

GENDER CONCERN IN GLOBAL WATER POLICY: AN INSIGHT FROM LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of gender concern in water sector is being increasingly recognized. Since women and men exhibit socially and culturally determined differences in behaviour, roles and responsibilities as well as opportunities (Seymour-Smith, 1986; Woroniuk, Thomas and Schalkwyk, 1997), it is believed that interventions within the sector must also reflect gender concern. Significance of the concern is seen at both policy and program levels. Knowledge of gender-specific priorities of different water-users is expected to contribute towards a realistic formulation of water policies and implementation plans at all levels (Guijt, 1994). Further, it is seen as a harbinger of greater efficiency and effectiveness as well as equity in water projects (Brismar, 1997; Thomas, Schalkwyk and Woroniuk, 1996).

As a follow-up on the benefits of gender concern in the sector, there has been a continuing trend of designing water management policies with emphasis ranging from promoting participation of women in management of water projects in particular to supporting 'gender-balanced' development of the water sector in general (Cleaver, 1998a; Woroniuk, 1994). How effective have these policies been in addressing the basic concerns raised at their outset? Do these concerns reflect the realistic gendered needs and priorities of the water users? Are these policy initiatives built upon the specificities of the gender dimension in local (traditional) water management systems? Are the (gendered) realities of the latter similar to the propositions laid down in the policies? Do 'effectiveness' and 'equity' as underlying policy goals reflect the water users' perceptions as well? Finally, is there a need to redefine or refine the goals and contents of the current gender-based water management policies?

This paper seeks answers to the above questions by considering the water management realities in local communities, a description of which is presented in the third section. An assessment of the scenario of implementation of the contemporary global policy in these communities in the light of such realities is presented in the fourth section. An analysis of the data on these two fronts, outlining the disjuncture between global propositions and local perspective, is presented in the penultimate section. Finally, a suitable policy alternative is suggested in the conclusion. Before having an insight into water management situation in local communities, an overview of the contemporary policy context with respect to gender concern in water management is presented in the next section.

The findings of the paper are primarily based upon a first-hand ethnographic study in India, conducted between 1997 and 2002 in different parts of the country, particularly in the central state of Madhya Pradesh (M.P.) and the central-eastern state of Bihar. The data procured is primarily qualitative procured through intensive fieldwork techniques such as participant observation, unstructured and structured interviews, focus-group discussions and case study.

2 THE POLICY CONTEXT

Gender concern in water management policies has evolved through an initial concern with women in the water sector that was actually formulated at the UN Water Conference in 1977 in Mar del Plata in Argentina. The concern led the UN General Assembly to proclaim 1981-1990

as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade (IDWSSD) where women were identified as a 'target group' to be benefited through installation of low cost technology in domestic water supply systems (Elmendorf and Isely, 1983; Kalbermatten, 1991; Deshingkar, 1995).

However, such a target-based approach soon showed its limitations, paving the way for adoption of a policy shift towards securing women's "participation" in the water sector. The new policy consensus that thus emerged during the 1990s is the outcome of a number of international events, notably the New Delhi meeting on water supply and sanitation in the 1990s, International Conference on Water and Environment (ICWE) at Dublin and UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro. The principles of the New Delhi Statement echo the emergent policy consensus, where Principle 3 notes that:

"Women should be encouraged to play influential roles in both water management and hygiene education. Capacity building is necessary to make community management effective and enable women to play leading roles" (UNDP, 1990).

These broad themes are also expressed in the Guiding Principles of the ICWE held in Dublin, Ireland in January 1992 where Principle 3 of the Dublin Statement acknowledges that:

"Women play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.Acceptance and implementation of this principle requires positive policies to address women's specific needs and to equip and empower women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes, including decision-making and implementation, in ways defined by them"(ICWE; 1992).

The Dublin findings figured very largely in the policy guidelines related to water as a natural resource adopted at the (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Agenda 21, the official policy document emerging from this conference, recognized the need for fully integrating gender considerations into all policies, programmes and activities undertaken by bodies of the UN system, governments and non-governmental organizations involved in follow-up to the conference (UN 1992).

