

# **Men's roles, gender relations, and sustainability in water supplies: some lessons from Nepal**

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## **Introduction**

There is a tendency among agencies engaged in installing water supplies in Nepal to claim that their drinking-water projects can deliver sustainable practical benefits to women and men in the project communities. On the other hand, study of the water-supply interventions of some agencies, including non-governmental, bilateral, and government organisations, carried out from a gender perspective in various geographical regions of Nepal over a period of two years (early 1997 to early 1999) shows different results. One major finding of the research is that, despite the importance of women's strategic involvement in the management of water supplies, as highlighted by the literature on gender and development, the drinking-water sector still appears insensitive to gender issues in Nepal. The following discussions support this finding.

## **Token involvement of women in community water projects**

In all the agencies studied, the technicians carrying out the feasibility study and planning, designing, and implementing water projects are men. Assuming that the local men have more spare time than women, these male technicians contacted more men than women to participate in various project activities, in order that the project works could be finished on time. As a result, only the local men were involved in the important phases of the project. For example, men make major decisions related to the location of tube-wells or tap-stands, and the selection of caretakers or maintenance workers, skilled workers and contractors, candidates for training courses, and membership of the water committees and various user groups. The male technicians' understanding of women's participation in project activities is limited to the presence of a few women on water committees and in user groups, and the presence of relatively more women in community meetings, while the technicians perceive men as the principal decision-makers, both in the household and the project.

For example, in Hile village in east Nepal, the two women on the local water committee reported that they had not known for months that they had been selected by the local men to serve on the committee. Because the male committee members had been instructed by the project officials to include two women in the committee, they had put the women's names forward as a token, in order to activate the implementation of the water project. These women said that because the men involved them only in order to meet the project requirement, they were not consulted either by the male technicians or by the male committee members when any decisions were made. They also said that they were not invited to participate in meetings, nor were they included on the sub-committee, composed entirely of men, that was formed to monitor the project's progress.

## **The impact of water projects on women's daily lives**

On the other hand, the contacts (however limited) between the male staff of the projects and the local men involved during the negotiation stage can lead to many negative consequences, although they claim that their aim is to improve women's lives. One such consequence is worth sharing here. In all the communities studied, women complained that their water-collection time had increased significantly (sometimes as much as four or five times) after the improved water services had been installed. This is in part because the tap-stands and tube-wells are located along the road side, where

they cannot bathe freely nor easily wash the clothes that they use during menstruation, for fear of being seen by males. In order to avoid this, women in Hile village in east Nepal (which is in the hills and has a cold climate) carry water all the way to their homes several times each day, expending significant amounts of energy to do so. In three villages on the Tarai plain (Motipur, Magaragadhi, and Gajedi) in west Nepal, women reported waiting until dark to undertake these activities. They said that they had not had this problem when they had used more distant traditional sources, where there was no chance of men being around.

Despite the claim of some of the projects to improve the lives of women by reducing their work burden, it was found that their workload had actually increased. Although the projects have made water services more accessible than before, the local men (who have more free time than the women) have not yet started sharing women's responsibility for water-hauling, which in Tarai has increased tremendously, owing to the greater use of water by family members in a majority of households. The research findings show that women in the communities selected for study work up to 18 hours a day, while men work up to 13 hours. Apart from ploughing, there is hardly any regular activity that is performed exclusively by men; but there are many that are exclusively female. In their supposed rest hours, men spend time drinking and playing cards, while women knit, sew, and weave. Men expressed the view that their agricultural work (mainly ploughing and preparing the fields) was much harder than that of women. In fact, not only do women work longer hours, but some of their activities, such as collecting fuel, fodder, and water, are at least as labour-intensive as men's work in the fields. In all communities, the women reported that they used to collect water four to five times a day, amounting to a total of 80 litres per family per day. But after water was supplied nearer their homes, they fetched water 10-15 times, with households using as much as 200-300 litres of water a day.

