



Findings from research in India and Nepal

Water: a gender issue

Current policies and practice in the water sector often reinforce gender inequalities, which in turn determine who does and does not have access to and use of water.



Introduction to the research

The UK government Department for International Development (DFID) funded this study. The aim was to explore how women are benefiting from and participating in water projects and what effect this is having on gender relations, access to and use of water and empowerment issues. Two researchers based at the University of Southampton, supported by an advisory team, carried out the study. It took place over five years and focused on drinking water supplies in rural areas of India and Nepal, investigating the extent to which current policies and practice are effective in reaching the poor, including women.

The study was unique in many ways:

- > It looked at all levels, from international water policy right down to practice on the ground;
- > Long-term research was undertaken in two countries, including extensive fieldwork;
- > It involved researchers who were experienced development practitioners when they started the study.

In India the researcher studied domestic water projects in three states, run by different kinds of organisations. The water authority administered some projects, while NGOs and the private sector in Uttar Pradesh implemented one, funded by the World Bank, that was studied in depth. This was the well-known SWAJAL project. The research focused on understanding international water policies from a gender perspective, and exploring how these were translated at every level down to the rural community. The researcher spent a long time at village level, working in local communities.

In Nepal the focus was particularly on detailed case studies of three very different organisations working in water provision: a government department, a major international donor and implementing agency, and an international NGO working through a local, Nepali NGO. The research explored how far gender relations within the organisation itself enabled or prevented the agency delivering on policy commitments to gender and poverty focused interventions. Research was also undertaken in the villages where these agencies worked, to study their development activities with local communities.

International donor policies were studied by both researchers (the research in India made this a central focus), with an emphasis on how these were translated into the national water policies of the Indian and Nepali governments.

The research in India was carried out by [Deepa Joshi](#) (currently a researcher with the University of Southampton);

In Nepal it was executed by [Shibesh Regmi](#) (present Director of ActionAid Nepal).

The advisory team comprised the following academics and practitioners:

[Ben Fawcett](#), Coordinator, Engineering for Development, University of Southampton

[Tina Wallace](#), Research Associate in International Gender Studies, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University

[Nicky May](#), freelance NGO adviser and gender specialist.

Why gender is central to the supply of water

The provision of water is complex. It involves delivering adequate supplies to locations that are accessible to populations; it requires ensuring and regulating access where competing demands exceed the volume of supply. It concerns the ways in which water is used, who uses it, and how to ensure long-term, sustainable water supplies both from the source and at the point of delivery.

Access to and use of water has been 'gendered' throughout history and in every culture. For example in India, Hindu concepts of purity and pollution determine both caste-based social hierarchies and the rights and access of women to water¹. Religious understanding and cosmology determined the dominance of patriarchal institutions over collective water resources in England thousands of years ago, according to Roman sources². Rights, roles and responsibilities in relation to water, and issues of ownership and control vary over time and between different societies. But it is universally true that the relationships of women and men to water are different; they are structured and defined by tradition, religion, cultural norms and even legal frameworks. The roles and identities resulting from being female or male determine who has ownership, control and use of water, and access to it. Gender, therefore, is central to any work that we do to increase the supply and use of water, or to improve access to it.

Gender is not the only social issue of relevance. The roles of women and men, and their rights to water are also shaped by other factors, including caste, class, wealth and physical ability or disability. In most societies where development work on water is currently focused, women's roles are subservient and unequal. While they often have clearly defined responsibilities for household water, and sometimes for water for production, they lack representation at all levels of society; often they cannot easily participate in development activities, and poor women especially lack access to decision-making. Gender relations, alongside those of class or religion for example, structure inequality in most societies; at the same time gender relations assign water roles and responsibilities. This means that, often, poor women's lack of power and control prevents them from meeting their water responsibilities.

These issues have been recognised and accepted by the water sector

The water sector has acknowledged the importance of gender relations in the provision and use of water, and commitments have been made, both in policies and in village-level work to address gender issues:

'Empowering women and men in poor and disadvantaged communities to decide on the level of access to safe water they desire and enabling them to organise to obtain it' World Water Council 2000

Certainly, those working to improve water supplies have great potential to make an impact on the lives of poor women and men, through the provision of water in contexts where it is currently inadequate and unreliable, seriously hampering development and affecting the livelihoods of millions of people. Lack of appropriate water supplies affects many aspects of life, including productivity, health and education; while 'control over water is inevitably control over life and livelihoods'³, the converse is also true.