On the whole, the current global policy framework on gender and water may be summarised as follows: It essentially rests upon the premise that increased involvement of the users in the management of water resources is desirable and can be achieved through participatory approaches that recognize the central role of women. The gender perspective in such participatory approaches primarily builds upon universalistic notions such as "the prototype rural female water user traditionally responsible for fetching domestic water for her family" should "become involved in planning and decision-making about management of integrated water resources". Further, "through membership of water user associations and groups, she should play a part in the maintenance of water supply infrastructures". Also, "efficiencies achieved in management of irrigation water enable her to increase productive output; a possibility enhanced by the release of her time through supply of improved domestic water supplies close to home" (Cleaver, 1998b). "Involvement of women in decision-making and management will ensure that resources management more accurately takes into account their priorities, is more efficient (women are there most of the time), and is empowering to those who take part" Thus, there is need to equip women to participate at all levels in water resources programmes (Narayan, 1995; UNDP, 1990; UN, 1992; DANIDA, 1992; SDC, 1994; as cited in Cleaver, 1998a).

3 LOCAL WATER MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AS GENDERED TRADITIONS

The policy context outlined above is essentially built upon the argument that traditional water management approaches are “gender-biased” in overlooking gendered interests, particularly those of women and hence the need of adopting a gender concern in the process of managing local water resources. The realisms of such contentions are examined in this section through a description of local water management system in practice in rural parts of India as a gendered tradition.

The basic water management practices in the rural Indian communities include assessment of needs, interests and priorities of the members; planning and development of the water sources; operation and use of the water sources; and their maintenance and rejuvenation. Action within the traditional system is guided by the locally defined objectives of water management and executed through the operation of internal social organisational principles, supported by underlying beliefs and values, traditional environmental knowledge and the technology, etc. The members of the community who actually execute action and who are ultimately benefited by it, are organized as two gender-specific groups- the men and the women. How the roles & responsibilities, rights and privileges, and powers and opportunities of the two groups differ as a functional reality is described in the following account.

The water utilization patterns in the local communities are reflective of the gendered water needs of the members. Women are the primary users of water at the domestic level while men are predominantly associated with water in the productive sphere. However, this is not to say that men do not need water for domestic purposes or vice-versa. Important among the needs of women in relation to domestic use are cooking, cleaning and washing, drinking being common to both genders. Irrigation and animal husbandry are significant productive needs of men in relation to water. The interests of women and men in relation to water then build upon their gender-specific water needs. For instance, women’s interest may lie in having adequate supply of ‘good-quality’ water as determined by criteria such as colour, taste, odour and freshness in case of water for drinking and cooking. They believe that good quality water is one that is colourless, odourless, tasteless as well as fresh. Similarly, men’s interest may lie in having adequate supply of clean water for irrigating their crops or for watering their crops.

Accordingly, water sources are built and maintained in the rural Indian communities so as to fulfil the gendered needs and interests of men and women. Domestic water sources are located within the village settlement and distributed according to the ‘social mapping’ of the village where different castes have exclusive access to their own traditional water sources. Productive water sources are generally located on the outskirts of the settlement or in the fields. Common traditional domestic water sources in the study area include the hand dug well while productive water sources include irrigation wells and ponds that may also be used for watering of animals. These sources may be ‘public’ or ‘private’, depending upon both ownership and access.

Planning and development of water sources is visibly the men’s task. Planning for public sources is done through community/caste-level meetings where men discuss the need and strategy for developing sources if required. The physical task of creating a water source is heavy in nature and therefore primarily men’s work. Planning and creation of private sources is a responsibility of the men of the concerned household. Though in all these activities men play the ‘visible’ role, women have a significant contribution that may be described as ‘invisible’ where within the domestic arena the needs and possibilities about new sources may be aired and discussed for the first time.

