
UNIFEM AT A GLANCE

Women and Water

Women are most often responsible for domestic and community water management in developing societies, being in charge of determining sources, quantity and hygienic quality. Often they travel great distances in search of water, which limits their time for other activities, including growing and preparing food and income generating work: On average women and children travel 10–15 kilometres [1], spending 8 or more hours per day collecting water and carrying up to 20 kilos or 15 litres per trip [2]. It has been calculated that in South Africa alone, women collectively walk the equivalent distance of 16 times to the moon and back per day gathering water for families [3]. The economic value of this unpaid contribution is enormous: In India it is estimated that women fetching water spend 150 million work days per year, equivalent to a national loss of income of 10 billion rupees [4].

Water is critical for household care and nutritional health. It is generally agreed that a minimum of 20–40 litres of freshwater is required per person and day to meet minimum drinking and sanitation needs. Women also provide water for domestic livestock and poultry as well as for crop irrigation — 1,000 litres of water are required to grow one kilogram of grain [5]. Women, particularly poor women, also use water for productive purposes, including for small-scale industries and micro-businesses, often household-based [6].

When women's access to water is restricted due to distance, time constraints or economic factors, they are often obliged to accept lower-quality water. This is a particularly frightening alternative given that 80 per cent of all illnesses are transmitted by contaminated water [7]. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee has underlined that the health of rural women often crucially depends on adequate and non-discriminatory access to water [8].

The Cost of Privatization

Given women's central role in water management, the privatization of water is of crucial concern for women worldwide, as it often results in significant cost increases which may result in water no longer being affordable for the poor. The attempt at water privatization in Cochabamba, Bolivia, for example, was abandoned after increases of 200 per cent and more led to massive public protests.

The potential impact of water privatization has led to increased attention at the international level: In November 2002, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stressed that states "should ensure that the allocation of water resources, and investments in water, facilitate access to water for all members of society" [9].

This was the result of a long process of activism around the world and through major contributions by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water who strongly recommended that water management be subject to public regulation and supervision, and governments "take

all necessary measures to enable the poorest people to enjoy this right, which is vital for all human beings. The right to drinking water must be considered a non-derogable right” [10]. The Special Rapporteur further indicated that “States are generally obliged to take action to facilitate access to water and sanitation, and, as a matter of priority, to implement the principle of some for all rather than more for some” [11]. While this does not imply that the State must directly provide safe, accessible drinking water to each household or person, it does mean that the State bears ultimate responsibility for ensuring that each person has access to the amount of water required to sustain their life and fulfil basic needs.

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To highlight women’s access to resource issues, and deepen understanding of the impact of economic policies on poor women, UNIFEM is planning to undertake advocacy and participatory research on women’s access to water in Bolivia and Uganda. This effort will enable women and their networks to document the socio-economic impacts on poor women and their communities of policies that affect the conditions under which water is made available.

Notes

[1] <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/152-497b/h2o/water/gwater/wfacts.htm>

[2] Bulajic Borjana, Women’s roles – a policy overview, *Waterline*, vol.17, no.1, July 1998, p7.

[3] Maude Barlow and Tony Clark, *Water Apartheid*, *The Nation*, 15 August 2002.

[4] As reported in: Jal Swaraj Abhiyan (Campaign for Water Liberation), NAVDANYA/Research Foundation for Science, Technology & Ecology. Equivalency: US\$1 = 48.1 rupees.

[5] According to UN Economic and Social Council Report.

[6] Gender and Water Listserve message 10.

[7] Population Report No.14.

[8] CEDAW General Recommendation #24, “Women and Health.”

[9] Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights for the Covenant on Economic, Social and Economic Rights, General Comment No.15, E/C,12/2002/11, Geneva 26 November 2002.

[10] *Ibid.*, para. 48.

[11] Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Water, UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/2002/10 (2002), para. 33.