

## **STRATEGIC GENDER NEEDS: THE MISSING ELEMENT IN WATER SUPPLY PROJECTS OF NEPAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the involvement of women in rural drinking water supply projects installed by Non-Government Organisations (NGO), International Non-Government Organisations (INGO) and Government Organisations (GO) in order to fulfill practical and strategic needs of women. Information was obtained from a household survey, group discussions and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) conducted in the western region of Nepal. This research concluded that in comparison to INGO projects, women in NGO and GO-installed projects had less involvement and fulfilment of practical and strategic needs which reduced the active women participation in the DWS projects of the mid-hills of Nepal.*

### **Introduction**

Nepal has a geographical diversity, from the low, flat north-Indian plain of the Terai, to the highest mountains in the world, in the Himalayan chain, is accompanied by cultural and religious diversity. The variety of attitudes towards women and their roles, combined with Nepal's geographical and socio-economic diversity, results in work division and social hierarchy in which there are marked differences in the involvement of development activities in rural areas. It has been widely demonstrated in numerous studies that many policies and strategies for the community development are not based on a clear understanding of the gender dimensions (Shrestha, 1994; Osman, 2002; Clifton and Gell 2001). Consequently, the formulation and implementation of such policies and programmes most often fail to improve the lives of women and their families, and may worsen their situation.

The development initiated from the national government, donors, and international agencies that aimed to empower the women and enhance livelihood are not becoming effective as their objectives. It creates the psychological dissatisfaction and provides additional burden in the name of participatory development. Women, many critics argue, are those most likely to lose out, finding themselves and their interests marginalised 'participatory' processes (Guijt & Kaul, 1998; Moser, 1993). Community leaders decided the number of days one has to contribute for the development without wage, which is critical for female-headed families and poor (Bhandari, 2001; CERID, 1997; Mahat, 2001).

Significant progress in accessibility of piped-water supply has taken place between 1980 and 2000 in the rural areas of Nepal. Reports and documents of supporting agencies of Drinking Water Supply (DWS) projects claimed that they considered a 'people-centered'

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participatory approach and involve extensive participation of women while making intervention in the community. Efforts to promote participation and gender equality in development have a different dimension (Cornwall, 2003). Gender and Development (GAD) emerged as an alternative to liberal Women in Development (WID) in which women seek to transform gender inequities. Government reports (2001) show that the intensive participation of women in drinking water projects have significant impact in the livelihood and contribute to keep projects sustainable.

In the beginning water projects tended to focus almost exclusively on physical works. The people for whom they were intended were mere users or beneficiaries. Gradually this thinking changed during 1981 at the beginning of the UN decade for water and sanitation (Facett & Regmi, 1999). It was then recognised that community participation was a key component for implementation of rural drinking water supply projects. However, community participation was largely led by men and women were involved in physical works (Fernando 1994). Gender is the social and changeable difference in power between men and women in a particular social situation (Scott, 1989; Wieringa, 1998, Shrestha 1994). A holistic and gender-sensitive approach is critical for water management and sustainable development. To attain this there is need for attitudinal and structural change in the management of human, natural and financial resources at the policy level; there is also an urgent need for more reliable gender disaggregated data – as well as the development of gender-sensitive indicators (Facett & Regmi, 1999).

The efficiency and effectiveness of community managed DWS projects are strongly influenced by different gender roles, needs and incentives. The sustainability of programmes can be attributed to the successfulness of assessing the different roles and needs of women and men (Shrestha, 1994, Verma, 1989). Within this context, understanding of indigenous systems is dependent on gender analysis; for example, analysis of practical and strategic needs, how are

decisions made and who is involved in what, who has access to resources, what are the different uses of water and waste, what are the roles and responsibilities of women and men and what is the overall cultural context of a given community- which influences the entire management structure or process. As found elsewhere (Devasis, 1998) the research on women involvement revealed that village women have a great initiation capacity and an always-positive attitude towards development. In comparison with men, village women were more practical and they dared to participate in experiments, especially in the procurement of water and better health care.

