

# Fluid Bonds

Gender and Water in Australia and the Asia-Pacific Region



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## This publication

This publication explores how decisions about the use and management of water can benefit from the inclusion of a gender dimension. It also makes a strong case for mainstreaming gender concerns in water-related research, policy-making and aid.

- The participation of women in water-related decision-making in Australia, and in its aid policies for Asia Pacific, must be a priority.
- In emphasizing 'community participation' policies, the attention must always be on who participates and who benefits.
- Water policy must not support the gender status quo, where women are often excluded or inequitably represented in decision-making.

Water is a complex resource and policy decisions reflect the cultural values and gender norms existing within a society. Recognizing the gender dimensions implicit in water resource-related matters may improve our understanding of water processes and our future management of water resources.

The objective of this publication is to refocus the attention on the gendered nature of water use and management, and to make a case for greater participation of women in water related decision-making.

The water sector has so far been a technically-driven engineering project that does not fully appreciate and incorporate the different social relationships and roles of women and men, poor and rich communities, and minority and majority cultures.

Gender issues in water are varied and dynamic. In less developed countries of the Asia-Pacific region, gender issues include equal access, sanitation, health, as well as questions of economic cost and privatisation of water resources. In a developed country, like Australia, the issues are more related to the use in particular productive sectors, at home, or even the specific cultural ways of engagement with water.

When talking about gender, we acknowledge the diversities of class, ethnicity, age, location and nationality that combine with gender to shape a woman's lived experience of water. The general feature that emerges is that women are notably absent from public debates on water even at the community level.

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## Fluid bonds

*As water is fluid, so are the social constructs which shape women's lives. Personal experiences flow into and out of one another, shaping the flows of lives in diverse ways.*

Speaking about gender and water is a complicated business. Gender roles are constantly in flux, and water too is as changeable as the attitudes towards it. The relationships between the two are multifaceted.

The bonds between women and water are primal and have a long history in every culture, whether old or new, beginning with religious rituals through to everyday practices. These bonds are not the same either in space or in time, and are fluid.

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of women and men and the relationships between them. Gender does not simply indicate women and men, but to the way the feminine and masculine qualities, behaviours and identities are determined through the process of socialisation. These roles and expectations are culturally specific, but the experience in the water sector shows that they can change.

## The issue of gender & water

Gender counts in water, not only in less developed countries, where Australian aid and expertise is improving lives, but also within Australia. It is time for us to engender water policy and decision-making. This is an issue as relevant in urban homes and backyards as it is in rural and remote parts of the country.

The current drought, along with the celebrations of the International Year of Freshwater and the recent publication of 'Every drop counts' (the water aid policy statement of Australia), afford us an opportunity to explore the various ways water is perceived, used and interpreted in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region through a gender lens.



# Is there a gender issue in water?

When we talk of 'gender', we are reminded that the roles of women and men are socially constructed categories; gender identities and roles vary from time to time and from culture to culture.

Women's bonds with water are not of one type, as there is not a single, homogeneous class of 'women'. Thus, we can talk about some women's relationships with water in only specific areas and with regard to particular issues raised. At the same time, the objective is to draw attention to the gendered nature of water in life, of which all women, at all times, are a part.

## Is water gendered?

Water itself may not be gendered, but the manner in which individuals or communities perceive or interact with it may have gendered characteristics.

Water is usually seen as formless, but the norms and laws that have evolved around water over the last two hundred years or so embody masculine values. Values such as individual ownership, control through technology, and the primacy of production as the best use for water. Thus, what may appear as gender neutral on the surface is intertwined with cultural values.

Again, there are links between gender and control, because masculine controls over water destabilise women's perceptions, knowledges and engagements.



*The differences in the extent to which women and men have access to and control over water resources need to be recognised*

## Engendering water

For water resource management projects and programs to be sustainable, equitable and effective, the cultural and social differences between women and men must be acknowledged.

In Australia and elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region, the needs and interests, knowledges, tasks and roles of women in water related matters, and above all, the differences in the extent to which women and men have access to and control over water resources, now need to be recognized.

To identify and address these differences and interrelationships is to ensure that both women and men have an equal role in the management of and access to water. This would enhance a 'gender approach' to water.

## Key questions

A gender approach asks five key questions:

- *Who has the information: women, men or both?*
- *Who does the work: women, men or both?*
- *Who makes the decisions: women, men or both?*
- *Who gets the benefits (such as water, training, jobs): women, men or both?*
- *Who controls the benefits (such as services, incomes, training): women, men or both?*

Answering these questions would go a long way towards aiding a gender vision in the water sector.