Operation and use of public water sources are gendered in rural Indian communities in a complex way. Here it is important to note that water sources are ‘integrated’ and ‘disintegrated’ in terms of the nature of their usage. An integrated source is one that is commonly used for a

number of different purposes, for instance a well used for fetching water for drinking and cooking as well as cleaning, washing and bathing. Sometimes, an irrigation pond may be 'integrated' in being used for washing and bathing as well as for watering of animals, apart from irrigation *per se*. Disintegrated sources imply an arrangement where a water source is used primarily for a single purpose, for example, a drinking water well the water of which is used for drinking and cooking alone. Similarly, ponds in Indian villages may be exclusively used for cleaning, washing and bathing. Since a public water source may be in use by both men and women, the skill of operation is generally known to all. The technology in use is also very simple, dependent upon local resources and traditional knowledge, for instance, drawing of water from the well using a rope and a bucket. However, gender-based patterns of use of public water sources varies according to caste of the users. Thus, women belonging to upper castes are not expected to fetch water 'publicly', particularly those who reside in the village by virtue of marriage. This task is generally undertaken by men of the household in whose absence the younger girls/daughters or even sometimes the senior women (like mother in law) may take over. Thus, while the women who determine the water demand and ultimately use water for domestic chores, it is the men who fetch it. For the middle and lower castes, greater mobility of women in using public water sources may be observed.

When public water sources – whether 'integrated' or 'disintegrated' – are in use by both men and women, a time-based cycle of use may be observed so as to avoid embarrassing confrontations between the genders. In case of disintegrated sources, different parts of a pond may be earmarked for men's and women's use. Where women have direct access to integrated public water sources, women almost never bathe but draw water for use at home. On the whole, it may be used by women during the mornings when water for household chores like drinking, cooking, cleaning, etc. is drawn. In the early forenoon and early afternoon it may be left for use by men for washing, bathing, watering of animals, etc. Again later in the afternoon, women may return to fetch water. The gendered pattern of usage of private water sources is similar.

Among the productive sources in Indian villages, clearly the use of irrigation ponds and wells is left to the men who possess the knowledge and skill of harnessing their water for fulfilling their own needs. The traditional technology used for lifting water from the irrigation ponds as well as wells, though simple and using local resources, may be regarded as cumbersome, requiring much skill as well as energy that is regarded as appropriate for men, besides being defined as a task to be performed in the public arena and therefore not regarded as suitable for women.

Maintenance and rejuvenation as water management activities in the Indian villages is also a gendered activity. While the heavier physical tasks generally connected with the water sources required to be performed in the public arena are reserved for the men, women are concerned with the more subtle 'domestic' sphere of activities such as maintenance of the water quality fetched for domestic use or socialisation of children with respect to maintenance of quality of water and water source. A part of the task of such socialisation may actually be shared between the two genders. The physical tasks of maintenance and rejuvenation commonly include activities like cleaning the base and deepening of the well or pond, and also re-bricking of walls in case of well. All these tasks are labour intensive and involve skill that is traditionally passed on among the men of particular serving castes. However, the need for undertaking maintenance or rejuvenation tasks may actually be expressed by any real user - women or men, the arena for such expression being free of the actual venue of meeting.

It is claimed that the principles and practices of traditional water management system in Indian villages are unwritten and informal, yet their perpetuation through generations has been ensured through the process of socialization whereby every individual in the society – whether male or female – learns about the rights and privileges and responsibilities and expected behaviours in relation to different spheres within water management. These in turn are seen as intricately associated with the gender norms and principles and the patterns of behaviour in the other spheres of social life. For instance, the pattern of gender norm regarding the use of a common

(integrated) water source is governed by the principle of ‘avoidance’ between men of senior generation and women of the junior generation who have moved in through marriage. This is an extension of behaviour pattern to be observed on all fronts of social interaction. Similarly, the norm about men’s work in public arena and women’s work in the domestic arena within water management are intricately linked to the overall perceptions and practices concerning gendered role division within family settings that in turn lay the foundation of gendered role division at societal level. Adherence to such basic norms and principles is desirable for coherence and perpetuation of the society.

