

Women and water

by Borjana Bulajich

Until the way in which water supply and sanitation policies are decided changes to include women in every step of the process, the huge improvements that are necessary for healthy communities will not take place.

WATER IS A PREREQUISITE for the survival of human beings and for their development. Current and projected problems with freshwater resources arise from the pressure to meet the agricultural, human settlement, food, and industrial needs of a fast-growing global population. Inadequate water and sanitation facilities are some of the most critical problems faced by the developing world today.

Statistics tell the story. In the 1990s, over one billion people in the developing world lack safe and adequate drinking-water, while those lacking sanitation number almost two billion. The lack of a healthy environment and the lack of safe drinking-water are the cause of 900 million cases of diarrhoeal disease every year, which cause the deaths of more than three million children; two million of these

deaths could be prevented if adequate sanitation and clean water were available. At any time 200 million people have schistosomiasis or bilharzia, and 900 million more have hookworm, cholera, typhoid, or paratyphoid.

The ever-increasing scarcity of water, combined with environmental degradation, continues to have serious impacts on primary water carriers, managers, end-users, and family health educators. The economic and social costs resulting from the lack of safe drinking-water are high. The average proportion of their working time spent on water collection by women in East Africa varies from about 12 per cent in humid areas to 27 per cent or more in dry or mountainous areas. By virtue of their domestic functions, women are in constant contact with polluted water and are therefore the group most vulnerable to water-related diseases.

T.S. Satyan/UNICEF



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Power and responsibility

In the area of water resource development and environmental protection, women are at present more often victims than beneficiaries. As women are responsible for the domestic use of water as well as for the provision of fuel and for the production of food crops, they are the ones most keenly aware of and the most adversely affected by the current negative developments. At present, women are still often excluded from both environmental and river basin development projects. For example, planners of projects related to soil conservation, agricultural extension, and credit for water conservation activities seldom include women or women's groups in the planning stage. In most irrigation projects, land and water rights are vested in the male head of the household, leaving women without the land or water to grow the staple foods essential for family health.

Women are more than target groups; they are active agents who can contribute constructively and knowledgeably to policy decisions, and who can also mobilize labour, provide resources, and disseminate and implement innovations. By involving women, particularly in the planning, design, operation, and maintenance stages as well as in health education programmes, water and sanitation projects could more effectively achieve the ultimate goals of more and safer water, resulting in better health.



Women's participation in the development of water facilities should result in a decrease in the drudgery and hard work of water collection.

The multi-sectoral nature of water supply and sanitation activities among women requires appropriate co-ordination among the national institutions and authorities concerned with water, health, sanitation, and agriculture and rural development, as well as among agencies in charge of education and training, including international organizations. Appropriate agencies at the national level should be instrumental in the co-ordination between responsible ministries and women's organizations. The strategy for women's participation needs to include water and sanitation if it is to become an integral part of the whole development process. Improved water supply and sanitation facilities could have many direct benefits, such as the reduction of the drudgery of water collection, an improvement in health, nutrition, and food supply, and environmental protection. Moreover, there are indirect benefits in the form of improved potential for economic and social development, such as the rise in productivity and incomes, and improved standards of living.

The management of local water sources and watersheds, forestation,

and the prevention of local pollution are typical areas where the interests of women and development planners go hand in hand, and in which women have already played constructive roles at the neighbourhood and community levels. So far, many countries have adopted policies of community involvement and women's participation and many *ad hoc* examples can be found of how this involvement makes a difference to local support, use, and maintenance. Development planners and engineers put policies into practice, and the responsibility ultimately lies with them as to whether these policies surface visibly in projects and programmes. Women's and non-governmental organizations can support this endeavour by establishing co-operative structures in engineering programmes and by educating their own colleagues about how women can play a more prominent role.

Despite their increasingly important and multiple roles, there is still not enough attention paid to women's roles in water supply and sanitation. They are the primary resource in water collection, and they are the greatest users of water. Their water-related

work is taken for granted and denied its economic and social value. Women are often excluded from both the early planning and the final implementation of water projects. Projects concerning women lack the elements of communication and information on the relation between water, sanitation, and health. Local women's customs, preferences, and traditions are not taken into consideration during the selection of the technical design and the location of the projects. Training programmes

Coming in the next issue of *Waterlines* . . .

Our next issue has been co-ordinated by WaterAid, and will feature articles about Replicability. A project that helps one village resolve their water and sanitation problems is important, but what makes a project so successful that it can be both carried on sustainably once the outside resources are gone, and replicated in other villages? Read the January issue to find out.



Changes in the way that water supply systems are planned and developed will make a big difference to this Peruvian girl's life.

on water activities rarely include women, and evaluations seldom consider the impact of water projects on the lives of women specifically.

Positive action

The role of women working in the field could be greatly increased through education, training, and the inclusion of gender issues in water policies, programmes, and projects. Equally, the recognition and enhancement of

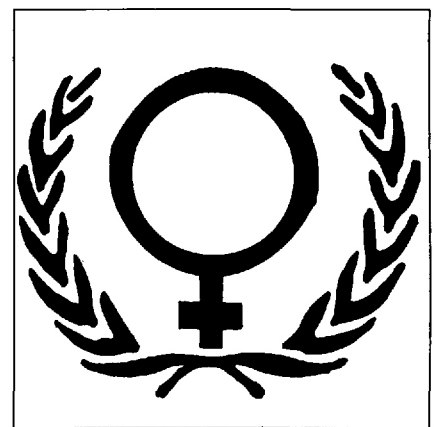
women in water supply and sanitation depends on a firm commitment at the national level. For example, in low-income urban areas women play a prominent role in innovative approaches to more sustainable water and sanitation services. They are (co-) managers of communal waterpoints, latrines, and vending stations, they run local water supply and wastewater treatment systems, promote domestic sanitation systems, and manage and collect domestic waste for recycling

and re-use. In rural areas women, as managers of communal waterpoints, are concerned with drainage and hygiene, the proper use of taps and pumps, and the prevention of damage by children and livestock.

There are many examples of successful solutions to water problems that have also had a positive impact on the environment and the socio-economic well-being of women and their communities. Still, a lot remains to be done to involve them effectively in environmentally sustainable water programmes and projects.

At the national and international levels, government and non-government organizations, women's groups, and international agencies have critical roles to play. Three points should be made concerning their approaches to women's participation. Women's participation should be part of an integrated approach in the management and support of sustainable water activities; women's issues are an integral part of community and national development concerns, and the emphasis on women's participation does not imply that activities should be carried out by women only. It stresses rather the need for both men and women to address the issue.

The 1990s and beyond call for a holistic approach towards the development and management of water resources, which is a prerequisite for the effective sustainable development of nations. It implies the development of human societies and economies and the protection of natural ecosystems on which the survival of humanity ultimately depends. This includes the need to look not only at the water cycle, but also at inter-sectoral needs, ecological issues, the alleviation of poverty and disease, sustainable rural and urban development, and protection against natural disasters. ●



Borjana Bulajich is Social Affairs Officer at INSTRAW, Cesar Nicolas Penson 102-A, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.