### **Exclusion of women from project management**

Because the male technicians made no attempt to understand the gender roles, gender relations, and the factors affecting those roles and relationships in order to devise ways to mobilise both women and men effectively in various project activities, it was only men who found time to participate in the project. For example, two women members of the water-users' committee in Gajedi village in west Nepal reported that they had attended only one out of ten local committee meetings held in the previous year, because the meeting place was too far away and there was no one to share their work at home. They said that, although their husbands supported the idea of their participation in such meetings, the men failed to realise that this would be impossible if they did not share the domestic work. These women suggested that the projects should focus more on how to motivate men to share women's work, rather than spending time on trying to involve women in project activities, since their involvement is never meaningful without men's sincere cooperation.

The other issue of concern is that all the male project staff in the selected projects seemed to think that men, in general, are the breadwinners, are more capable than women of doing labour-intensive work, and more suited than women to technical tasks. This leads them to suggest that it is men who should receive technical training and payment for their work. So the selected projects provided technical training exclusively to men, and recruited men as paid workers and women mainly as volunteers. Even in the few cases where both women and men were recruited for daily wage-labour activities, men were paid a little higher than women. This happened, for example, during the construction phase of the Hile drinking water project. The argument was that men work harder than women and thus they should be paid more. Since the project staff were all men, they agreed with the local men's argument and paid them more than women. On the other hand, women labourers said that men should in fact have been paid less than them, as they spent time chatting and smoking cigarettes, in contrast to the women, who, they argued, were very dedicated to their work.

This male bias is seen not only at the community level but also at the organisational level. In all selected organisations, more men than women are hired in general, and especially to perform the technical tasks that yield more income. Even when women are hired as technicians, only men are sent to do the field jobs, on the basis that the field work is labour-intensive and thus beyond the women's

capacity. An example comes from the government district water-supply office in Dhankuta, eastern Nepal, where three women were recruited as water supply and sanitation technicians. However, senior officers decided that women cannot undertake labour-intensive activities in the field, and so these employees have been reassigned to perform administrative tasks.

The implication is that, although the projects claim that their improved water services can enhance the quality of the lives of women, it has actually had a greater positive impact on the lives of men. In other words, men's bargaining power is now even higher than before, even though women are investing a significant amount of their time in the project activities.

### **Male bias in the sharing of benefits**

The research project studied the issue of equity in the sharing of project benefits. The men who dominated both the agencies and the communities could not figure out, while conceptualising, designing, and implementing projects, whether the benefits of the projects would be equally shared by all users in the communities. Questions of gender, caste, ethnicity, and class were all overlooked. For example, the amount of cash to be contributed to meet the capital costs and the operational and maintenance costs was decided by men, although this responsibility actually fell on women, as the primary users of water resources. Because men mostly control household incomes, women face difficulties in paying the water tariffs. Consequently the number of women defaulters has increased, raising a doubt about whether they will be allowed continued access to the improved water resources. For example, in one meeting about the collection of the water tariffs in Gajedi village, it was found that the tariffs were mostly paid by women, and that women from female-headed households were among the defaulters. A decision was taken in the meeting that if the defaulters did not pay their dues within 15 days, they would not be allowed to use the tube-wells. Two of the defaulters contacted for further investigation, who were very poor and lived a hand-to-mouth existence with their two to three children, were very shocked by this decision of the committee. They did not know what they would do if they were banned from using the tube-well. The danger in such a case is that these households may revert to using unhygienic water sources, risking the health of everyone in the family.

Moreover, because the male technicians had chosen to limit their contact with the local women, the women in households whose men were temporarily or permanently absent could not voice their concerns during the planning stage. Such women, who are mostly from lower caste/ethnic groups, with lower economic status, suffer as a result. For example, a poor woman from the low-status ethnic group called Mallah in Gajedi village remarked to the researcher with frustration that she and many other women from her ethnic group still spent a whole hour collecting water from the new tube-wells. Yet women from relatively well-off families spent hardly five to ten minutes in this task, because their male family-members had good contacts with the male project-staff and thus were able to influence the location of tube-wells, ensuring that they were installed close to their own homes. She observed that such discrepancy made her feel that women who were not benefiting equally from the improved water services should destroy the tube-wells, so that all women would then be on an equal footing in the community.