Communication plays a central role in any successful approach to community development. There is no lack of technologies and scientific discoveries, which could bring about economic growth and rural development but the main problem is the lack of effective communication strategies and methods (Mustanoja, 1998; Rosenberg, 1999). Determining indicators to practical and strategic gender needs is a complicated task, as the condition of development agencies at a given time and place is an outcome of complex interactions of project staff and user groups that may vary from staff motivation, socio-economic status of projects area and attitude of water users. However, in this study, levels of information and communication, women capability and change in gender work division are taken, as indicators for the assessment of gender needs.

### **Women's Access to Information and Communication**

Virtually all DWS-installed agencies intended to provide information through using effective tools like awareness campaigns, newspapers and audio-visio media. Rural people become aware by listening to others and understanding their views. Thus, the ability to communicate is a fundamental step of empowerment. Women in rural areas of Nepal have insufficient access to get information from radio and newspapers. Women from NGO and GO areas have less access with respect to attending meetings

and seminars due to an overload of household chores plus a fear that they would not be able to understand what was being said and that they would have little to contribute (group discussion, 2004). In principle the participatory approach for community development emphasises women's empowerment but due to time and resources constraints, interventions have not achieved expected changes on women's livelihood. This study depicts that a woman's accessibility to public meetings, conflict resolution, newspapers, and radio are significantly higher in INGO-installed DWS areas compared to GO and NGO-installed projects. INGO working area has different post-literacy groups and they have collection of wall newsletters and INGO publications that assist to provide information to women. Due to insufficient support from external development agencies, women in NGO and GO project areas are lagging behind.

Awareness can be enhanced due to access to both formal and informal information through media and communication. The staff from GO and NGO entirely depend on the information of key persons of the project area and believe that their message will be circulated by the attendee to all members of the community. Unfortunately, people have fewer tendencies to convey meeting decisions to other family members. This study shows that only one-third of the households' members conveyed the details of meeting conclusions to all members of the family. Moreover, GO and NGO-installed areas had less tendency to convey messages to other household members which also served to reduce women participation. Since prototype designs are used in GO-installed DWS projects, users' participation in planning and decision-making is poor. Furthermore, implementing agencies have time constraints to complete the project, which compel them to provide limited latitudinal choices to users.

**Table 1: Communication practices within households**

Description	NGO-Installed DWS(N = 40)	INGO-Installed DWS(N =50)	GO-Installed DWS(N =50)	Total (N=140)
Communication practice of meeting decision to other family members	12 (30.0%)	31 (62.0 %)	7 (14.0 %)	50 (35.7 %)
Written correspondence by females to community development supporting agencies	2 (5%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)	8 (6%)

Significant difference at .01 confidence level (Chi-square value = 35.93, d. f. = 2,  $P < .01$ )

INGO-installed areas have relatively higher awareness about communication compared to others. Much depends upon the performance and quality of field staff who organised community meetings. The male dominant society of the mid-hills provides less preference to women and other junior household members and this practice is inherently accepted within the society. NGO and GO-installed areas have lower incidence in conveying meetings' conclusions to other members (Table 1). These men felt that a public matter was not important or

relevant to other women members. Such a dogmatic practice deprived female members of information, which is virtually, power. In the context of DWS, lack of dissemination of information to all users means that there was less motivation to participation in water issues. INGO projects women mentioned that training and information are primarily required for the men of this area to ensure to motivate them to share women's household chores and then women will get opportunity to participate in social activities.

Furthermore, this study shows that only six per cent (N=140) of rural women were involved in official letter writing to do with public works. This is extremely poor given that men and women are equally informed about technology options, service-level of the project, social impact and health consequences in the initial stage of the project. Low national female literacy rate, less opportunity in social activities and workloads are the prime factors to less women involvement with supporting agencies in official affairs. All implementing agencies have limited time and budget frame to finish installation works which leads to rush to complete projects. Practice has shown that DWS were designed in the district headquarters and installed within the fixed time-frame. Women from GO project mentioned that no body asked them about the quality of new source, after completion of the project they found that water taste is not good compared to their traditional water source; therefore, they are not interested to involve in the activities of WUC.

