeting.

Outline of the presentation

The presentation will provide an overview of the gender dimensions in the water sector, followed by a discussion on key issues related to gender relations, integrated water resources management and environmental change. After a brief look into international commitments on gender, water and the environment, the presentation will conclude with the main recommendations.

Key issues in gender and water management

Women worldwide play a key role in the provision of drinking water and water for other household purposes. Although women’s tasks in environmental management vary according to region, age, socio-economic class, caste and vary within families, many women in rural areas have to go far to fetch water. They spend up to a day’s task fetching water while many urban women have to wait long queuing for water.

As primary care givers, women further look after their family members suffering from water-related diseases and take responsibility for the hygiene and sanitation education of their children. In the absence of sanitary facilities, they are the ones who lack dignity due to societal values on women’s privacy. Many women in urban slums have to relieve themselves after dark, while women in rural areas have to walk far, both of them facing fear of harassment and sexual assault.

Women further play a key role in agriculture, livestock, forestry and fisheries. Depending on local customs and circumstances, they may be the only farmer in the household, take

responsibility for specific crops or subsistence farming, or they may take responsibility for specific farming tasks such as weeding and transplanting. Many women further take responsibility for fisheries, livestock and the collection of forest products. As part of their agricultural work and knowledge, they contribute to the retention of plant and animal species, the conservation of genetic resources, and in retaining indigenous knowledge.

Due to different tasks in water supply and food production, women have different priorities, demands and knowledge on water management than men. However, women are not as widely consulted and women's priorities and requirements are not given as much attention due to different power relations between women and men.

One of the reasons for the limited consultation of women relates to women's limited control and access to land and water. Control over and access to resources is a determining factor for decision making over the resource while land ownership is often linked to water access. Women's control over natural resources is limited because of societal values and practices determining men as the 'guardians' of property, the 'heads of the household' and the decision makers in the public sphere. Control over resources further depends on factors such as ethnicity and socio-economic class, despite realizing that control over natural resources is limited for basically all women worldwide.

As a result of women's limited participation in decision making, valuable knowledge and expertise is lost and decision making processes may result in failure of policies and programmes. Lack of title deeds further limits women's opportunities to access credit, technical inputs, and training.

In addition, lack of control over natural resources contributes to limited opportunities for women to exercise their power to demand fulfilment of their human rights and to negotiate responsibilities for a reduction of their time burden.

Altogether, lack of attention to women's requirements and priorities contributes to food and energy insecurity, poverty, gender inequality, lack of women's empowerment, and contributes to environmental degradation.

Gender, water and the environment

Women not only have unique knowledge of ecosystems and environmental sustainability, they are further most affected by distortions in ecosystems. This particularly applies to poor women who have least control over natural resources and whose primary tasks depend on natural resources, such as forests, rangelands, water bodies and inshore fishing grounds. They also have least means to find alternatives.

Climate change is predicted to have a disproportionate effect on women. As main water fetchers and food producers who are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, their time burden and responsibilities will increase as they will try to maintain same levels of drinking water and food production.

As such, many women have great interest in the protection of ecosystems and are active agents of change. Grassroots women worldwide have been playing a primary role in

raising water and environmental concerns despite less access to and representation within formal political structures at all levels and less access to the media. Organizations such as the Gender and Water Alliance play a key role in mobilizing practitioners and activists in gender, water and environmental management.

International commitments

Gender concerns in water and environmental management have been raised and included in a large variety of international commitments. Women's role in water and environmental management received attention during a large variety of conferences on the status of women and gender equality. Gender equality or women's concerns further received attention during water conferences and conferences on the environment. Nevertheless, neither the different impact of climate change on women and men, nor the respective roles of men and women in addressing climate change have been considered in global negotiations under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Good progress has been made in the incorporation of gender concerns in water management by highlighting gender concerns in national water policies and strategies. Main challenges remain in implementation of the international commitments and in a good understanding of gender equality issues. While the international commitments acknowledge the important role women play, they do not call for a deeper understanding of gender concerns, power relations between women and men, and for the necessity of gender equality for sustainable development.

When the meeting will discuss international commitments on the environment, especially the multilateral environmental agreements, it is important to realize that monitoring reports fall short of addressing gender concerns. Reports mainly portray women as victims and in their traditional roles as care givers rather than as actors in water and environmental management. Gender is perceived as a synonym for women and the power relations between women and men do not receive attention. In addition, women are treated as a homogeneous group irrespective of differences in age, income level, ethnicity, and for example women living in urban or rural areas.

Conclusions and recommendations

Environmental sustainability is enhanced when the priorities and demands of all stakeholders are addressed:

- Women should be recognized as central to the provision, management and safeguarding of water and environmental management
- Policies and strategies on water and environmental management need to respect gender differences
- Good understanding of gender equality issues is required for adequate implementation of policies and strategies

Organizations such as the Gender and Water Alliance, and its members in all regions and countries worldwide, are able to provide support to work towards implementation of the following recommendations:

- 1) Multilateral agencies, governments, and civil society organizations are encouraged to ensure meaningful and equal involvement by women and men for effective, efficient, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable water management.

Participation by women is required at all levels of policy making, and in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Women of different social groups need to participate in decision making to enhance success of policies and strategies on water and environmental management. At the same time, women's worldwide representation in governments and other decision-making bodies is important.

- 2) Policies and strategies on water and environmental management need to respect gender differences. Women's and men's priorities and power imbalances need attention in Multilateral Environmental Agreements, national policies, legislative frameworks, data collection, national and global monitoring reports, and the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of water and environment programmes.

When discussing coordination of Multilateral Environmental Agreements during the GC/GMEF, it is important to recognize the different impact of climate change on women and men and their respective roles and opportunities in water management and in addressing climate change. Particular attention needs to be given to the collection of gender and gender-disaggregated data, and to the development of gender indicators, to keep track of the implementation of multilateral and national policies.

- 3) To enhance understanding of gender equality issues and enhance the likelihood of adequate implementation of policies, institutional strengthening is encouraged. When government officers and civil society members are aware of the benefits of addressing gender concerns in water and environmental policies and know how to develop and implement these policies, they are more likely to involve women and to recognize women's environmental knowledge. Financial commitments to gender equality and individual mandates and responsibilities on gender equality are a requirement. Gender experts and gender focal points can play a major role by providing advice, development of office policies and gender tools, and by conducting training. A comfortable and conducive environment for both women and men staff member is crucial for staff recruitment and to retain women staff members.