On the whole, the water management systems is perceived as a joint venture between men and women of the community, where each has been its own role that complement each other. These in turn determine the nature of rights and privileges in relation to the system. Thus, questions of ownership, access and control over water and water sources are seen as functionally linked to their roles and responsibilities. Ownership is not gendered in terms of women or men’s resources *per se*, rather it is projected at household/family level with access defined in terms of needs and governing principles of social interactions and behaviour. However, both access to and control over water sources are further understood as ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’, depending upon who is physically entitled to exercise the same. Both ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ access and control are equally important and functionally relevant within the system.

Further, the needs and priorities of the community members is not actually judged on the basis of their gender – as being men’s or women’s. Rather ‘domestic’ and ‘productive’ spheres in water management are perceived as equally important for the lives of the community members and of equal concern to both as it is the domestic (family) unit which is seen as the ultimate dynamic living unit whose survival and perpetuation is a function of the underlying gender cooperation in different spheres of daily lives, including water management.

4 THE POLICY IN IMPLEMENTATION: AN ASSESSMENT IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Against the backdrop of the traditional water management systems prevailing in rural Indian communities, we will assess the achievements of the global policy related to gender concern in water management. An early intervention related the policy was installation of low cost water supply technologies in rural communities that were later handed over to the communities for management. Under this intervention handpumps have been installed all over the country with the objective of providing sources of safe drinking water close to home so as to ease the burden on women by cutting down on their time and energy input, ultimately releasing time for involvement in economically productive activities.

As a follow up on the outcomes of this intervention, women in the Indian villages under study are not unanimous in acknowledging that their domestic water needs are effectively resolved through installation of handpump. A common notion is that handpump is a good “add-on” source of water particularly in the water-scarce season, when traditional sources (most notably the well) tend to dry up.

Further, although the policy setting is based on the assumption that women place great priority on securing an adequate supply of water for domestic purposes, within as little time as possible, the traditional water management set up shows that women in local communities actually exercise strong preferences for particular types of water for different purposes. If handpump water is found to fall short of these essential criteria, traditional sources may be preferred, even when time and energy constraints operate on the water drawer, whether men or women, while use of handpump water may be actually restricted to washing, bathing and watering of nearby kitchen gardens and animals.

Another important phase in the process of implementation of the global policy was the attempt at training of women from local communities in the physical task of repairing handpumps. In the mid-1980's, under a scheme called TRYSEM (Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment) in India, a special emphasis was laid on training young women as handpump mechanics, with the underlying rationale that through enhanced capabilities for handpump maintenance, women as the end-users would be better equipped to ensure continuity of water supply. However, not only was the turnout of women for the scheme low, but even when trained their actual functioning, as mechanics is even rare. In the study area, as noted in the previous section, the very idea of women repairing handpumps is unconventional because firstly, repair and maintenance of water sources is considered to be primarily a man's responsibility and second, that the very act of working for a public cause by a married woman outside the privacy of her house is not valued positively. As a result, even after a prolonged effort at improving women's involvement in repairing and maintenance of handpumps, a majority of handpump mechanics continue to be men.

This has been followed by action initiated under the new water management policy guidelines concerning enhanced participation of women in water resources management, particularly in planning and decision-making as also supervision and monitoring in relation to public water supply systems. This is being achieved through a system of reservation of 33% of the seats for them in 'Panchayat Raj' bodies that constitute the local government structure at 3 levels - district, development block and village. One of the spheres of action of the local government bodies is 'water and sanitation' for which members are organized as special committees at each level that are primarily involved in planning about new water supply installations and supervising and monitoring their operation and maintenance. It is assumed that within this set-up women would be able to voice their opinion and influence decisions through their elected representatives in these committees. M.P. is the first state in India where the new Panchayat Raj organization has been operationalized but a closer look at the situation reveals that perhaps the goals underlying such participation are far from being achieved.