Because of their frequent contacts with the male project staff, the local men have achieved more access to and control over project resources, which has given them greater economic benefits, thus improving their status still further, and further widening the gap between the sexes. There were no attempts by the male project staff to improve women's knowledge, skills, self-esteem, and confidence.

The projects' over-reliance on men has deterred the local women from taking responsibility for the protection and management of water resources. As a result, the number of malfunctioning tube-wells is increasing in the project communities. Moreover, the local women are not showing any interest in becoming involved in other committee activities. A deeper analysis of the projects' impact shows that, despite the relatively easy access to improved water services, the local women have been able neither to meet their practical needs and concerns nor to improve their lives strategically.

## **Institutional bias**

Further investigation of the causes of such an emphasis on men's participation over women's at the community level showed that all the policies and practices of the selected agencies are gender-biased. For example, there are more men participating in the policy-making bodies; the number of male staff is much higher than the number of female staff; the personnel policies (formulated by men, of course) do not encourage women to join or to continue working in the agencies; the institutional objectives and strategies do not emphasise the strategic needs and concerns of women. The project-management guidelines are not gender-aware; there are no funds available for addressing gender issues; and even in agencies where funds are not a problem, the male senior staff showed no real interest in allocating funds for gender and development (GAD) activities; and despite all these situations there is nobody particularly responsible for ensuring that gender-related concerns have been effectively addressed, either in the agencies or in the local communities; nor is there any provision to train the agency staff in gender-related aspects of development

## **Challenges**

The research findings show that addressing women's strategic issues and ensuring the sustainability of project benefits are inter-related. How can the agency technicians (mainly men) and local men and women working in the delivery of water supply be made aware of this relationship? An equally important question is how to help all these partners to understand the effects of a gender-insensitive project on existing gender relations in the project communities, and how a gender-sensitive project can benefit overall human well-being.

In order to improve the present situation, it is necessary to make the institutional policies and practices more gender-sensitive before addressing the gender issues at the community level. This is because what the male project staff do at the community level is guided by the agencies' policy documents, objectives and strategies, internal culture, and project-management guidelines. We recommend the following specific measures:

- organise gender training for all agency staff, and gender-sensitisation activities for community women and men;
- make provision for both human and capital resources to ensure gender sensitivity in all agency work;
- increase the number of women in general at the agency level, and in paid and technical positions in particular at the community level;
- provide women with technical training that can yield income in the future, so as to improve their bargaining power, decision-making power, and status.

Moreover, since the research findings also show that the policies and practices of the agencies in the study have been heavily influenced by the international donors, who wield considerable financial power, there is also a need to make the water policies and practices of the donors more gender-sensitive. Finally, what is of the utmost importance is to make the education system, both in the schools and at higher levels, gender-aware through the provision of gender-sensitive textbooks and teaching methods, the appointment of gender-sensitive teachers, and the creation of a gender-sensitive environment. Also needed is an environment where girls get opportunities to go to school and continue their study up to higher levels together with their male counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

We conclude that women's strategic involvement at the community level is possible only if the male project staff and their agencies are fully gender-aware. The challenge is how to make them truly gender-sensitive, so that they are not satisfied with women's tokenistic involvement.

As long as men do not assume their share of women's traditional tasks, over-burdened women cannot effectively participate in development projects; the challenge thus is how to motivate men to share women's traditional work. Men in general assume that water supply is a technical matter and that thus women have no influential roles to play in this sector; the challenge here is how to make the male technicians and the local men aware that water has not only a technical dimension but also social dimensions, and that thus women's strategic involvement is absolutely essential.