To achieve the potential of water in transforming lives the water sector has undertaken to meet the needs of poor women as well as men for water. It has also, through commitments to empowerment, undertaken to meet women's need to challenge and address the existing inequalities that determine male ownership and control of such a precious resource.

The water sector claims that interventions to improve domestic water supply have the best record for integrating gender issues into development work⁴. In the last decade, women's involvement and participation in water projects has increased greatly, and some claim that this has contributed to better project efficiency and the empowerment of women⁵. Planners and decision-makers are now committed to addressing gender issues and gender equity. Where they fail to address the subject better, they say it is only because they lack specialist knowledge or the tools for working effectively on gender issues⁶.

The findings from this research challenge these claims

There is very little evidence-based research informing discussions in the water sector on issues of gender. Much debate and discussion is based on short-term experiences and ideology. This paper uses field research to examine what actually happens in rural water projects, and how far these commitments at policy level are translated into development practice and improve the lives of poor women.



Key findings

In policies

The researchers found that definitions of gender being used in the water sector are weak

There are serious misunderstandings and simplifications in the definition and understanding of gender in the water sector. This was found at the international level, the national levels in India and Nepal, and amongst organisations implementing water projects.

The term 'gender' is often equated simply with women. Consequently, addressing gender has become equated with counting the numbers of women involved in meetings and water-user committees. The emphasis is on ensuring women's involvement, to improve the effectiveness of water projects. Women have been encouraged – in some cases pushed – to become involved in building water points, in health and hygiene related activities, and in water-users' committees. These activities are seen, by those promoting them, as empowering, enabling women to improve their position in their society.

The water sector, at all levels, sees women as a homogeneous group, not a group divided by class, caste, geography, religion or wealth. They largely understand women's roles in relation to water as providers of domestic drinking water; women are not seen as key users of water for production and

other activities, though many women do use water for such diverse purposes. Gender relations are separated from the wider social context, from norms and traditions, in policy and strategy documents; the water sector tries to address women's water needs and roles without any systematic analysis of the social constraints they face in making decisions or taking action.

Assumptions are made, because of this lack of analysis, that women are free to give time to participate in water projects. Projects assume that women are able to sustain long-term involvement in water committees, or that women can change household health and hygiene practices through learning about them themselves. Assumptions about women's involvement in and benefits from new income-generating projects are routinely applied, even in countries where caste is a dominant factor determining opportunities. Yet in many contexts, in and beyond this research work, women lack the time, skills, resources or power to fulfil all these anticipated achievements.

Gender is widely understood as a critical issue only at the community level. Few policies explore gender issues within organisations working in the water sector; few practitioners undertake gender analysis of water policies at the national and international levels:

*'There is a tendency in development programming and policy to compartmentalise gender issues to the micro level. All other institutional levels are seen as gender neutral'*⁷

The water sector seems to focus its efforts on gender in meeting women's practical needs for an improved water supply, and in finding ways to ensure efficiency and to increase impact through developing health and income packages alongside the improved water supply. The more strategic issues involved in women's subordination, exclusion, lack of representation in decision-making, and lack of access to and control over essential resources are largely seen as being beyond the remit of the water sector.

There are contradictions in policy at all levels

The researchers found discrepancies and contradictions in international water policies, in which economic growth, cost recovery and 'water as an economic good' are seen to be compatible with commitments to ensure access to water for all and to women's empowerment.

The Dublin principles moved water from being a common or public good to being an economic good



that needs to be regulated and distributed as efficiently as possible; charging for the use of water is an essential component of this approach. Charging for water is also linked to concepts of sustainability. However, in reality the poor cannot pay for the water they need; studies looking at the payments which poor people do make, undertaken to prove that they can pay, ignore many factors. They do not assess whether the poorest are able to acquire adequate water in that way, they do not explore what else is forfeited to buy water, and they do not analyse the gender breakdown of those who can and cannot pay for water.