*Within Australia,  
women's access to  
and control over water  
vary across the country*

## Less developed vs developed countries

The most obvious examples of gender issues in water can be seen in the different ways in which women in less developed and developed countries relate to water; its excesses, scarcities and its use for various purposes.

There are also variations in the relationships between water and women in different places; women on farms, women of indigenous and non-indigenous communities, women living on river banks, and so on. For instance, in the Mekong delta region, gender issues involve dealing with seasonal excess and scarcity of water, whereas in South Asia, the major issues are those of access, health and sanitation.

Another concern is women's active participation in community management of water projects. Not all these concerns have been addressed adequately yet. Not much is known about water use on a gender-segregated basis yet, whether in developing or developed countries. Hence the recent emphasis of international agencies to generate gender-segregated water data.

Even within Australia, women's access to and control over water vary across the country: from class to class, from region to region, from one ethnic group to another ...



## How adequate is adequate?

The recent drought in Australia literally brought home the immediate need to rethink our water use.

It is a good time to remind ourselves that 1.2 billion people in less developed countries of the world are without safe drinking water. Another 2.9 billion people are without adequate sanitation, over 3 million people die from diarrhoeal diseases alone, and two-thirds of city-dwellers in the developing world lack sewage and sanitation facilities. In India, over 480 million people lack access to safe water. Every 8 seconds, a child dies from a water-related disease.

At the same time, US\$4 billion is spent every year on bottled liquid drinks all over the world.

*1.2 billion people in less developed countries of the world are without safe drinking water.*

## Definitions

How does the World Health Organisation (WHO) define 'safe'? It means treated surface water and untreated water from protected springs, boreholes and sanitary wells.

'Access' is defined as 'piped water or public standpipe within 200 metres of a dwelling or housing unit' in urban areas and reasonable access in rural areas implies that a family does not spend a disproportionate part of the day fetching water.

'Adequate' is defined as between 20 to 60 litres per person per day on a *continuous* basis.

These definitions cover a basic water supply for which more than a billion people are still waiting. Therefore, they form the basis for a fairly conservative estimate of the relationship of poverty and access to safe and adequate quantities of clean water.

The United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the World Summit on Sustainable Development pointed to the need for a recognition of gender as a crosscutting theme.

International agencies have not only stressed the need to stop the unsuitable exploitation of water resources, but also recognise the key role of water in alleviating poverty in less developed countries and in improving the lives of women of poorer communities.

# Water matters, every drop counts, but for whom?

The United Nations and World Water Vision declared that every woman, man and child must have access to safe and adequate water, sanitation and food, and that they must also be responsible for ensuring maintenance of the ecosystem.

Governments were urged to involve interest groups in all levels of decision and policy-making, and to establish and strengthen mechanisms at international, national and regional levels to facilitate the participation of women. It is debatable how successfully women have been involved in decision-making about water resource issues.



*Every woman, man and child must have access to safe and adequate water, sanitation and food*

## Women at the margins of water

There is a need to rethink the processes and policies currently being developed in the water sector.

Over the last decade, policies have shifted in such a way that the State in many countries no longer wants to be a provider of water resources. In Australia too, the emphasis has now moved to creating a sector for water-related activities through the establishment of a framework in which communities can themselves construct, operate and manage water facilities.

- *How far is this new approach gender aware?*
- *Are gender roles subsumed in what is seen as 'community'?*
- *If this happens, can women become marginalised in the management of water resources?*

When water is viewed mainly as an 'economic good', the emphasis moves away from health and sanitation in which women have recognised interests. The new system appears to be gender neutral but in reality is marked by gender bias of various forms. Whether in the developed world or in a less developed country, many of the chores performed by women have to do with water. Women form half the population and are users of water in such ways that involve the health of families.

# Water reflects values of the society

Water is commonly seen as formless, taking the shape of whatever holds it. It is the most fluid, illusive and changeable element surrounding us. However, water also reflects, and often the cultural values and inequities in access to power – economic, social and political - are reflected in water use and decision-making.

In most cases, when entire communities suffer from lack of access to safe and adequate water, the difficulties are not quite the same for women and men. Women are in physical contact with contaminated water, leading to serious adverse health impacts.

