

## Women's Participation in Lake Basin Management From a Gender Perspective

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### Introduction

Before the First World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992) and the Dublin Meeting (Dublin, 1992) there was little concern for the need to preserve the environment and, in particular, water resources and to consider women's participation in the water sector. Water was considered an infinite resource renewed through the water cycle. After the Rio Summit and especially after the First Water Forum (Marrakech, 1996), many government officials from all over the world began to push forward in their agendas the need to implement programs and projects geared to sensitize and involve all the people on the need to be co-responsible in the use and preservation of water. Thus, from the First World Water Forum (Marrakech, 1996) to the Third World Water Forum (Shiga, Osaka and Kyoto, 2003), significant actions were taken to carry through the Dublin Principles, the implementation of Integrated Water Resource Management Policies (IWRM), and to encourage people's participation.

It is important to remember that among the four Dublin Principles for water management, the third relates specifically to the issue of women's participation: "Women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water". Therefore, since the Second World Water Forum (The Hague, 2000) to the recently passed international meetings on water: The International Conference on Freshwater (Bonn, 2001); the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) and; the Third World Water Forum (Shiga, Osaka and Kyoto, 2003), more government officials of institutions related to water management have considered the need to recognize women's participation in the hydrological sector.

The Lake Basin Managers as well as other water authorities, have used different approaches in the implementation of the IWRM policies to encourage all types of lake basin water users, approaches which vary from those concerned with some minor general administrative issues to those dealing with in-depth changes, including profound changes in their constitutional laws, as it has been shown in the Case Studies presented. Even though a wide variety of experiences can be found in the ways in which social participation has been encouraged in all such Cases Studies presented throughout the Lake Basin Management Initiative Meetings (LBMI), very few cases acknowledge women's participation in the implementation of their programs and projects.

Thus, this Theme Paper will concentrate on “why” there has to be a special consideration given to recognize and enhance women’s participation within the hydrological sector -in general- and concretely in Lake Basin Management.

## 2. Women’s Role in the Hydrological Sector

To have a better understanding of the women’s role in the hydrological sector, it is important to begin by defining the concept of “gender”. Although there are many definitions for this concept, the broadest one is that “Gender is a network of beliefs, personality traits, attitudes, feelings, values, behaviors, and activities differentiating men and women through a process of social construction that has a number of distinctive features. It is historical; it takes place within different macro and micro spheres such as the state, the labor market, schools, the media, the law, the family-household, and inter-personal relations; it involves the ranking of traits and activities, so that those associated with men are normally given greater value”. (Benería and Roldan 1987:11-12)

This concept leads us to comprehend the nature and significance of implementing programs and projects geared to obtain gender equity, such as those given by the World Water Council as the main objectives to obtain Integrated Water Resource Management, which are:

1. To identify critical water issues of local, regional and global importance on the basis of ongoing assessments on the state of world water.
2. To raise awareness of critical water issues at all levels of decision-making, from the highest authorities to the local level.
3. To provide the forum for a common strategic vision on integrated water resource management on a sustainable basis, and to promote the implementation of effective policies and strategies worldwide.
4. To provide advice and relevant information to institutions and decision-makers on the development and implementation of comprehensive policies and strategies for sustainable water resources management, with due respect for the environment, and social and **gender equity** (emphasis added)
5. To contribute to the resolution of issues related to transboundary waters. (World Water Council 2000, 4)

The above is based on the fact that proper Water Management takes into account that most social conflicts are caused by two main issues: allocation and management. Although these issues have been widely developed in other chapters, it is important to raise them again here, because all these objectives are deeply rooted on the fourth objective, which acknowledges that IWRM will only be accomplished through the participation of the people that live in a lake basin. This will be enhanced if it has a specific reference to gender equity as well as to environmental issues.

Thus, a lot has to be done to create an enabling environment to open spaces for women that are at a disadvantage in comparison to men due to gender differences, because although most water policies recognizes women’s participation in almost all projects and admit that their responsibilities vary in the urban, suburban and rural areas, the “gender” differentiation continues to be perceived as a sex difference between the male and female. Within these

perceptions, women are mainly seen as part of the private sphere or within the household domain, where their main responsibility is to prepare the food, be in charge of the hygiene of the family, to pass on good habits to children, as well as to play an important role in carrying water from the closest water supply. Although these are some of women's socially assigned tasks, there is no doubt that women also play a key role in the productive and reproductive sphere, not only as water users but also as economically feasible social actors at the local, national and regional level.

### **3. Women's Economic Feasibility**

Although almost everybody takes for granted that women's prime responsibility is for the use of domestic water, due to their role within the household, little importance is given to acknowledge her direct and indirect participation in the economic sphere, as well as to uncover the invisibility of her actions within the productive and non-productive sectors.