There are many contradictions between a commitment to water for all and the principles of cost recovery, especially in a context where the water sector is encouraging privatisation and the private sector stands to make huge global profits. On the one hand, the private sector cannot make a profit in poor rural areas of India or Nepal, so it avoids these areas. On the other hand, women in these areas lack access to decision-making power over household resources and often cannot pay for the services they need. Poverty bites deep and the water sector glosses over its effects on the abilities of individuals and households to pay⁸. While some NGOs experiment with subsidies for the poorest, many apply cost recovery principles, claiming they are the only way to ensure careful water use and the sustainability of maintenance and repair in the long term.

Another area of contradiction concerns a focus on achieving high quantitative goals, to quickly increase coverage and supply, while claiming to also work in ways that ensure community participation. In reality, engineers can install water supplies, using a range of relatively simple technologies where these are appropriate, very quickly. Working with communities, especially if women are to be properly represented and involved, is often a much slower process. It often requires working to change traditional patterns or beliefs, building the confidence of women and the low castes, the very poorest, who have often previously been excluded from village affairs. This is especially so in remote villages, or in areas previously neglected by development agencies. The very real tension between moving fast to build water supplies and to meet targets, and the work needed to empower poor communities, and especially poor women, is ignored.

'We have never been involved in constructing or designing water systems here in the village. That is men's work. We do not know about rights to water. Land belongs to men. We do not know if we can say that a water point belongs to us. Decision making in public is men's task. That has never been our work, how can we go and talk about water with our elder males.'



The current focus of international water policy is that projects and programmes must be demand-led, not supply-led. While this sounds appropriate in theory, in practice it is hard to see how poor villages, the poorest and most needy people, who have little access to authority or local government are able to make any demands. This is especially the case in countries where hierarchies are rigid, and rural populations have low status and little political weight. The lack of formal education, confidence, and knowledge about rights amongst the poor, and the superior attitudes and high-handed behaviour of local and national governments, combine to prevent those most in need from making demands on donors, governments or NGOs.

Similar contradictions and incompatibilities are found in national domestic water policies, which are significantly influenced by international donor thinking in both national contexts, though one is donor-dependent (Nepal) and one is not (India). Indeed, such thinking is found from the international level of the big funders right down to local NGO project policy and planning, carrying within it contradictions that make addressing complex social relations and gender issues very difficult in practice. In addition, it should be noted that there

is no regulation of any kind at the national level of the private sector, in terms of social issues and gender inequalities. With much provision of water now being undertaken by private enterprises, it is of great concern that the wider policy commitments of the water sector to gender issues can be totally ignored by these major implementing agencies.

In practice

Amongst donors

While donors echo the international policy commitments to gender equity and water for all, and see water programmes as entry points for empowering women in communities, the dominant focus in practice is on the provision of water through engineering solutions. Gender is usually 'tagged-on', and the big challenge of understanding complex social realities and grappling with social change are sidelined. Engineering and technical issues, and targets for increasing supply, dominate the sector. Donors' evaluation guidelines require almost no monitoring of issues concerning gender-related access and participation, or the social impact of water projects. Donor monitoring consists almost entirely of counting numbers of water-points constructed, the flow of water, broad water-



coverage, in terms of villages served, and possibly issues of maintenance and cost recovery. Visits are rarely made beyond two years after project completion and long term data is not available about the impact of water on changing lives, especially amongst the poorest and most vulnerable within a village.

There is little health monitoring, even though many projects include health and hygiene components which are especially targeted at women. Donors appear to assume that the provision of water and hygiene education will lead to health benefits as well as economic benefits for women. Involving women in committees and meetings is assumed to lead to an improvement in their social standing and confidence, with resulting positive benefits on improved gender relations. Income-generating projects are assumed to be unproblematic and beneficial to the women involved. Issues concerning who controls water, who pays and who cannot pay, how long water-user committees last, whether women are able to use training that they have been given in health and hygiene, and how appropriate income-generating components are to women, are not evaluated.

