

WATER PRIVATIZATION

FROM A

GENDER PERSPECTIVE



Water Privatization from a Gender Perspective

Published by Heinrich Böll Foundation

Produced in Thailand

All rights reserved

© Heinrich Böll Foundation, Thailand and
South East Asian Regional Office, June 2003

Text, Design and Layout: Carsten Klöpfer

Editors: Heike Löschmann, Peter Crawford and Hilke Kögl

Cover Photo: UNESCO 2003

Heinrich Böll Foundation, 91/9 Umong Soi 5, Suthep Road,
Tambon Suthep, Muang, Chiang Mai 50200
Tel. 053-810430, Fax 053-810124, Email sunny@hbfasia.org,
Internet www.hbfasia.org/thailand

HEINRICH BÖLL FOUNDATION

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg 2002), world leaders committed themselves to a gender approach within international water management policies and practice:

We are committed to ensure that women empowerment and emancipation and gender equality are integrated in all the activities encompassed within Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals and the Plan of Implementation of the Summit.”

Governments, GOs and NGOs, various institutions and civil society organizations have acknowledged **the critical role of women in water and natural resources management**. Yet, gender inequalities are the norm rather than the exception. Over the last decade, the “Concept of Integrated Water Resources Management” (IWRM) has explicitly included women in the sustainable use and management of water resources.

IWRM is a cross-cultural policy approach, developed by UNDP in 2003 for people involved in water resources management issues (<http://www.undp.org/water/gender-guide/index.html>) - to respond to the growing demands for water in the context of finite water supplies and is premised on a number of principles:

- Water should be treated as an economic, social and environmental good;
- Water policies should focus on the management of water and not just on the provision of water;
- Governments should facilitate and enable the sustainable development of water resources, including a regulatory framework;
- Water resources should be managed at the lowest appropriate level (not on a highly centralized one);
- There should be recognition that women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.

There are three elements in an approach to gender and IWRM:

- In every initiative, programmers and analysts should take steps to understand the differences and relations among and between women and men in each specific context under consideration.
- Based on this analysis, all initiatives should incorporate women’s and men’s perspectives, needs and interests and, where possible, promote the advancement of women (reduce gender inequalities).
- Participatory approaches that facilitate the equitable participation of women and men should be used.

GATS (GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TRADE IN SERVICES) AND WATER

GATS was in the WTO contract 1995 and it will be a central issue in the WTO Ministerial Meeting in September 2003 in Cancun. Due to economic and ethic considerations water management was not included.

Yet, the EU demands 72 countries to open their water market and tries to strengthen the global dominance of big European water companies (Suez Lyonnais, Vivendi, RWE/ Thames Water und Saur). The EU promote private funding as key tools to achieve one target of the 7th millenium development goal “Ensure environmental sustainability” (to halve the people with no fresh water access - currently 1,2 billion - by 2015).

The WTO pretends that governments could freely decide which service sectors they want to open to the free market. Yet, large service companies put pressure on governments to allow global competition. Once a country has decided to take on board liberalization obligations, it is hardly possible to call off privatization measures. The population is mostly uninformed about the effects of privatization and will be confronted with accomplished facts. **The whole procedure is highly undemocratic and decreases solidarity.**

So far the governments hold the responsibility for basic services to all human beings regardless of their age, their health and financial situation. Once global service companies take over, these sectors will change radically. **They are interested in profit and competition not common welfare. They do not necessarily need to be accountable to the people.**

Deregulation and enhancement of efficiency means in practice reduced jobs, increase a number of unfair work contracts, aggravate competition and decrease solidarity. Enhancement of efficiency is nevertheless needed to manage fresh water sustainability. Yet, community participation and decentralized management systems are workable alternatives to corporate privatization.

Poverty has a woman’s face. Of the 1.3 billion people in poverty, 70% are women.”

- HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX, UNDP 1995

Facts about Water

- **1 billion** people are making a 3 hour journey on foot every day to fetch water.
- **1.1 billion** people lack access to safe drinking water.
- **2.4 billion** people lack access to sanitation.
- **5 million** people annually die of diseases transmitted by polluted water or **10.000** children per day under the age of 5 compared to only **16** people per day in the US.
- **One third** of the world's population live in countries with high water stress (water consumption exceeds 10 per cent of renewable freshwater resources).
- **Two thirds** of the world's population are expected to be without drinking water by 2025.
- **80 countries** suffer water scarcity which make up
- **40%** of the world's population.
- **40%** is the expected increase in global water use by 2020.
- **40%** of our sweet waters are still too polluted for fishing and swimming.
- **75%** of the world's renewable freshwater resources are absorbed by agriculture.
- **One liter** of water generates six times more profit than one liter of gasoline.
- **23 liters** of water is needed for a single serving of lettuce, **186** for a glass of milk, **9.880** for a steak and **25.840** to grow a day's food for a family of four.
- **26 billion liters** of water are flushed down their toilets in the USA every day.

GENDER AND PRIVATIZATION

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of women and men and the relationship between them. Gender, therefore, does not simply refer to women or men, but to the way behaviours and identities are determined through the process of socialization. Like the concepts of class, race and ethnicity, gender is an analytical tool for understanding social processes. These roles and expectations are culturally specific and they can and do change.

- STATUS OF WOMEN, CANADA

As a common structural problem women suffer the most from water privatization, therefore this text is predominantly concerned with the women's perspective. Worldwide, women provide basic services, whether they are working as teachers or nurses in the public sector, unprotected and poorly paid as domestic workers or elderly care takers, or unpaid housewives. The public sector has previously been an important employer for women where they can find socially protected jobs.

Where privatization takes place, as a first rule lesser qualified women are laid off. Jobs are turned into part-time employment and cheap labour with women pushed into self-employment. **Rationalization and reduction of governmental benefits culminate in a shifting of social services from the paid to the unpaid sector, where these services are compensated by women in the households or the communities as an "unpaid honorary position"**. Moreover, women – especially single and poor women – are dependent on affordable public services. **GATS will increase the unpaid work of women as well as the low paid informal sector (outside of the social security net) and will deepen social polarization.**

Yet, we can already look at the picture of such a future in the countries of the South. As the "UN Conference on the status of Women" in Beijing in 1995 stated, the World Bank induced policy of privatization led to a **dramatic impoverishment of millions of women.**

Why a Gendered Approach?

UNDP lists a number of reasons for the inclusion of a gender approach in water initiatives (<http://www.undp.org/water/gender.html>):

- Involving both women and men in integrated water resources initiatives can increase project effectiveness.
- Using a gender perspective and ensuring women's involvement can support environmental sustainability.
- Social and economic analysis - as well as documenting natural resource use - is incomplete without an understanding of gender differences and inequalities.
- Without specific attention to gender issues, initiatives and projects can reinforce inequalities between women and men and even increase imbalances.

GENDER AND WATER MANAGEMENT

In most cultures, **women and men have different roles and responsibilities in the use and management of water** - women and girls are responsible for cooking, cleaning, health, hygiene and, with men, food production. The burden of fetching water in areas where infrastructure is poor – spending up to 4 hours per day carrying heavy containers - inhibits women’s involvement in other activities such as education, income generation, cultural and political involvement, rest and recreation.

The best approach to protecting the world’s ecosystems is ensuring that women are involved in integrated land and water use planning.”

- *THE MINISTERIAL DECLARATION OF THE 2ND WORLD WATER FORUM 2000*

Private companies will only invest in profitable infrastructure and services. Men’s work is considered a part of the productive economy of paid labor reflected in GNP growth and as such it is generally seen as more worthy. As a result, there may be infrastructure investment for irrigation, but not for safe drinking water within cartage distance. Little consideration is given to women’s work and it’s not taken into account how much productivity would be freed up when women don’t have to compensate for bad water infrastructure.