INGOs have a practice to hold preliminary discussions with the concerned beneficiaries about the need for safe drinking water and sanitation and their impact in human health, technology used in water supply and sharing of project cost and responsibility of maintenance and operation. However, women of INGO projects mentioned that they felt uncomfortable in participating in the presence of seniors, relatives and a majority of men at the meeting. On the other hand, GO projects organised meetings with elite and local leaders of the project area during the feasibility and detailed engineering survey. Only few women know about the planning and expenditure of water supply projects. Women of this area believe that senior men or leader of community are champion for dealing with outside persons (Agency staff) who provide assistance to them. NGO staff have tried to encourage women of the project areas for fulfilment of the participatory process without the provision of follow-up and monitoring.

It has been well recognised that information is power and that skilled people perform

tasks more efficiently than unskilled people. Thus for meeting the women's strategic gender need the flow of information and training to develop the necessary skills to enhance their capacities to use and maximise the benefits of their own participation is sought in the rural areas of Nepal.

### **Project Intervention Versus Increased Women Capability**

Awareness training programmes and trainings are essential in rural communities, which are characterised by low access to education, health, and any income opportunities and services. Introduction, adoption, operation and finally internalisation of modern appropriate technologies are essential for community development (Manikutty, 1997). The project reports and documents show that before, during and after interventions, DWS installation supporting agencies concentrated on facilitation such as training, observation tours, workshops and seminars. The careful consideration of exactly who receives what type of training and education and the duration of both is crucial to sustain the project on a long-term basis. In the study areas women reported that there is a lot of potential technology or terminology in water supply technician training, which is posing difficulties for the newly literate rural people. It was found that English terminology frequently used by the technicians during the implementation and training phases was difficult for women to grasp and remember. Agencies need to keep this in mind and use simple and locally friendly terms and language.

Because women are the most vulnerable people in remote areas of the country, INGO are conducting gender awareness programmes to reduce the domestic workload of women to enhance their self-confidence in society. Poster and leaflets with the message of sanitation, importance of safe drinking water and natural resources are the main tools used by INGO for the awareness raising. Some non-formal education materials were also designed in order to bring awareness raising on health and nature that distributed in the non-formal education class. On the other hand, GO agencies provided poster

and leaflets in district headquarters, which have less access to rural people. NGOs usually made connection with government office to distribute informative posters and pamphlets in the

meetings and workshops. Women from the GO projects remarked that colourful posters are usually used for the decoration of tea-shops and groceries; nobody takes the messages written in it.

**Table 2: Improvement of women's status (after project intervention) as assessed by the respondents – replies in the positive**

Women's status	NGO (N=40)	INGO (N=50)	GO (N=50)	Total respondents (N=140)
Women as decision-makers on behalf of their family (community and household)	26 (65%)	40 (80%)	18(36%)	84 (60%)
Have opportunity to attend social meetings	20 (50%)	38 (76%)	16(32%)	74 (53%)
Increased knowledge about health and sanitation	30 (75%)	45(90%)	27(54%)	102 (73%)
Women's increased control over their own fertility	15 (38)	26 (52%)	15(30%)	56 (40%)
No discrimination between son and daughter for education and training	32 (80%)	44 (88%)	40(80%)	116 (83%)
Training opportunity in particular DWS-related technical issues	4 (10%)	8(16%)	0	12 (8.6%)

Because as a large number of men migrated to seek jobs in urban centres and abroad, the decision power, particularly in household and community development affairs, shifted to women. Water users from INGO supported areas realised that gender relations have changed to some degree over the last few years due to different awareness activities launched in their community by the INGO (Table 2). Many factors have changed the balance between women and men decision-making and reduced the gap between the influence men and women wield. About three-fourths of the total respondents agreed that education is the most important factor which has contributed to the improvement of their positions. Women's development activities are emphasised by the government, such as the celebration of women's day, formation of savings groups and female health workers in villages have less impact in order of their proposed activities. Lack of road links up to district headquarters, inadequate budget within the department and remoteness are the prime reasons for not enabling government agencies to carry out projects effectively in rural areas. On the other

hand, NGO and INGOs say that they are working with rural people in limited period of time, which was often approved by the government; therefore, they have compulsion to hand over after the completion of project.

Women's position refers to women's social and economic standing in relation to men. The women in the INGO areas were able to challenge the belief system which legitimises their subordination, and to analyse their own situations and problems. Village people realised that significant improvement in their leadership qualities and decision-making power is accrued in women compared to past decades. Group discussion with the GO supported projects women mentioned that GO staff were given less preference to young unmarried women, who are literate and active compared to old age women, while recruiting for maintenance and operation training since they have high chance to go away from the village after getting marriage. It implies that the role of field technical staff also plays a crucial role in the upliftment of women livelihood.