Amongst implementing agencies

There are many barriers to implementing a gendered perspective amongst agencies trying to design and implement water interventions, in addition to the confusing policy messages coming from above. These include:

- The reality that grappling with complex social relations and inequalities is difficult, long-term and skilled work.
- Working with local women can be especially challenging, as many lack contact with outsiders, and the female staff needed to work with them may not exist (due to discrimination against girls' education) or may not be able to travel (because of family pressures).
- Agencies are often working to tight, donor-driven targets for increasing water supply.
- Meeting construction targets and spending budgets are goals that are valued more highly by donors than the work with local communities, which is often not part of the external monitoring system.
- Most water agencies are male-dominated, and often hierarchical; attention is paid to technical issues above social ones.

- There is a serious lack of female engineers, because of biased education systems and the traditionally gendered nature of engineering roles. The few there are appear often unable to challenge dominant work cultures, or to take a gendered approach to the provision of water.
- People charged with ensuring the social involvement of the poor, women and the excluded in these organisations are often in junior positions, or playing advisory roles which lie outside the line management. They may even be external consultants lacking any decision-making role and often without adequate budgets.

Water-focused organisations often have weak mechanisms and limited budgets for ensuring the effective participation of local people in project planning, design and implementation. Reaching women, especially the most disadvantaged women in communities, is often especially problematic. Staff often appear unaware of the many social barriers to women's participation, or the barriers facing women in accessing meetings, making decisions related to water, finding money to pay for water, controlling their own income, and influencing men in their household to change health and hygiene practices.

These are not easy issues to address; there are no simple solutions. Developing local understanding and building the confidence of local people, and finding ways to work with women and men to enable women to become involved and to address their position are complex tasks. Yet gender training is usually very limited, sporadic or ad-hoc; it is rarely long-term or consistent. It is seriously underfunded and given only a low priority. There is little follow-up or support for staff trying to work on these issues.

Within organisations, gender was again found to have been simplified to fit bureaucratic requirements, to make the work simpler and more standardised, easier and quicker to deliver. Gender has been depoliticised and little work is being done to address the attitudes and beliefs that staff bring to work. Yet many come from the most privileged class; leaders are mainly men, most of whom – with one or two notable exceptions – have almost no understanding of or sympathy for issues of gender equality. Neither women nor men are being systematically exposed to the challenges, realities and relevance of gender to their work.

In rural communities

Roles and responsibilities concerning water in local communities are gendered and most water projects

follow the existing gender divisions, keeping women in their appointed roles of managing, fetching and using water within the domestic sphere. Technological interventions, training in skills, work in the public sphere beyond drinking water, and decision-making remain largely with men. This is not recognised by agencies working with such communities, neither is the way that these inequalities and allocated roles are embedded in the wider community, including the staff of such organisations. The community is seen as a homogeneous entity, working altruistically for all members, but the reality is very different. Those privileged by class, caste and gender will gain control of the management and allocation of water, and local custom and belief uphold their dominance. Positions of advantage and disadvantage are reinforced by water projects, not challenged. This results in the poorest, often women, being excluded from access to water.

The field studies, especially in India, highlight the web of social relations and inequality in villages. These are largely shaped in that context by caste, religion and gender. Ignoring these issues, because of lack of commitment or time, means that in practice water projects exclude poor women from access and further marginalise the poorest and most disadvantaged.

“A walk across the village reveals that the socially stratified village community does not view or treat their water resources as a common good. Those disadvantaged by caste and class have historically been deprived of water and isolated from decisions about water management. Their voices are stifled, even when local water development interventions impact negatively on their water needs and rights...there is also a centrality of gender inequality in water allocation, management and use... women in certain disadvantaged groups are impacted on more severely than others by the lack of adequate, appropriate and reliable water...”

Researcher's comments on her field work in one Indian village

The results are far from those claimed by the water sector. Women are not actively involved in many aspects of water, barriers to their access at all levels are not being addressed and water projects are not contributing to equity or empowerment. The assumptions that women can pay for services



which they need, that their involvement leads to sustainable services, and also to social empowerment were found to be false and need revisiting in the light of concrete evidence drawn from this experience. The findings are similar in Nepal and India and show the weakness of the work on gender in the water sector.