The absence of women in decision-making positions as well as the externalization of the reproductive economy from GNP accounting results in the creation of policies that fail to address women’s needs and concerns. Women determine the appropriate domestic use of water, but are rarely involved in decision-making on sanitation and hygiene issues. **Women’s equal participation at all levels of decision-making is critical to achieve a more equitable provision of water and sanitation services.**

Poor women, as managers of household and community water, have been first to signal **problems with water privatization**, including: astronomical price hikes, water disconnections due to unpaid bills, lack of accountability mechanisms for users, hygiene issues and deterioration of water quality. In some cases poor women have been forced to decide between paying for water or feeding their children.

Water politics and water management systems should be gender-sensitive. They should reflect the division of labor - paid and unpaid – between men and women in all settings related to water.”

- *THE 2001 INTERNATIONAL FRESHWATER CONFERENCE
IN BONN, GERMANY*

What does this quote consequently mean? **It means to account for unpaid reproductive work.** The flow chart of our economic model is nevertheless not “designed” to provide for such accountability. While in the past the externalisation of environmental costs or low cost natural resource use was a common feature. More recently the “commodification of the commons” became the norm and the unpaid reproductive services of women providing for the “work force” still go unrecognized. This has severe impact on policy making, sidelining women’s needs on providing these basic social services in the field of the care economy.

WATER – A PUBLIC GOOD OR A COMMODITY FOR PROFIT?

Proponents of privatization argue the “discipline and efficiency” of the market; no mis-management, full-cost recovery, financial viability, management acumen, customer service, capital to maintain and develop new water and sanitation infrastructure.

But the right to water is a human right which is often lost in the open market. In particular, a vast number of poor women and children suffer most from the consequences.

The risks of privatization are

- public access to and control of fresh water is limited,
- the increase in corruption,
- the market dominance of a few competitive service providers,
- the reduction of government autonomy in policy-making for regulatory frameworks and pricing, particularly in developing countries with low governance systems and very limited public participation in planning and monitoring.

To remain competitive, many countries decrease taxes and sustainability criteria in environmental resources management. Due to falling taxes there is a lack of money for the protection of waterbodies and waste water management. At the same time it is getting more difficult for governments to regulate pollution with preventive environmental laws. However, **key elements of an efficient and socially balanced water supply must be transparency, sufficient incentives for service providers and consumers alike, as well as strong institutional and regulatory frameworks.**

If you want to see which way a country is headed, look at the country's budget and how it allocates resources for women and children."

- PREGS GOVENDER, MOP, SOUTH AFRICA

GENDER AND WATER MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Agriculture

Agriculture is by far the largest user of freshwater. Irrigated agriculture provides some 40% of the world's food and consumes about 75% of the world's renewable freshwater resources.

The poor resource position and social inequity of the majority of women mean that they produce less and suffer higher production risk than men. Sector and national economies could improve dramatically if

policies enabled women to contribute better. Therefore it would benefit the whole society if policies promoted inclusion, participation and equity. Nevertheless, the inequities in this sector cover an extensive range of issues. These include: land tenure, access to water, participation, resource control, marketing, capacity and skills development.

Challenges

- Ratify the "Convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women" (CEDAW).
- Enable women (producers) to become decision makers and owners.
- Promote and support women's right to inherit land.
- Ensure that women farmers have access to land, water, credit, marketing, technical input and training.
- Recognize the unpaid care economy in GNP calculation

Drinking Water

According to the WHO the percentage of people with access to improved water supply rose from 79% in 1990 to 82% in 2000. Still, obtaining drinking water continues to be a preoccupation for women in the North and the South. **Poor women throughout the world have an especially difficult time obtaining safe and affordable water.** Women in the North are increasingly faced with the reality of dealing with toxic chemicals in their water supply as well as rising costs in bottled water.

Women engaged with water in the domestic sphere and the reproductive economy, their management, knowledge and use of water are not valued or given recognition. The reproductive economy and the household is not considered financially productive, nor given monetary value – it is not contributing directly to the GNP. The engagement of men with agriculture, irrigation, livestock and with industrial and commercial uses are considered priorities and so is their involvement in decision making.