#### **3.1 Women as Part of the Productive Sector:**

According to the International Institute Of Development Management Technology (IDMAT Asia Office) women constitute not only half of the world's population but also sway the growth of the remaining half. They produce half of the world's food supply and account for 60% of the working force, but comprise only 10% of the world's economy and surprisingly own less than 1% of the real estate.

In this trend, it is important to recall that more than one-third of the world's formal labor force is female, and more and more women are entering into this labor sector everyday, either because the families' needs cannot be fulfilled anymore with only one salary, or due to the high unemployment rate in most developing countries, pushing women to become part of the labor force with cash income. Many cases are also of women abandoned by their husbands who have become the head of their households and are forced to enter into the labor force, either as part of the formal or informal sector.

The women's economic role is also important in most countries where the economical crisis has pushed men to migrate to the cities or to other countries in search of increasingly important cash incomes. This massive migration has left many rural women as heads of their households, having to support their families as well as enter into their community's administration, such as the management of their water and sanitation systems, community services and other economic responsibilities that cannot be unattended.

In the agricultural sector, women's participation in the whole agricultural process is unquestionable, since most of the poor agricultural economies of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America have women working in the fields, in the transportation of their products and in the marketplaces. Even though, as a result of gender bias, this work is generally unrecognized and their economic role is invisible.

According to estimates, in the industrial sector, the Eastern European Countries under the Soviet Union's regime reported a higher percentage of women inserted in the formal working sector, where in the 1970s and early '80s about 85 percent of all Soviet women between the ages of 20 and 55 were employed outside the home; in East Germany (now part of the united Federal Republic of Germany) the number of employed women was as high as 80 percent. Women's participation rate in the workforce, however, was lower in Hungary and Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), which had less-developed economies. Although more integrated than in the West, women in Eastern Europe were still concentrated in some traditional occupations and industries. In Bulgaria, for example, 78 percent of textile workers, but only 25 percent of engineers, were women; in the Soviet Union, these figures were 74 and 40 percent, respectively. Although part-time employment was discouraged, about half the married women worked only part time.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.2 Women as Part of the Non-Productive Sector:**

Given the fact that the “world population grows by 77 million people each year, with the bulk in developing countries. By 2025, the report states, 5 billion of the world's 7.9 billion people will be living in areas where it will be difficult or even impossible to meet basic water needs for drinking, cooking and sanitation if present water consumption rates are maintained. Between now and 2025, the total water use is projected to increase by 40 per cent” (<http://www.unfpa.org/news/news.cfm?ID=193>). This data leads us to consider that there is a need to increase women's access to education and health care, including reproductive health and family planning, in order to slow population growth and reduce pressure on water supplies, improve livelihoods and increase opportunities for women in regions with water shortages or contamination.

Urban and peri-urban water use related to health and for social reproduction, relies mostly on women as housekeepers, where they are in charge of the washing, cooking and other hygienic activities within the family. The lack of access to safe water and sanitation, especially in rural areas, obliges women to spend hours every day collecting water from streams and rivers or from communal taps. At the same time, the exposure to contaminated water is linked to pregnancy failures, infant illnesses and deaths, as well as all sorts of water-related diseases that affect the community and their families' health. These illnesses require a greater control and obligation from the governmental authorities who have to invest a great part of their budget in “curative” health programs, instead of “preventive” health programs that could be managed by women if they would be better prepared with respect to water use.

In the rural areas, women are mainly in charge of watering and washing cattle, irrigating homestead crops, and other, where the lack of access to fresh and safe water and sanitation, especially in poor communities, obliges women to spend hours every day collecting water, sifting it or taking care of their children affected by water-related diseases. If women's activities would have more access to training and capacity building workshops for more efficient use of

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<sup>1</sup>"Women, Employment of," *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2000*. © 1993-1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

water and the care of their lakes in their communities, they could prevent many of these health problems from the very beginning and have more time to spend on other economically productive activities with their families.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Lake Basin Management with an IWRM approach in a Lake Basin is a task that entails both risk and efforts, women have to face similar challenges, go through same stages as do men, and at the same time deal with the gender based social impediments like social stigma, unfavorable infrastructure, support systems, and others which block their entry and reduce their pace of growth. Removing these impediments in the existing set up of the hydrological sector has assumed a critical significance for the empowerment and economic development of women and hence for the whole community. Today there is a need to help women overcome these blockades and draw maximum participation from them to place them at par with their male counterparts in the issue of water allocation and management.

The above should shed light to the Case Studies that are gender sensitive such as:

**Nakuru:** A gender sensitivity training project, that needs to be pushed forward and supported.

**Toba:** PARA a technique used in the project, where women are invited to participate in community meetings.

**Chilika:** In the upper watershed, a pilot project was conducted to create Women's Forums geared to enhance their participation.

**Biwa:** Women organized in what has been known as the "Soap Movement" to avoid using a soap detergent that was causing pollution and contamination in their lake.

All these examples are the first steps to begin enhancing women's participation in a full civil society's participatory approach for Integrated Lake Basin Management.

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