Many examples of the health effects have been noted, and have been the reason for a greater emphasis on women in water and sanitation projects in less developed countries.

Women are also burdened with the responsibility of providing water, making household decisions about water use, and through these tasks have often developed an intimate knowledge of water.

*Women are burdened with the responsibility of providing water and making household decisions about water use.*



In Papua New Guinea, a mining company controls water, its distribution and use.

These knowledges are often untapped when community-level decisions are made, as they are different from those propagated by the masculinist views of control.

For example, when water is part of the 'commons', entire communities have user rights and even control over it. However, when an external agency, say a mining company, takes up resource-ownership, it tends to impose its values on water ownership, distribution and use.

As a result, the community becomes dependent upon that external agency for the provision of water, the supply of which may not remain as reliable as before. Women, who are major household users of water, suffer most if the supply or quality changes for the worse, as they are dependent on a resource that is now controlled externally.

# Where have all the women gone?

Take a look at the decision-making structures with regard to water. This is a solidly masculine world, not only in its value systems, but also in proportional representation of women. If one looks at national and international water symposiums and forums, one sees a marked imbalance between women and men participants.

- *Is this because women are not interested or are not involved?*

Women are important water users in Australia and the Asia-Pacific, not only in urban middle class families but also on rural farms and in industries. They are household water managers but have little space in public decision-making regarding water.

- *Is the absence of women in the decision-making structure because women lack support at points of entry and a poor enabling environment?*

There are examples of women who have led their communities in negotiations over water issues, but at higher levels of decision-making, the voices of such women are hardly heard.



## When bond becomes a bondage:

Untapped connections between water, gender and poverty

In less developed countries, women in poorer communities perform the role of primary water resource manager, as water carriers, end-users and family health educators.

Women are often affected most severely by changes in water availability or a reduction in water quality, leading to a chain effect through generations.

At the same time, the nature of jobs usually performed by women is such that they are in constant contact with polluted or poor quality water, and affected by the lack of sanitation, and thus are most vulnerable to water-borne diseases.

Water is indeed a matter of life and death for women in poorer communities in many less developed countries.

*Women are informal water managers at the household level*



*Women are users of water in such ways that involve the health of families*



*Women involved with water perform productive roles in the economy*



# Water in Australia

Australia is among the highest water consuming nations, although it is the 'driest inhabited continent' in the world. At the same time, the country has a rather high level of awareness of water-related issues.

## Colonising water

### *Greening the country*

The colonising process of Australia is also one of colonizing the 'red' or 'brown' indigenous state into 'green', a re-formed country. The indigenous land is brown, which is turned into green by the colonial intervention.

In indigenous cultures, water is an integral part of the consciousness.

*'I grew up in a little remote part here in central Australia ... Water was, from my earliest recollections, one of the most important precious items of our daily lives. We didn't cultivate. We walked very lightly on the earth, trusting that it would meet our daily needs and, miraculously, for thousands of years the land did meet our daily needs. It not only met our daily needs, it also took us and we became a part of that land:'*

Rose Kunoth Monks

[www.desertknowledges.com.au/symposium.html](http://www.desertknowledges.com.au/symposium.html)

## Colonising water

### *Taming water*

Australia's hydrology has been a location of great anxiety for the colonists. Water distribution in Australia is understood by the colonist as being particularly 'abnormal', 'out of control' and 'irrational'.

The irregularity is understood as 'chaotic', leading to the 'lexicon of control and rationalization'. In the colonial control of the indigenous space, water becomes an element which colonists have rights to order, allocate, license, and charge. 'Water' is combined with other terms of controlled distribution to form water allocation, water charge, water license, water ordering, water rates and water rights.

Taming removes the threat of the anarchy of the indigenous world – 'flooding' – and 'opens' the country to development, to change, and to the future.

J. M. Arthur, *Default Country*

## *Streams of Knowledge*

Indigenous communities in Australia often have special knowledges of the land they live in and that contains the vital, life-giving water. Deborah Bird Rose in her book puts the dreaming stories on land and water.

