

Breaking the Cycle

Women, Water and the Search for Equity



Photo: Jens Nykjaer Paulsen



Photo: IDE-International Development Enterprises

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WOMEN AND WATER?

Throughout the world, women are intrinsically linked to water resources because of their roles and responsibilities in using and managing water. Since women and girls often cook, clean, farm, and provide health care and hygiene for their households, they are on the front lines of their communities' and countries' water issues. Global challenges like over-consumption, population growth, privatization and climate change all affect the quality and accessibility of water, and put a strain on limited freshwater systems. Water scarcity and contamination disproportionately impact low-income women and girls. For many girls who must walk miles to access clean water, school is not a reality. Without a basic education or the ability to get a formal wage-earning job, many women become locked into a vicious cycle of poverty. This has a ripple effect that impacts communities and countries socially, economically and environmentally.

From Global Challenge

INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO LIMITED WATER



Growing populations coupled with unsustainable lifestyles in a consumption-driven world are increasingly impacting water shortages. Around the world, water stress, or the “economic, social, or environmental problems caused by unmet water needs,” is an ongoing issue. Women are most vulnerable because they often work in informal markets and do not have the resources to participate in competitive markets that are worsening water scarcity. Since women primarily manage water resources at the local level, women’s voices must be heard at national and international levels if global equity is to prevail in a water-scarce world.

SUCCESS STORY – In Bangladesh, studies found that women’s access to irrigation water was not useful if they did not also have access to other resources such as land, credit, seeds and fertilizer. When women were provided with these and other resources, their income from irrigation increased by as much as 10 times as what they would have earned in wage labor or other traditional activities. This comprehensive program focused on women’s empowerment, which not only gave them access to water but access to several resources, decreasing women’s dependence on male intermediaries.

INEQUITABLE ACCESS TO PRIVATIZED WATER



For developing countries, meeting the basic needs of water supply and sanitation is the most pressing water security issue. As water becomes increasingly scarce, governments are allowing market forces to privatize water in an effort to conserve water. Water privatization occurs when private companies take ownership of the production and distribution of water. Water prices usually skyrocket when it is privatized even if the service is poor, causing many impoverished families to use large portions of their income to pay for a basic right. Women are the first to experience negative impacts of water privatization because as managers of their households, they are often forced to purchase water and must forego other productive activities such as subsistence farming of cash crops that need irrigation.

SUCCESS STORY – Khawla Al Sheikh has responded to increased levels of water scarcity in her town by working with Jordan’s Ministry of Water and Irrigation and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to create a network of empowered rural women who inform each other on water scarcity issues and conduct simple home water audits in order to reduce their bills and conserve water. Khawla was one of 23 women who recently took a course in repairing residential plumbing systems to earn an income. She was also among 110 women who were trained as agents for simple, cheap, easily installed water-saving devices, which are marketed to friends, family, neighbors and anyone else they can reach. She believes her initiative has been successful because, in her words, “Only a woman can sell to a woman.” As a woman in a position of power, she has successfully addressed the water needs of women in her state.

es... to Local Solutions

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS FROM CLIMATE CHANGE



In the last century, excessive consumption coupled with unsustainable population growth has contributed to the increase in carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions that are warming the earth's climate, resulting in climate change. Climate change poses threats to human health through increased droughts and floods, and further reduces water access and quality; in fact, according to experts, water will be the first resource impacted by climate change. Although climate change is largely caused by industrialized countries' wasteful consumption patterns, it is the world's poorest – women – who bear the brunt of the impact. Environmental crises negatively affect women on a daily basis because of their family obligations to obtain clean water for cooking, cleaning and farming. Environmental degradation not only decreases water resources but can also be a major contributor to severe climate change. Through deforestation – cutting and burning down forests for firewood – several tons of CO₂ are released into the atmosphere, continuing the water scarcity cycle.

SUCCESS STORY – In the rural community of Keur Moussa, Senegal where erosion and land degradation lead to insufficient agricultural yields, three villages were chosen to participate in erosion control projects. Women in these villages took active leadership in these projects by building stone barriers and engaging in reforestation to increase crop productivity. Vegetation in the area is now regenerating, and diverse herbs are growing. The erosion had prevented women from accessing fresh water resources; however, in working to stabilize soils and slow erosion, the women also recharged groundwater and created water bodies. The time women spend collecting water has reduced from 2-3 hours to 1-1.3 hours a day.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACTS FROM URBAN WATER CONTAMINATION



In the last century, rapid population growth and expanding global economies have exacerbated fresh water demand. As a result, many water sources are contaminated; in developing countries 90-95% of all sewage and 70% of all industrial wastes contaminate surface water. As the primary collectors of water, women are the first to be exposed to water-borne diseases. This directly affects women's health and reproductive health and often results in high infant mortality and birth defects.

SUCCESS STORY – In Luzanvika, Ukraine, a center for cleaning railway oil tanks, women organized and met with residents to file a legal suit against the local authority when they found that sewage overflows from an inadequate sewage system were going into people's homes and into the streets. As a result, the government allocated resources to finish construction of a sewage pump, financed environmental works in the district, and closed the hazardous oil-tank cleaning facility, a primary factor in the sewage overflows.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES DEMAND GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

In an era of climate change, water scarcity and a growing divide between rich and poor, this is a critical moment for the international community to work together to curb water consumption, reduce water contamination, and invest in women's rights worldwide. Not only are women the most impacted, but they are also the most in need of adaptation and coping mechanisms.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is a step in the right direction towards addressing women and water challenges. The MDGs are a sustainable development and poverty alleviation action plan, agreed upon by 189 nations – including the United States – at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000. Of the eight goals that collectively aim to halve global poverty and hunger by 2015, Goal 3 and Goal 7 respectively seek to empower women and ensure water supply and sanitation. Addressing these individual but cross-cutting issues together, we will be more successful in achieving a healthier, more prosperous and equitable world for future generations.



TAKE ACTION!

As consumers and as global citizens, we must all do our part to break the cycle of poverty and inequity that impacts women and water resources worldwide. Women around the world must have the means and the power to protect water resources critical for their and their children's survival.

- Encourage your decision-makers to support sustainable development initiatives that help to achieve the **Millennium Development Goals**. <http://endpoverty2015.org>
- Get involved with Sierra Club's **Global Population and Environment Program**. Find out how at www.sierraclub.org/population
- Get involved with **Feminist Campus**. Find out how at www.feministcampus.org
- Find out more about **WEDO's publications**, factsheets and case studies on women and water at www.wedo.org
- Join Sierra Club's **Population Justice Environmental Challenge** campaign at www.sierraclub.org/popjustice
- Take action in your community by using **WEDO's online action kit** to *educate* and *advocate* for gender and climate change! www.wedo.org/category/act
- Join **WEDO's Women Demand U.S. Action on Climate Change** campaign listserv by visiting <http://groups.google.com/group/wdaccus?hl=en>
- Join the **Think Outside the Bottle Campaign** to support strong public water systems over bottled water profits www.thinkoutsidethebottle.org
- Find out about your region's local water worries and spread the word on your community and campus. Host a panel or film-screening connecting the dots between women and water, and generate media to educate your peers!

This is a joint publication of Feminist Majority, Sierra Club and WEDO. Sources include WEDO, Sierra Club, Feminist Majority, the United States Agency for International Development, and the United Nations Population Fund.