The Lutheran project (INGO) has implemented a DWS project with other non-formal education programmes and income generation activities. These activities became popular among the women of the project areas and brought positive changes to their lives. During the interviews, one of the women, a beneficiary of an INGO-installed project area, explained her experience with the project's intervention.

### **Voice of Suntali**

Suntali KC is a 42 year-old woman. She has a big tea and sweet shop on the way to Baglung-Kharbang at Malma VDC in this study area. She graduated from the post-literacy class, which was conducted by the Lutheran project. According to her, the health behaviour of people has been changed after adult non-formal education (NFE) programme, which were conducted in the preparation phase of DWS project. She said that she could remember the situation of this geographically isolated and backward community eight years ago. At that time people used to suffer from many water-borne and other infectious diseases. She said that during the monsoon the incidence of water-borne disease was particularly high and she remembers that horrible incident in the monsoon of 1992 when hundreds of people, who did not have access to safe drinking water, died from gastro-enteritis and other water-borne diseases.

In our society, pregnant women especially suffered from anemia due to lack of knowledge and nutritious food. They did not go to the hospital, which took two days walking from the village. People believed that sickness happened due to their fate, and that God controlled everything in their lives. The only solution was consultation with traditional healers and the sacrifice of cocks and ducks to God for healing. Alcoholism was a major problem involving both men as consumers and women as sellers. After the intervention of Lutheran project, the situation has gradually changed. Through literacy classes they have realised the importance of health and sanitation and adopted preventive measures. Now other community people also realise the impor-

tance of using toilets and gradually people are starting to construct pit latrines near their houses

Suntali K.C. was an example to others when she gave up smoking after she joined the literacy class. She learned how to write and do simple mathematics at the class. Therefore, she is now able to handle such a big shop.

In fact the Lutheran project had made a visible contribution to the community by initiating DWS projects. Our people did not expect it would be possible to bring water from such a difficult and distant source. All women participated to complete this project. Now we are responsible to take care of the maintenance and operation of this project. Men are the secondary users of water supply therefore, they do not worry much when tap-stands are not functioning. We are the prime users, therefore, we formed user committees for each tap-stand to look after the tap-stands and keep cleanliness around it. If any genuine repairs were required, we contacted the WUC and village maintenance workers for additional assistance. In conclusion, I believe that Lutheran has changed the overall situation of this community and now people have become aware of health and development issues. I thought that this type of development should be implemented in other areas. (Source: Personal Communication, 2004)

### **Changes in the Gender Division of Labour**

Most cultures have strong beliefs and values which favour cleanliness and practices intended to prevent water supply source pollution. This study shows that women of the INGO-installed area are more conscious about the sanitation and hygiene. Therefore, women are particularly involved in the cleanliness around the tap-stands (Table 3). They formed tap-user groups in each tap-stand, which is responsible to take care of tap-stands as well as cleanliness around them. This type of practice is available only in INGO-installed projects. In the group discussion with NGO project area, women complained that the designs of water tap-stands do not favour women. According to custom, they do not take bath in an open public tap-stand. Moreover, they

have additional problems during the period of menstruation. When a few women raised their problem during the construction period and suggested construction of a boundary wall for privacy, nobody listened to their voices. Men argued that this would raise the cost of the project and community contributions would increase tremendously.

Even though conservative norms and culture are declining gradually in rural area, however, women are inhibited from unfettered mobility. Women are involved only in providing muscle power, i.e., collecting local materials, trenching for pipeline and carrying construction materials in GO and NGO projects (Table 3). Women's involvement in finance is often overlooked. This study shows that no women were involved in account keeping and they also had less involvement in decision-making issues. At

the rural community, the attitude towards having women handling money varies—some committees seem to feel women are more trustworthy than men, but on the other hand feel that they are too softhearted to handle pressures. Illiteracy, workloads and hesitation to accept accountability are major reasons of deprivation in managerial as well as financial involvement.