One of the great creator beings of the south-east, Nguril (Ngrunderi) is commemorated in a song sung by a man named Pound who came from the Lachlan River area of New South Wales:

*Look her! Nguril did this!*

*That is what Nguril did.*

*Look her! Nguril did this!*

*Plain after plain, with flowing creeks,*

*To the River's water.*

'To know the country is to know the story of how it came into being, and that story also carries the knowledge of how the human owners of that country came into being. Except in cases of succession, the relationship between the people and their country is understood have existed from time immemorial ~ to be part of the land itself. 'Sometimes dreaming men and women 'walked separately and thus created gendered places. ... There are places where men cannot drink the water, cannot look at smoke that rises from women's country':

Deborah Rose, *Nourishing Terrain*



*'Sometimes dreaming men  
and women 'walked  
separately and thus  
created gendered places ...  
There are places where  
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women's country!'*

# Australia & Asia Pacific

Australia has recently announced its water aid policy for Asia Pacific, stating that it will focus on governance and delivery systems. The focus on governance, in particular, must promote 'efficient, equitable and sustainable' use of water resources.

Australia has a long history of community participation in resource governance (in catchment management for example) and has led the world in bringing about a paradigm shift by returning environmental flows to river systems.

This is in a way an acceptance of the rights of rivers to flow over space. All around us, we notice changing values – from an emphasis on 'use' towards a stewardship ethic in natural resource management.

It is time for us to take forward the agenda of gender mainstreaming in the water sector.

Many Australians want to be assured that the nation's freshwater ecosystems are healthy and want peoples' involvement in water management at the community and government level. They want the spiritual, aesthetic and cultural values of peoples – of indigenous as well as non-indigenous, or urban as well as rural, of women as well as men – to be reflected in water policies as much as the scientific understanding.

*Australia will focus its aid policy for Asia Pacific on governance and delivery systems*



*Many Australians want to be assured that the nation's water management systems reflect the participation of both women and men*



# How to make gender matter in water

We need gender segregated data that breaks up household level uses to show the gender distribution of water use.

Recently, international forums have emphasized the need for the enhancement of social and gender statistics in the water sector. The use of alternative data sources to generate social and gender statistics at the household level will be a good step.

Unfortunately, so far, the programs dealing with irrigation, agriculture, domestic water supply, sanitation and urban-industrial development have seen 'the household' as the lowest common entity, thus treating the roles and power distributions as being equal within the family.

*In most cultures, women and men do different work and have different access to resources*

Is the household really an entirely homogeneous unit of production, consumption and decision-making? In most cultures, women and men, often supported by children, do different work, have different access to resources, and different areas in which they can make decisions and exercise control over resources and benefits.

Again, there is evidence that the ways in which water resources are managed within and between the different sectors of the economy are highly gender-specific. Whether in rural and remote locations, in urban centres, in domestic and in agricultural requirements, in construction, food processing, dairying, fishing and in cottage industries such as local textiles and potteries, in low-income communities or in higher income groups – water plays an important role.

In all these cases, one can see a gender-specific division of tasks, means and responsibilities. The gender roles associated with individual practices also influence each other. For example, in the past, class, ethnic and religious groupings were seen as significant in water, whereas gender remained ignored.

- Decision-makers and administrators at all levels need to be gender-sensitized, that is made aware of the difference that gender makes in water use.
- We need to take note of the agenda that international forums have stressed – that there should be many more women in decision-making roles in the water sector in every country.
- The organizations implementing the development and management of water resources must ask who requires water for what purposes at the household or community level, and what impacts the new measures and structures will have on these uses and user groups.

The gender issues in water have been actively discussed over the last few years all over the world. They have been documented, and connections between gender, development and water have been made.

The need for mainstreaming gender was felt by various international bodies and efforts in that direction have started in many countries.



It is true that gender mainstreaming faces deep-seated cultural problems, and any policy changes will have to be implemented through further capacity building. At the community level, a more enabling environment needs to be created for women. While participating in public affairs, it needs to be remembered that this must not increase their work burdens.

Gender needs to be seen in the overall context of empowerment through water related decision-making and this would allow both women and men to appreciate the benefits of a gender approach.

## What can we do?

- Develop comprehensive strategies for gender mainstreaming in international, national, regional and local institutions, including government, donor and civil society organizations
- Integrate gender concerns in state water policies through the inclusion of mechanisms that encourage the participation of women in decision-making
- Political will for effective policy implementation
- Establish targets and benchmarks for a balance in representation of women and men in water forums at all levels
- Gender segregation of water-related information and the provision of freely available information
- Gender sensitisation and gender education of the corporate sector so that it encourages and supports a gender perspective
- Train women in technical areas of water so that they can participate at higher decision-making levels
- Train local communities to enable a change in roles for both women and men in water resource management and in the decision-making process

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