Women's relationship to drinking water is only acknowledged in the domestic sphere along with health and hygiene, even though research has demonstrated the reality to be otherwise. For example, rural women in Africa are the primary producers of food (i.e. in Tanzania 60-70%).

The time is long overdue for a recognition of the role of women in all economies: care, productive, formal, informal, export and domestic, and of their involvement in decision making in these economies.

Challenges

- Water (services) should be provided at fair and reasonable rates and with a payment system that is flexible to reflect different social and socioeconomic patterns.
- Link proposed rate increases with agreed-upon improvements in service based on consultations with women and men in different user categories.
- Subsidies, if necessary, should be economically, socially and environmentally sound.
- Government should retain or establish public ownership and control of water resources.
- Public agencies and water service providers should monitor water quality, quantity and reliability of delivery.
- An integrated and holistic approach should be designed and operationed with the influence of women to meet their requirements.
- Involve institutions with experience in improving water supply and supporting micro-enterprise development in the re-formulation of current policies.
- De-link water and poverty by providing income-generating opportunities that depend less on water and local market orientation.

Sanitation and Hygiene

According to the WHO, 2.4 billion people annually don't have access to any form of sanitary means. As a result, 4 billion cases of diarrhoea were reported each year resulting in an annual death toll of 2.2 million infants and young children, which makes prevention an important family concern. Unfortunately, more money and resources are spent in treating water-related sicknesses than on sanitation provision and hygiene education. The cost of health care and loss of life, productivity, exports and tourism revenue totals millions of dollars. The burden for the sick falls on women again.

In fact, few development issues demonstrate the gender divide in human society more graphically than sanitation. As the traditional water bearers and custodians of family health, women shoulder a huge burden in coping with the lack of basic sanitation services.

Hygiene concerns must be perceived as a concern of women, men and children, instead of the sole responsibility of women.

Challenges

- Provide support for the establishment of national targets for sanitation within the framework of the Millenium Development Goals and provide a guide to the level of investment required.
- While promoting an integrated approach, separate policies should be designed addressing gender-sensitive hygiene promotion and sanitation improvements.
- Governments should ensure that national sanitation policies are gender sensitive, that formulation was participated by women and addresses both practical and strategic needs.
- Create an enabling environment that will stimulate public and private sector investment.
- Governments should ensure that schools have adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities and that there are separate and private facilities for girls.

LITERATURE

- Gender and Water Alliance (GWA): The gender approach to water management, Lessons learned around the globe. Delft 2003a
(Download: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/wedc/publications/gwa/The-Gender-Approach-to-Water-Management-Lessons-Learnt.pdf>)
- Gender and Water Alliance (Prabha Khosla): Tapping into sustainability: issues and trends in gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation. Delft 2003b
(Download: <http://www.genderandwateralliance.org/reports/3wwfsessions/3wwf4.doc>)
- Greenpepper Collectif: Water issues: struggles, ideas and reflexions from a grassroots perspective. Amsterdam 2003
(Html Version: <http://squat.net/cia/gp/hom.php>)
- GTZ: GATS and the Liberalization of Water Supply Services. Eschborn 2003
(Download (still) not available. GTZ Water Pages: <http://www.gtz.de/themen/english/environment-infrastructure/water.htm>)
- GWA (Prabha Khosla): Tapping into sustainability: issues and trends in gender mainstreaming in water and sanitation. Delft 2003
(Download: <http://www.genderandwateralliance.org/reports/3wwfsessions/3wwf4.doc>)
- Prabha Khosla: Water, Equity and Money. The need for gender-responsive budgeting in water and sanitation. The Netherlands Council of Women 2003
- UNDP: Mainstreaming Gender in Water Management. A Practical Journey to Sustainability: A Resource Guide. New York 2003
(Download: http://www.undp.org/water/docs/resource_guide.pdf)
- UNESCO: Water for people, water for life, Paris 2003
(Download: <http://www.unesco.org/water/wwap/wwdr/index.shtml>)
- Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO): Untapped Connections: Gender, Water and Poverty. New York 2003
(Download: http://www.wedo.org/sus_dev/untapped.pdf)