These failings can be explained partly in terms of the focus of the water sector on the practical needs of women rather than their strategic needs. Agencies focus on increasing supply and women's involvement in water supply without addressing their social position, so preventing them from capitalising on the opportunities that new water supplies may offer. At the same time, these weaknesses can be explained in terms of the constant simplification by the water sector of the complex and entrenched social realities. Agencies' unwillingness to engage with these difficult, long-term issues, allows them to focus on project efficiency and to avoid issues of inclusion and empowerment.

'She is a single woman and she does not want to/cannot attend meetings' (Village committee president). Of the same woman the field staff said: *'to insist on the Dalit (lower caste) woman's representation would have antagonised the dominant higher caste community in the village. This would hamper completing the project in time, which was our major responsibility.'*

Her household was excluded from the improved water supply and subsidised sanitation which

most benefited from as a result of the project.

The field studies highlighted the flaws in many of the assumptions of the water sector. Income-generating activities do not prove empowering or enriching for women because they lack the necessary skills and access to markets; many did not have time for this work as time saved on water collection was used on other household tasks. Even where women did earn some money, men controlled and used the income. Lacking control over income, women are often unable to pay for water and so the commitment to cost recovery excludes them and the poorest in the local society from access to the improved supply. Working on construction or on water-users committees does not enable women to challenge their assigned water-related roles. Their access is confined to domestic water use, and those too marginalised or too poor are often excluded from access at all. The skills and experience that some of the women gained, usually the more affluent women, has not proved adequate to build their confidence and ability to a level where they feel able to challenge their circumscribed roles and access to water or their wider subordination and exclusion. Current 'blueprint' approaches prevent water agencies from engaging with the wider inequalities; this leads to their maintaining and sometimes even strengthening them, rather than challenging and perhaps even changing them.

Lessons for the future

At the policy level

Agencies working on water should not passively accept new policy directives from the top, wherever they are developed. They need to engage in active and challenging dialogue concerning policies. Problems and ambiguities need to be highlighted and discussed. Policies need to be measured against realities in practice, and dilemmas clearly illustrated. Current contradictions between a commitment to empower both the poor and women, and the focus on cost recovery and on water for growth, are serious. They cannot be ignored; they need to be confronted and resolved.

Clear definitions and understandings of gender are needed and gender must not be simply equated with women. Involving women must not be equated with efficiency and effectiveness. There is an urgent need for clarity about what addressing gender inequality and ensuring access for all means and implies at the international policy level. Evidence needs to be collected widely, to examine what has happened to women and gender relations under current water policies and project practices to ensure that future policies are rooted in actual experience.

Policies also need to recognise the inter-related nature of gender inequalities, and to highlight the need for the water sector to work with other sectors to address other aspects of women's subordination, especially their low levels of education and representation.

Donors

Donors need to grasp the political complexities of gender inequalities and to show political will to really grapple with these difficult issues. They need to provide adequate resources and time for working with poor women and men and the most marginalised groups, where women are always heavily represented, to ensure their effective participation in projects.

They need to demand proper monitoring and evaluation of policies and projects – whether implemented by government, NGOs or the private sector – that will help them to understand the social aspects of water projects. They need to ask for information on gender inequalities in relation to water and how these have been addressed. Long term monitoring of access to water, water use, and its impact on health and the economy locally, and the role of women in relation to these factors, must be monitored. Such data are essential for an improved understanding of the role of water and its potential in improving women's lives and positions. Where projects or programmes, or indeed the wider

sectoral approaches are failing in these objectives, attention needs to be paid to reshaping these strategies and activities to ensure that gender issues are addressed.

Agencies

Organisations need to build a stronger understanding of these issues within their staff, and to ensure those charged with working on equality and poverty issues have the authority and voice within the organisation which they need to do their job.

Organisations need to ensure that there is a genuine commitment to confronting difficult issues of inequality, and the cultural norms that uphold them. Staff have to address their own values and beliefs in order to advance work in this area.