In the villages under study, it is men who take the lead in management decisions about water supplies within panchayat bodies, while women's participation tends to be only officially reckoned. Many of the women members from different tiers echo the social organisational principle that decision-making about water management in public primarily constitute men's arena of work. Thus, in some of the meetings it is observed that husbands of the women occupying key positions actually participate.

A majority of the women representatives as well as others agree that what is more important is that their water interests are safeguarded and needs fulfilled in the way they desire rather than being concerned about 'who' actually gets it done. They explain that the social norms about behaviour of men and women in public stand violated at panchayat meetings that involve open interaction between men and women who belong to categories that otherwise share a "relationship of avoidance". This is negatively valued in society, attracting social criticism and dishonour for the family. Another opinion expressed by women is that since traditionally it is men who take final decisions about the 'extra-domestic' affairs in public, assumption of such decision-making powers by women as members of panchayat bodies may also be seen as leading to power confrontation at home, since instead of differentiation of the arenas of decision-making, such a situation actually leading to overlapping of their functional arenas. Men express the feeling that in such circumstances, the women might even think of overlooking their primary (domestic) responsibilities. Such social disorder is undesirable. In fact, a number of women representatives also express their difficulties about managing time for meetings and other routine 'committee work' since their involvement in domestic chores and children extend over the whole day.

The men and women further feel that since the handpump is not the primary source of water supply for them (substantial dependence still being on the traditional sources), situations such as

breakdown of handpumps or other problems with their management may at best be seen as one of inconvenience but not significant enough to necessitate a situation where societal norms be flouted or transformed. On the whole, the villagers are primarily of the view that there has not been a substantial improvement in the water management situation in the villages even after formation of the panchayat bodies and their committees and election of women members to these, an opinion confirmed through comparative records of the operational status of handpumps during this period.

This study also indicated that the process of participation of women in water management activities is not as simplistic as is often assumed. Women may not constitute a homogenous group due to operation of several other social factors, such as caste affiliation. In one such instance in M.P., the only public handpump to be installed was originally targeted at the scheduled caste¹ women who were found to lack a source of safe drinking water in or near their locality. However, the handpump was finally installed in the locality of the dominant caste² in the village – the Brahmins. In the summer of 1999, when the traditional source (namely, the well) dried up and women belonging to the scheduled caste section attempted to fetch water from the public handpump, they were denied access, resulting in much conflict in the village. In another similar instance in the same state, two public handpumps intended to benefit the scheduled caste women were actually installed in the Yadav locality, the latter being the dominant caste in the village. Scheduled caste women were denied access to these handpumps, even in times of crisis.

Interestingly, in both the cases, women from the scheduled caste section were represented in the village panchayat as also at higher levels, such category-based membership being constitutionally obligatory. However, despite their physical presence as representatives of a single group – ‘women’ – at the pragmatic level, they were divided on the basis of their caste affiliation. The caste-based identities of women members outweighed their cohesion in terms of gender identity. As a result, in the first case, women representatives from the scheduled caste section were unable to safeguard the interests of the water-users of their own group. In the second case, cleavages within the women’s section lay further down at the intra-caste level – here the women members from scheduled caste section belonged to what is commonly referred to as the “creamy” layer. These women had greater concern with power-based affiliations than with the real needs of their less fortunate sisters.

In recent times, attempts are also being made to enhance access and participation of women in water user associations meant for managing irrigation systems. Regarding this action, women in the villages under study are almost unanimous in opining that as in the domestic water supply systems, here too, their ‘visible’ participation may not be really forthcoming. Since irrigation is seen as a sector of primary concern to men, women find it to be of little relevance to directly participate in an arena of work that has limited concern with them in terms of either need or role. It is also pointed out that the relevance, and thus motivation, for participation of women in formal meetings as a mechanism for defending their own interests in irrigation sources is even less than in case of domestic water supplies. It is also anticipated by women and men alike that membership of women in water user associations may amount to challenging the prevailing norms and practices by creating situations of power confrontations between genders within households, besides threatening the gender-based domestic arrangement concerning division of labour.

