

Dialogues on mainstreaming gender dimensions into water issues

Diálogos sobre a valorização das dimensões de gênero em questões de água

Interview script with Dr. Alice M. Bouman-Dentener, Vice-President of the Water Research and Training Centre of Myanmar (WRTC), chair the Members Council of the European Water Stewardship (EWS) and is member of the Advisory Board of Gender Concerns International (GCI)

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INTERVIEW



What does it mean to mainstream gender in water management? What are the main nexus between gender and water that sustain this necessity of mainstreaming?

Alice Bauman-Dentener (ABD) – We are all familiar with the examples of women having to walk many miles for a bucket of water and girls not attending school because there is no proper sanitation. While in the WASH sector important strides forwards have been made under the MDGs, we are still far away from universal access and women and girls are still affected the most. So, attention for gender in WASH is still needed.

We should also note in this context, that in many cases the facilities provided do not reach the intended beneficiaries, nor are they managed sustainably. This shows why it is important to not only analyze the implications of a policy or program for women and men, but to involve them in design and management as well.

Another issue that people usually mention is the limited number of women water professionals, or female water ministers. While women and men – from a human rights perspective – should indeed have equal career opportunities, in my personal experience, gender parity among water professionals does not necessarily lead to gender sensitive water management.

Mainstreaming gender in water management is not so much about professional individuals of different biological sex. It is about the culturally specific differences between women and men that vary across age, ethnicity or social strata; and how these socially shaped differences result in distinct gender roles and unequal power relations that influence access to and control over water for domestic and productive uses, and that often prevent women from contributing meaningfully to water security and sustainable development.

A gender approach to water resources management leads to a more equitable distribution of physical labor, contribution of time and cash, influence on decision-making and control over resources and benefits. It allows for the empowerment of disadvantaged women and enables them to take part in the development of their society and the safeguarding of the environment.

Do you think there were some changes or evolution in the gender and water nexus framework since 1992 Dublin Statements?

ABD – The Dublin Principles for Integrated Water Resourced Management of 1992 are the corner stone of a strategic framework to achieve water security in our rapidly developing world, where the increasing demands for different water uses are reaching critical levels, and the environmental water needs are under serious stress. In the IWRM philosophy, participatory water governance, involving all relevant stakeholders (Principle 2) is the way to achieve equitable and sustainable use and management of water resources and should be organised at the lowest appropriate level; and Women are pictured as key actors in this process (Principle 3).

It is important to note that Dublin Principle 3 is not a gender equality goal. But if properly implemented, it is a significant contributor nonetheless: the empowerment of women to participate on an equal footing in water resources development and management ensures a gender lens to design and implementation of interventions so that women's needs and priorities are given equal attention to those of men. It also gives women recognition and voice in their communities; and there are many examples of the positive impact of women leadership on the sustainability of infrastructure and institutions as well as additional social and economic development of the community after the water project was completed.¹

Gender mainstreaming, as agreed by the UN Member States during the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (three years after the Dublin/Rio Principles), prescribes the inclusion of a gender perspective in all development activities, from policy and legislation to research, planning and resource allocation, and including in the implementation of programs and projects. This strategy addresses gender equality not only in terms of rights, but also in terms of responsibilities; and it includes women's empowerment as a key objective to ensure their meaningful contribution to sustainable development.

In the GWA (Gender & Water Alliance) definition of gender mainstreaming in water management more than a decade later however, this dual approach of equal rights to benefits as well as equal responsibility to contribute (= the link to Dublin Principle 3) is not made explicit. The Resource guide for Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management (2006)² defines gender mainstreaming as: "The process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels". It considers women and men more as beneficiaries of water-related development interventions than as actors in their own right.

¹ See for instance www.womenforwater.org.

² GWA, UNDP, CAPNET (2006). Resource Guide Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management. Available on line at: <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/environment-energy/www-ee-library/water-governance/resource-guide-mainstreaming-gender-in-water-management/IWRMGenderResourceGuide-English-200610.pdf>

Regarding evolution in the water – gender nexus since 1992:

From what I have seen and researched, gender and women inclusiveness were not really prominent on the IWRM radar during the past 20 years. This despite the fact that the International Decade for Action “Water for Life” 2005 – 2015 specifically called for the full participation of women in water-related development efforts.