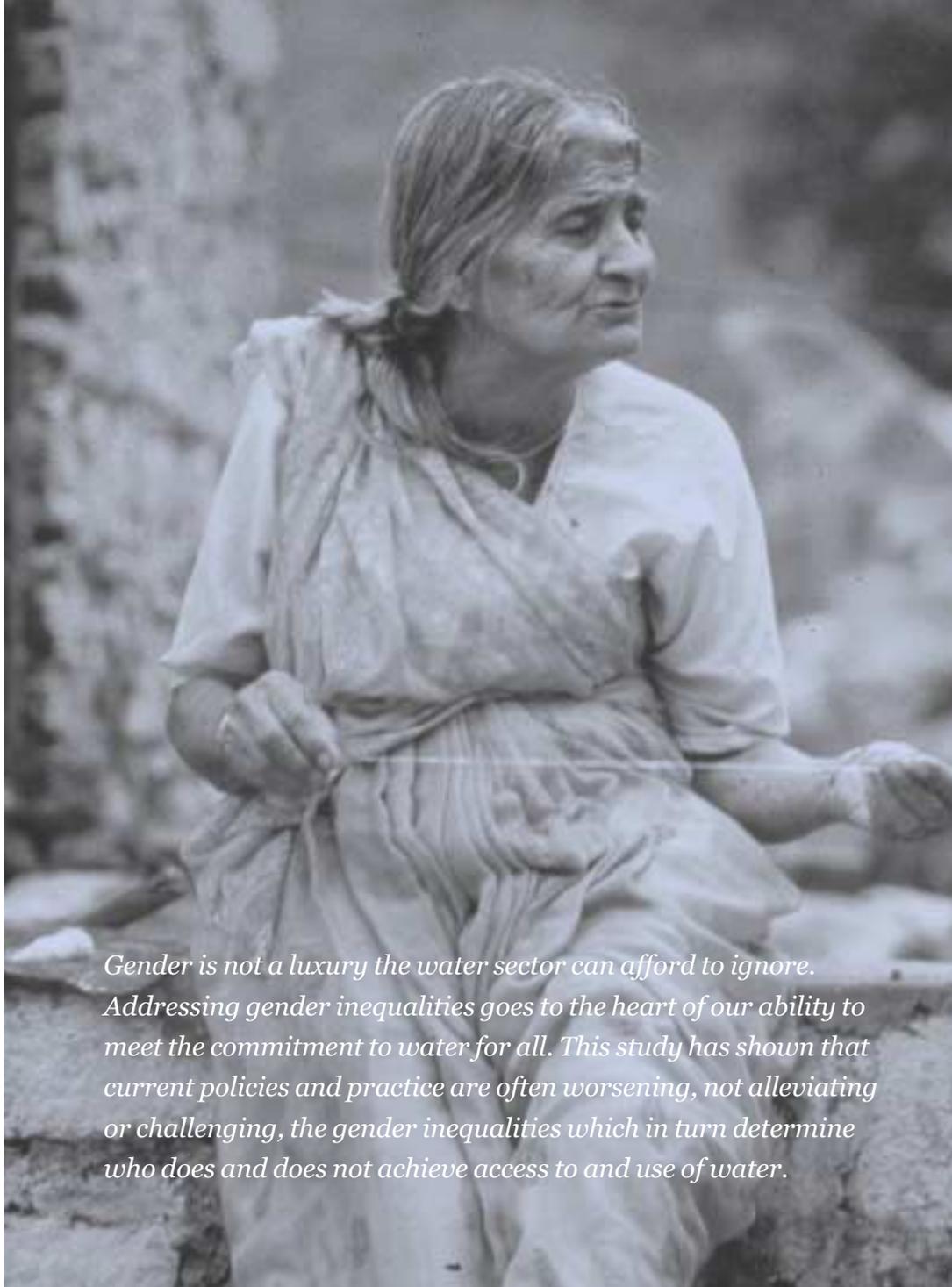
The research in Nepal suggested a range of criteria against which organisations could assess their gender work; they provide a helpful guide to the range of issues which organisations need to address in order to be more effective in this complex work.