¹ The term ‘scheduled caste’ implies a category mentioned in one of the schedules of the Indian Constitution. This category is considered to be a weaker section of society whose interests need to be safeguarded and promoted. Socially, these castes are seen as occupying the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy.

² For details on the concept of ‘dominant caste’ see Srinivas (1959). Among the basic criteria determining dominance are higher position in caste hierarchy, numerical preponderance and sizable ownership of village land.

5 GLOBAL POLICY AND LOCAL REALITIES: SOME REFLECTIONS

The description of the traditional water management system in rural Indian communities amply demonstrates the fallacies in the basic policy assumption about traditional water management settings being gender-biased or 'imbalanced' against women's needs and interests. The study shows that traditional water management arrangements in rural India, on the contrary, is gender-sensitive as well as 'gender-balanced' in its own right where it is not only women but both women and men who are recognised as equally important partners in the water management process that, in turn, is perceived as a social process. In this system it is assumed that it is not necessary for women and men to perform the same tasks in relation to water management nor is it that women's interests are overlooked when men are the 'visible' actors in the process. It is assumed that the water needs and interests of both are equally important and relevant to their daily lives, and in fact, women's needs and interests are prioritised. Hence, the water management processes are founded on a gender-specific role-differentiation pattern that in turn upon prioritisation of each one's needs. This role-differentiation pattern in turn determines the gendered patterns in rights and privileges including issues of ownership, access and control over water resources. In fact, the water management system in these communities is not an independent formalized structure but is an inseparable part of the total socio-cultural system and functions through operation of the social processes underlying its various institutions like kinship and family, polity, economy, religion, etc. the gender dimension in each of these together define the gendered pattern of the water management systems operating in the community that ultimately aims at achieving efficient and effective utilisation of the available water resources. These gendered specificities may show variations across the different castes in the rural Indian setting. Thus, needs, interests and priorities of women (as a gender category) in relation to water may itself vary in the rural Indian communities from one caste to another. Instances of heterogeneity among women as a gender category have also been reported in other settings where financial position is seen as a significant parameter (Cleaver and Elson, 1994, Cleaver, 1998a).

It is also important to note that the traditional system recognises a differentiation between 'actors' and 'beneficiaries' in a given water management situation, the gendered basis of which is entirely contextual. Within the domestic water management situation, for instance, men may be the actors in fetching water while women are the beneficiaries in receiving water for their various domestic needs. However, simultaneously, women may be the actors in deciding about the appropriate source and the usage of water so fetched. Men may be the beneficiaries here in receiving water for drinking or while using the product of water usage (such as food). Among the lower caste households, however, women may be the more actively concerned with fetching water as well as using it. Thus, domestic water management itself is a complex social process where different arrangements may be observed across different sections of the community

The basic features of the gender dimension in traditional water management systems stand in sharp contrast to the gender premises of the global water policy in several ways. These contrasts may be seen as significantly contributing to ineffectiveness of the policy in field. First is the assumed universality about women as "domestic water managers", being burdened with the task of fetching water for the family. This study clearly indicates that water management in local communities is a cooperative process between the genders where each is ascribed a role in accordance with needs and potentials that are 'functionally' defined in the given context.

Second is the problem with making universal assumptions about gendered water needs and therefore the corresponding roles in water management systems. This study there is problem with making a beginning with universal assumptions about gendered water needs and roles in water management systems. This study demonstrates that in reality gendered water needs may show commonalities across communities (as found among different castes in India), but their

fulfilment may entail differences in the kinds of managerial arrangements in different socio-cultural contexts.

Third, the existing policy framework, though concerned with gender actually tends to view women in isolation. Our study indicates that in traditional water management systems, gendered needs for water and role allocations between men and women for their fulfilment are complementary and reflective of the interconnectedness and interdependence of women and men at various levels. Considering only women's side of the problems, needs and roles is bound to yield distorted pictures and lead to design and delivery of lop-sided interventions that may not be ultimately effective at community level.