Developing an IWRM approach to water management is a long and complicated process that requires a mind-set change and institutional transformation of a traditionally top-down water sector. In many countries, this process is ongoing and only gradually translated into participatory water governance systems. We should bear in mind that political contexts vary across countries; and that social and economic conditions are quite different between and within countries or regions. In many cases, women are still considered a vulnerable group instead of a stakeholder group in their own right, as Dublin Principle 3 propagates.

In short, the advantages of women inclusive participatory water governance are known to the global water and development community for decades, and anchored in agreements, policies and strategies. Yet the water & gender agenda still lacks traction at the national and especially at the sub-national level; except maybe in the WASH sector.

Could you tell us about your career trajectory and how you started to work on the gender and water inter-connection?

ABD: I am a biologist, specialized in ethology: the natural science-based analysis of animal behavior that Lorenz and Tinbergen started in the 1930s. My specific interest lies in the evolution of social behavior and its relation to the natural environment: how the behavior of a species – including the human species – is influenced by the environment it lives in; and how in turn, our behavior influences the environment over time. Sustainable development was a logical career focus for me, as it rests on a social, environmental and economic pillar which should be viewed in conjunction. My ethology background has also been quite useful for understanding gender as a social construct of constantly evolving inter-human relations.

My involvement in the water-gender-development interface stems from the Second World Water Forum in The Hague in 2000, for which I organized the inputs of the Major Group Women and was instrumental in putting gender on the water agenda for the first time. This was followed by a substantial women and water contribution to the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, 2002), where I laid the foundation for the Women for Water Partnership. I have been their President for the first ten years.

Nowadays there is a growing consensus for increasing water security in a sustainable manner and for building more resilient water systems as an imperative towards a more democratic development. How can we bridge the gender gap in Integrated Water Resources Management to achieve this?

ABD – By starting to implement Dublin Principle 3 in earnest. In fact, if we read the full text of Dublin Principle 3, it is already outlined how to proceed:

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.

In cases of accepting gender equality in IWRM, how does it impact public policies and people concrete lives? Could you give examples worldwide?

ABD – The Women for Water Partnership has documented many examples of how gender equality in decision-making processes and the full engagement of women in the development, implementation and management of water systems has impacted peoples lives and development opportunities across the globe. Rather than singling out one specific case, I would like to refer to some publications that give a broader picture:

Bouman-Dentener, A. M. (2015). Women as agents of change in water: Reflections on experiences from the field. A WfWP publication in cooperation with UN Women and UNW-DPAC. Available from: <http://www.womenforwater.org>

Schuster-Wallace, C. J., Cave K., Bouman-Dentener A. M., & Holle F. (2015). Women, WaSH, and the water for life decade. United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health and the Women for Water Partnership. Available from: <http://inweh.unu.edu/women-wash-water-life-decade/>

Bouman-Dentener, A. (2017). Water Seekers, Carriers and Keepers: The Global and Gender Divide. In: D. Devlaeminck et al. (eds.), The Human Face of Water Security, Water Security in a New World, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-50161-1_7. Springer International Publishing AG 2017.

In general, I would say that: Empowering women and their organisations to take a prominent part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water has a record of creating solid water systems that adequately cater for the needs of the entire community. Also, it increases the social capital of a community resulting in local ownership and informed, active and resilient communities. There are quite a few records of local women subsequently entering the public sphere, and articulating developmental issues right up to the national level of politics.

Concerning gender and water agenda what are the opportunities and constraints of the Sustainable Development Goals implementation? What is their transformation potential?

ABD – Over the years I have become more and more convinced that participatory and women-inclusive water governance as pictured in the Dublin Principles for IWRM is the way forward to achieve water security as the basis for sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs provide an inspiring framework based on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and integration across SDGs. The SDG5 – SDG6 interface is a focus area that should receive proper support as it is a largely untapped potential to tackle poverty at its roots.