Organisations need:

- To understand how their policies are generated and to ensure that gender is considered at this critical stage.
- To assess how well these policies are reflected in strategies and objectives, and in the organisational structure, culture and management style.
- To review their recruitment and personnel policies to ensure that women have access to jobs, and that both women and men are gender aware.
- To look at their incentive structures and to find ways to reward community level and gender-related work.
- Good gender training systems for all, and support for those working on gender.
- To assess how their resources and power are allocated, and find ways to support those acting as positive change agents. They need to provide a positive environment for women staff working with women at the grassroots, and to listen to their needs and concerns.
- To examine their relations with other agencies to see how they promote (or not) gender issues.

At the community level

A commitment is needed to work in ways that involve everyone in each community in project activities. This will involve employing women staff who are able to work with and mobilise women, both poor and less poor. It will require time to



Gender is not a luxury the water sector can afford to ignore. Addressing gender inequalities goes to the heart of our ability to meet the commitment to water for all. This study has shown that current policies and practice are often worsening, not alleviating or challenging, the gender inequalities which in turn determine who does and does not achieve access to and use of water.

allow them to build the confidence and involvement of local women, and men. Staff must be trained and supported to work alongside those prepared to challenge the traditions and cultural norms that lead to the exclusion and marginalisation of people by gender, age, class, caste, wealth and ability. Time is needed to work properly on these issues at this level. Social relations cannot easily be made to fit within restricted timetables and engineering schedules; they are long-term development issues and processes. Staff need to have the skills and the space to work with people's hopes and fears, to identify their opportunities and

constraints and to find ways to increase women's power and involvement. It will involve working alongside men to address issues of gender and social inequalities.

Local staff and local people, women and men, must be seen as the key resources in making the changes needed to ensure that everyone has access to new water supplies, and that women's traditional position and roles are not reinforced by these external interventions. This means that blueprint approaches should be abandoned. Much more sensitive listening to the needs and realities within each village, and even within each household, is required.

Endnotes

¹ **Deepa Joshi,**

'Water, Hindu mythology and an unequal social order.' Paper presented at the Second Conference of the International Water History Association, Bergen, Norway, August 2001. Other relevant research papers written by Deepa Joshi on her research are 'Water projects and women's empowerment', paper presented at 27th WEDC Conference, Lusaka, Zambia, August 2001; 'Voices from below', a paper presented at the Alternative Water Forum, Bradford, UK, May 2003.

² **Veronica Strang,**

'Taking the waters: cosmology, gender and material culture in the appropriation of water sources.' Paper presented to International Gender Studies, Seminar series, Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford, 2001.

³ **K. Wittfoegl,**

Oriental despotism. Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

⁴ **K. Athukorola,**

'The need for gender analysis in strategic planning for effective water management in Sri Lanka.' 'Water Resources Development, Volume 12, No. 4, 1996.

⁵ These claims and those that make them are analysed in writing by Frances Cleaver. See for example, Frances Cleaver and Diane Elson, 'Women and water resources: continued marginalisation and new policies.' International Institute for Environment and Development, Gatekeeper Series, No. 49 1995.

⁶ The search for tools as the key to issues of gender is evident in the writing and work of the Gender and Water Alliance, formed in 2000 to lobby the 2nd World Water Forum and other water forums on gender issues.

⁷ **Naila Kabeer,**

Reversed realities: gender hierarchies in development thought. London: Verso, 1994.

⁸ **Shibesh Regmi and Ben Fawcett,**

'Integrating Gender Needs into Drinking Water Projects in Nepal', Gender and Development, an Oxfam Journal, Vol. 7, No. 3, November 1999.

Other relevant papers by Shibesh Regmi are 'Water supplies, gender relations and sustainability: some lessons from Nepal.' A paper presented at a workshop on 'Men, masculinities and gender relations in development', organised by the University of Bradford and Oxfam at Queen Elizabeth House, UK, 9-10 June 2000; 'Gender implications of the move from supply-driven to demand-driven approaches in the drinking water sector: A developing country perspective'. A paper presented at the First South Asia Forum for Water, 26-28 February, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2001; 'Imperialism, privatisation of water and its impact on poor and marginalised people, especially women' (forthcoming paper for ActionAid).

This summary of research findings has been written by Tina Wallace, synthesising the extensive material in the PhD theses of Deepa Joshi and Shibesh Regmi.

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All photographs are by Shukla Mitra, taken in Pithoragarh district, Uttaranchal, India.



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