



## Water and sanitation - a gender approach

*Vijita Fernando, NGO Water and Sanitation Decade Service, Sri Lanka.*

IN THE BEGINNING water and sanitation (WS) projects tended to focus almost exclusively on physical works. The people for whom they were intended were mere users or beneficiaries. This thinking changed fast, fortunately, and at least a decade before the UN decade for water and sanitation was declared in early 1981, community participation began to be identified as the key to the success of WS projects. But community participation became a male affair and women had no active role. They became "users" or "target groups" for health education with only the community men being involved as leaders, committee members and caretakers.

For greater efficiency and effectiveness of WS projects it became quite clear in the eighties that women needed to play a greater role. Their views had to be listened to and their participation was vital if WS projects were to bring extra benefits for the community and women. The realisation of the value of women's participation created a demand among projects for practical guidelines and how they could be brought effectively into planning, implementation and maintenance processes. These guidelines proved very effective and worldwide, many projects and programmes had glowing stories of the effectiveness of projects with active and full women's participation.

Where were the men now? There was a tendency to ignore the roles of men and this meant that focusing more on women's roles reduced the responsibilities of the men. Extra focus on women also overburdened women who already had the hands full, especially in Third World situations. It also brought cultural problems. The need for women and men to share the decision making, the work and their functions more equally was becoming apparent, resulting in what we now call a "gender approach".

It is rather difficult to get the concept crystal clear. In simple terms, gender, as against sex which is a biological difference, is the result of a socialisation process which assigns to women and men certain aptitudes, roles and responsibilities leading to certain forms of behaviour. Gender is the social and changeable difference between man and a woman in a particular social situation.

In the gender approach we assume that the community - men and women - are the agents of their own development, with development agents in a supportive role. In situations where women are in a subordinate group women can easily be denied an active role in development with the self determination of the community becoming the self determination of the men. What is meant by gender approach is the aptitudes, roles and responsibilities of both men and women are taken into account

requiring an open mind and aiming at the fullest participation of both women and men. Here we look at the two concepts - women's involvement and the gender approach. Women's involvement means that due to their disadvantaged position there is a perceived need to uplift them and bring them into the mainstream of development. Programmes focusing on women's involvement often have a negative effect as they tend to increase women's workload.

The gender approach, on the other hand, envisages a situation with more equality and justice, also taking into account existing aptitudes, roles and responsibilities of women and men. This approach gives more opportunities for women, make them share their burdens and recognize women as equal partners.

It is a working together for water and sanitation in its simplest form!

"Together for water and sanitation" is a project I would like to talk about, perhaps one of the very few efforts to introduce a gender approach to WS that has taken place in Sri Lanka.

In September last year (1993) 17 participants from 7 Asian countries and Yemen worked together for two weeks in a hotel on the outskirts of Colombo close to the beautiful beach - just as you are now - to develop perhaps the first manual giving guidelines for a gender approach in WS. This project was by the International Reference Centre of the Netherlands and coordinated by the Sri Lankan NGO consortium, water and sanitation decade service.

We were 16 women and one man. They came from Bangladesh (the man!), India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Bhutan, Philippines, Pakistan. The Hague and Sri Lanka provided the facilitator and coordinator.

I think before I go on to tell you something of the process of producing the manual, I should answer the question I myself asked when the process was launched. Why a manual? The rationale was that though individual countries in the region - and elsewhere in the world - were trying out new and innovative methods in gender and other aspects of WS, other countries were not aware of events taking place even in the region. The manual would document such experiences providing a source of information from other contexts and other experiences on how they were trying to introduce a gender approach to WS.

Also, despite the growing concern and urgency of an effective gender approach in WS, no practice gender approach in WS, no practical field tested guide was available which had a strong base of experience from the field.

Visualising and producing such a guide as the one we did was a hundred percent participatory effort. It would include participant's methods of working on gender concepts at field level, organisational methods of sensitising staff on gender issues and at policy level, how implementing agency field workers influence policy makers. It is through the eyes of the participants that the manual would view "women's involvement/gender approach" first broadly and in a wider context and more specifically as related to WS.

As we worked through the day and sometimes half the night, we were a closely knit group, sharing information on seven countries on a variety of projects and a hundred ideas on how to produce a manual!

With the background of the participants' work in WS clear, we identified problems related to women's involvement each encountered in his/her work. Problems were clarified on a problem tree which helped in the identification of the root of the problem hammering a gender approach. It was easy to see the nature of the problem - these were not always related to lack of water. Quality of water, sanitation and the environment, drought which increased women's workload and increased women's workload and health problems caused by constant carrying of water on the head - all these stood in the way of women's true participation.

One hard fact emerged - it was impossible to make general statements about the role of women in WS. The situation in each country differed even when the countries were in the same zone.

However, it was possible to come to some conclusions. The ultimate aim of women's involvement is to achieve a more equitable society - in relation to the burden of women's work burden, decision making and planning, access to paid official positions. WS projects address practical needs of women. But through the working methods used, strategic needs can be addressed. Women's involvement thus is not a mere contribution of labour. It is access to resources, decision making and management tasks. It should not be a process to overburden women further and reinforce their gendered roles. To achieve this men need women to be sensitized on gender issues, the roles of women and their own roles.

Shared experiences showed us that while the position of women varied within the region, the lot of the rural woman is an unenviable one, with their triple burden of home, work and community. They are overtired, undernourished with too much work and too many pregnan-

cies. Often they are a prey to strong forces within the family and the larger society outside the home. The woman has little voice in matters that concern her or her children outside the home. She hardly ever makes decisions in public affairs that concern her vitally, as WS, the environment, her health. Such decisions are left to the men. She has no voice even in the physical well being of her body, often her only possession. Tradition and culture shackle her. Illiteracy isolates her. Girl children are often unwelcome as they entail a tremendous financial burden on the family.

Scarce water places special burdens on women who do not always realise that they themselves contribute to their over burdening as in cases of deforestation - resulting in less water and longer distances to carry.

All of us agreed that empowerment of women should be a common goal for women to take charge of their own lives, be less dependent on men to have their voices heard. We spoke of the importance of employment to increase their decision making capacity to influence changes that reduce their drudgery. Hopeful silver linings emerged.

With these facts at the backs of our minds, we prepared the guidelines for the manual - identifying tools, case studies, checklists for policy development, gender sensitizing programmes for project staff and guidelines for the integration of a gender sensitive approach in all project phases. The manual also would include a gender specific baseline data formulation, environment assessment, planning with the community, developing gender sensitive materials, task decisions which would increase gender awareness at community level, increasing women's self esteem through economic activities, selecting the right technology, training for operation and maintenance, spare part supply by women's groups, a women's water book and some real soul searching in the section "Do women really participate?"

The manual also have a sprinkling of case studies from the various participating countries, list of books and videos which might be of help, and a note on funding agencies.

As I write this paper the manual is still in draft form. Those who got it together have gone through the draft and provided comments, criticisms, deletions, additions to perfect a labour of love, painstaking produced by this group and ably put together by IRC's eveline bolt.

Hopefully by the time I present this paper the final version may be available for us to look at.

I certainly hope so!