A major constraint to implementing Dublin Principle 3 is the lack of funding for Women’s Civil Society Groups that work on the water-gender-development interface. Analyzing the amount of gender focused funding in Official Development Aid (ODA) is quite revealing: hardly any money goes to women’s organizations while they are considered key for the achievement of gender equality and development commitments.³ At the same time, audits and evaluation of water projects reveal that many water interventions – in the case of the 2012 EU audit⁴ more than 50% - fail to reach the targeted beneficiaries. This presents a tremendous opportunity for financial efficiency: before thinking of increasing the budget for water projects, part of the funds should be allocated to pre-investment in strengthening stakeholders, notably Women’s Civil Society, to ensure that future projects will effectively reach the beneficiaries and address their most pressing needs.

3 GENDERNET (2015). From commitment to action: Financing gender equality and women’s rights in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Available on-line at: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/gender-development/From%20commitment%20to%20action%20FINAL.pdf>

4 European Court of Auditors. (2012). European union development assistance for drinking water supply and basic sanitation in Sub-Saharan Countries. Special report No. 13. Available on-lone at: http://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR12_13/SR12_13_EN.PDF

Concerning the challenges to mainstream gender in water policies and programs what are the similarities as well as the differences more often faced between South and North?

ABD – This is a difficult one. I would not want to overemphasize North versus South, as gender is a social construct and gender roles evolve constantly; meaning that they might be quite different even from one generation to the next. I would really recommend to look from case to case whether gender is relevant in a given socio-cultural and geopolitical context.

Having said this, we should not ignore that in countries of the developing world, gender roles are often more pronounced, especially in secluded communities where customary law prevails. Also, countries in the North have a tendency to ignore gender issues, which may result in gender blindness.

What both have in common is the social capital of women's civil society organizations. Women's organizations are often the advocates for social equity, water and environmental stewardship and sustainable development in general. They mobilize and engage their constituencies and hence are a prime instrument to achieve the all-of-society engagement and partnership that the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development propagates.

Gendered issues are quite often deeply embedded in cultural contexts. How can we deal with these challenges?

ABD – In my experience, an effective way of dealing with processes of social change is through women's civil society groupings in the countries themselves.

Brazilian National Water Law is celebrating twenty years. Our National Law incorporated all Dublin principles except Principle 3 about the role of women as providers and users of water and guardians of the living environment. What could you talk about this situation? Do you think the lack of reference on gender in a national water law represents a great prejudice to include this framework in national low level water policies?

ABD – I would have to study your Water Law first to pass judgement. You indicate that Dublin Principle 2 about stakeholder participation in general is included in the Law. Meaning that De Jure the Major Group Women is included, together with all other stakeholder groups. The pivotal role of women might be omitted because singling out a specific stakeholder group is not considered appropriate in a law. But then Dublin Principle 3 should hopefully be elaborated elsewhere, in a policy or strategy. If that is not the case, I hope that it will still happen. In a highly culturally and ethnically diverse country like Brazil, gender is bound to be an issue.

Could you give us few successful cases worldwide which managed to mainstream gender in their water management policies? What are the lessons learnt?

ABD – I would think that the Gender Policy and Strategy of the African Ministers Council on Water (AMCOW) provides a good example of a strategic approach and commitment to mainstream gender in water policies and practice throughout the Continent.⁵ I think it is appropriate to mention that the Hon. Maria Mutagamba as President of AMCOW and Minister for Water Affairs of Uganda has played an important role. I would like to take this opportunity to honor her leadership, as Maria Mutagamba has unfortunately passed away on the 24th of June last.

⁵ African Ministers' Council on Water (2011). AMCOW Policy and Strategy for Mainstreaming Gender in the Water Sector in Africa.

An assessment commissioned by the Water Research Commission and Global Water Partnership⁶ reveals that progress in gender mainstreaming is uneven across the African Continent with East and Southern Africa showing the most substantial progress. Important lessons learnt are that gender mainstreaming is hampered by the fragmentation that generally exist in water management, that political will of the relevant bureaucrats is a necessity and that capacity and understanding is often missing.

⁶ Elaine Salo (2015) Gender and Water Policies in Africa: Synthesis Report. A joint publication of the Institute for Women's and Gender Studies, University of Pretoria, Water Research Commission (WRC) and Global Water Partnership (GWP). Available on-line at: http://www.gwp.org/globalassets/global/events/www-2015/concept_2_gender-policies-in-africa-ek_v9.pdf