



Want progress in water? Let women lead

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- Women are the often “unseen” agents of change at the grassroots.
- Their experience and leadership need to be scaled up to the national level.
- Water resilience requires real, not token, participation and leadership by women.
- Women are on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19, but need more support.

Women are on the frontline trying new farming practices and crops to adapt to a changing climate. Women planting rice in Khavre District Nepal, 2015.
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An IWRA webinar on Women and Resilience in the Water Sector on 27 May 2020 examined the central role women play on the frontline of water crises, and how decision-makers should learn from their experience.

WOMEN BEAR THE BURDENS

Women bear the burden of solving wicked water problems, often literally. In many countries, they collect clean water, often at long distances and over difficult terrain; they keep families safe with WASH practices; and they take the risks from insecure or non-existent toilet facilities. They are responsible for watering their farmland and keeping streams clean.

Since 1992, international agreements such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development have recognised the central role women should play in generating change in the way water is used, shared and allocated.

But despite supporting the principle of full participation, legal, regulatory and institutional frameworks in practice leave little room for women to contribute to planning and decision-making. Evidence that women's voices are being heard is thin on the ground.

WOMEN ARE THE AGENTS OF CHANGE

Without women's input, SDG 5 and 6 targets will be impossible to reach. Yet research usually focuses on how policies affect women, as if they are only passive victims. This misses the big picture where women are also driving change. Their strong capacity to cope with natural disasters such as drought and flood, as well as water-related health matters, is because they are the ones on the ground who understand the challenges and get on with solving them.

Women are often innovators in adapting farming practice and crops, and leading mitigation efforts such as planting trees. But their activities are rarely recognised for what they are: when they plant trees, it is not recognised as integrated water resource management (IWRM); when they explore new crops, it is not recognised as ensuring food security in a warming, drying climate.

Women's efforts are too often dismissed as 'hobbies' rather than taken seriously. Women's organisations struggle to get funding for small-scale projects that will make a real, lasting difference at the local level. These small-scale projects then have the potential to be scaled up, based on what women have already tried and tested, and know will work.



WOMEN MUST PARTICIPATE AT ALL LEVELS

Participation is generally measured merely by counting women present in a forum, rather than weighing their influence in shaping priorities. Qualitative as well as quantitative evaluation is essential.

Participation has four levels: sharing information; seeking advice (consultation); pursuing common objectives (collaboration aligning strategies and inputs); and systematically integrated decision-making, resources and actions.

Decision-makers rarely go beyond levels one and two. The information shared is often inadequate, and women's advice is sought only after decisions have already been made and priorities determined.

Women discuss how best to use an early flood warning system installed by ICIMOD, Nepal 2017.
© Karen Conniff

Women bear the burden of solving wicked water problems.



Well Attendant, Katosi, Uganda.
© Katosi Women Development Trust

Official declarations recognise women and water as a priority. Yet in practice women are too often an afterthought when governments and agencies negotiate Official Development Assistance (ODA) contracts with donors, so only extremely small amounts of financial support reach women's groups and programs.

WOMEN NEED TO BE "SEEN" IN THE DATA

Women's participation in the water sector is poorly understood, especially in water scarce areas. Little is known about how water scarcity affects their capacity to fulfill their responsibilities as farmers, businesswomen and as household heads making critical decisions such as how to avoid involuntary migration from drought-stricken regions.

Academic data collection masks the nature and significance of women's contributions. Sample sizes are too small to be conclusive on their own, and nuance is lost when data is aggregated. Most women's work is unpaid or voluntary, so does not show up in statistics.

'Citizens data', such as anecdotal information, may be less statistically reliable, but in sufficient quantity will show significant trends – for example, not just whether women were present, but whether their advice was acted on.

WOMEN ARE ON THE FRONT LINE OF THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

Women bear primary responsibility for their families' access to safe water and sanitation, but the COVID-19 pandemic is testing their endurance under already difficult circumstances.

Hygiene is critical to preventing the spread of the virus, but 40 per cent of the global population lacks access to clean water and soap at home. Having ill people in the household accelerates the need for clean water five-fold.

Data on infection rates and access to water are not disaggregated by gender. The pandemic's employment, health and cultural

"Women are the frontline in fighting this pandemic. They are carrying water long distances to ensure everyone can wash their hands. They are the ones who should participate in change management and inform policy."
Nchedi Sophia Maphokga-Moripe
(South Africa)

impacts are not gender-blind. Women are disproportionately represented in job losses, for example, reducing the household capacity to pay for clean water and other water services.

Supply chains are also disrupted as traders do not visit villages to buy produce, leaving women without income for household necessities such as water services. Government food support is not enough for large rural families comprised largely of babies, the sick, old and disabled.

Yet the pandemic is an opportunity to reset priorities, by focusing fiscal stimulus on the water infrastructure and programs women need. For example, many households get the WASH message but lack soap and water. Women entrepreneurs could produce more soap locally, but need support. A major unmet need for women commuting between work and home on foot is clean water and sanitation including handwashing facilities along highways.

A WELL-INFORMED WOMAN IS A RESILIENT WOMAN

The internet is awash with information on what to do in water-related disasters. Yet more than 40 per cent of women have no internet access, or even a mobile phone. Even if they could get online, information is often in languages they do not understand, or only written, when many of these women have not yet learned to read.

Authorities need to communicate better in other ways. They also need to do better gathering and disseminating women's ideas on how to cope. Resilience is about providing relevant information, including on alternatives at the right time in the context of the community women are living in. It also requires empowering women to act.

Women need to be engaged in generating citizen data from the grassroots. Citizen data can contribute to policy position papers, programs and projects to address challenges as diverse as climate risk management, WASH in wetlands, dam safety, food and water security. Ugandan and South Sudanese women, for example, can supply insights into transboundary cooperation and access, as they are forced to migrate between countries in search of water.



*“Don’t get sad – get mad!
Seize the day!”*

Kusum Athukorala (Sri Lanka)

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP NEEDS MORE THAN EMPTY WORDS

Words are no longer enough. Governments, agencies and donors must act to make gender equality and women's participation a reality. Women's leadership needs to be valued, and their knowledge used to shape cooperative planning and decision-making to drive change.

A crisis is a good time to challenge the status quo, to create a more inclusive, more supportive social contract. Donors must be influenced to fund those women's organisations with a record of practical achievement. Policies and legislation that only pay lip service to women's participation must be given teeth, monitored and enforced.

With no running water at home, women rely on ancient communal stone taps in Patan Nepal, 2018
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WATCH THE WEBINAR

The IWRA Women & Resilience in the Water Sector webinar can be viewed online here: www.iwra.org/womenandresilienceinwater-webinar/

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