Fourth, the current policy visualises water management as an activity in itself, where efficiency and effectiveness is to be achieved. Therefore, formalised structures for water management are being introduced irrespective of the prevailing socio-cultural background. The present study shows that the domain of water management is intricately linked to other institutional aspects in the socio-cultural matrix of the community. Gender differentiation with respect to needs, roles, rights and privileges can be meaningfully understood only when seen in the light of interrelatedness.

The present study further indicates that manipulations with gender-based complementarities may not be acceptable to the community. The social balances between the two genders are not only meaningful in the given traditional water management set up but relate internally to the overall socio-cultural matrix. Thus, working with formal structures based on principles of gender equality may not turn out to be an effective strategy.

Fifth, the policy is based upon an assumed universality of a "means-end construct" where increased participation of women has been defined as the 'means' for achieving the 'end' of greater efficiency and effectiveness in water management. Such a generalised construct is rigid and non-reflective of the local realities as the arrangements about 'whose needs', 'fulfilled by whom' and 'how these are fulfilled' as 'means' are gendered and contextualised within the broader socio-cultural matrix and therefore vary from one community to another.

Lastly, a belief in universally ascribed water management roles for women further raises the question of relevance or use of the related interventions in society. If a perceived gendered water management role does not actually exist, then attempting to fulfil it or improve it will fail to achieve participation of the community, thus rendering the input wasteful. The present study indicates that as beneficiaries, women's priorities are traditionally upheld through various social mechanisms even when women do not participate 'visibly' (as 'actors') in the 'decision-making' processes in public. Given such a situation, enhanced participation of women in 'public' activities would amount to replacing the existing gendered role patterns that may either lack relevance to their lives or entail reversal of roles that may be perceived as socially damaging to the community. If an improved water management system is ultimately expected to enhance the "quality of life" of the people, then choice of such socially disruptive means demands reconsideration.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The gaps and incongruence between the global policy guiding action under new participatory gender-based water management regimes and the traditional realities have the effect of thwarting the achievement of policy goals. This necessitates the need to design an alternate policy that is of greater relevance to the lives of the communities towards whose benefit these efforts are ultimately directed, one that must be built upon the gendered realities of their water management systems. Therefore, it must be based on a broad gendered approach incorporating men as well rather than a mere focus on women's involvement.

Such an alternate policy framework must make a beginning from the gendered needs in society related to water and the prevailing social arrangements for fulfilling these. Fulfilment of these needs and interests should be the ultimate goal of the policy, rather than aiming at achieving 'utopian' goals such as equal participation of women. Since the gender of the 'actors' and 'beneficiaries' in water management situation is contextual and therefore variable, pre-selection of targeted participants is not a viable alternative. The means for achieving such a goal must be focussed upon supporting the 'actors' in the given context and gender must not be set as a pre-determined criterion for their identification.

The gendered realities of lives of people as actors and beneficiaries in a water management system must find a reflection in the policy initiatives. Enhancing equality between men and women by enhancing the latter's participation can neither directly benefit communities in physical terms nor enhance efficiency and effectiveness of programmes in real terms. Increasing mere head counts (of women) in the name of women's participation leads nowhere. Instead, the policy initiative needs to focus on 'empowering' the 'actors' by upgrading their capacities towards performance of their gendered roles as actors with greater efficiency and effectiveness. These roles & responsibilities must be seen as contextualized within specific socio-cultural situations rather than attempting to redefine them under sweeping universalistic assumptions. The policy should thus focus on facilitation of gender role performance by the actors in a given water management situation

Further, making the policy framework relevant over variable contexts would imply the need of postulates broad enough to accommodate variations in water management situations, leaving the intricacies about modalities of the internal gendered arrangements in water management to be worked out at local levels. Such a broad policy framework may not only enable functionally valid actions to be formulated and executed at local levels but also allow local traditional set-ups to persist and function with greater efficiency and effectiveness without any undue social stress.

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