According to the men's perceptions on women falling behind or limited in the decision making and finance issues are: First, women have less access than men to information and education. Secondly, they have less access to technology, which can be used in the project or daily system. Thirdly, due to extreme poverty, women-headed households are in the most vulnerable positions when their husbands migrate, when they are seriously ill for a long time or when they die.

**Table 3: Women's high involvement in muscle power**

Statements	in percentage					
	NGO Projects (N=5)		INGO Projects (N=5)		GO Projects (N=5)	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Account keeping	100	0	100	0	100	0
Management of work	75	25	65	35	90	10
Collection of maintenance fund	80	20	70	30	95	5
Solving problems during construction and O&M	75	25	65	35	100	0
Transportation of construction materials	40	60	50	50	40	60
Collection of local materials and transportation	40	60	50	50	40	60
Pipe trench digging work	40	60	50	50	40	60
Access to maintenance kits	90	10	60	40	100	0
Call for meetings	80	20	70	30	90	10
Cleaning around tap-stands	20	80	60	40	20	80

This study shows that 56 per cent (N=140) of migrants for the search of job had put the decision power on the shoulders of women. On the other hand, the entire burden of agriculture works and child surveillance also shifted to the women. WUC of GO and NGO projects mentioned that women have so many house chores and are not able to work on technical jobs like water maintenance and operation. INGO user groups commented that males are interested to take maintenance training during the water

scheme installation but later on they leave community in search of high paid jobs. Water maintenance works is occasional and not attractive in terms of an incentive, which is one of the reasons of projects dysfunctioning.

This scenario of gender inequality in the project area reflects the lesson that the implementing agencies have failed to introduce gender planning in the initial stage. The objective of gender planning is reducing women's triple roles and enhancing women's access to resources.

Therefore, the concerned agency should be aware of the practical and strategic gender needs to enhance gender equality in the society.

### Conclusions

Women's participation has received considerable rhetoric, but there has been less careful attention paid to women's strategic needs and priorities with regard to resource use, and barriers women face in achieving control over resources, especially within local organisations. Women from NGO and GO project areas have less opportunity to access information about preventive health and sanitation awareness. Women's participation is less in the beginning stage of DWS projects, detailed survey and the process of decision making which is crucial to increase performance of DWS projects. Empowerment of women in order to increase decision-making within household events, impartially dealing with sons and daughters and knowledge about sanitation has significantly increased after the intervention of the project. However, training opportunities particularly for DWS related issues are critical in GO and NGO project areas, which is of utmost importance to sustain a project's function and sustainability.

Water supply project is a basic infrastructure. However, this technological intervention in isolation is not a solution for the fulfilment of practical and strategic gender needs to improve their living standards. It is to be integrated with different other programmes activities at local, regional and national level. Regional and national

interests are to be integrated with local interests. If water supply projects and programmes are to be sustainable, equitable and effective, they must take account of the cultural and social differences between men and women. These include differences in their needs and interests, knowledge, tasks and roles in society and, above all, differences in the extent to which men and women have access to, and control over, resources. Projects must identify and address these differences and inter-relationships to ensure that both men and women have the resources they require for their development. In other words, projects should adopt a gender plan framework for intervention in a community.

Integrating gender in drinking water supply projects requires a thorough understanding of gender relations and well-crafted strategies by development organisations. This study shows that women's involvement in managerial, decision-making and training is poor and not able to achieve strategic needs. It concluded that women's involvement from the beginning stage is essential to keep a project sustainable with good performance. Supporting agencies should learn from the past that before intervention, the gender analysis framework in the planning stage is crucial, because it can meticulously analyse the constraints and supporting factors of the society; who does what? and who has what? Finally, it gives a project action profiles, which assist in appropriate planning and pragmatic actions for the achievement of gender strategic needs.

### Notes

The DWS projects were selected from Baglung district, western region of Nepal where many NGOs and INGOs are working for the rural development activities. To bring consistency in sampling, various criteria were developed for the selection of projects: number of households served by each project should be greater than fifty, the project should have been completed before December 1996 to ensure that the communities had some years experience in the management of the DWS system, water yield from source should be greater than one liter per second (lps), the transmission line of the DWS project should be greater than one kilometer and the number of public tap-stands should be more than six. On the base of above mentioned criteria, 15 projects – five projects from each – were chosen for the field survey.

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