



## Women's participation in water projects

*Audrey Lubisi, South Africa*



THIS PAPER IS based on the experience learnt by the author while working with the Claude Harris Leon Foundation Water Programme (CHLF) based at the University of the Witwatersrand Rural Facility (WRF). The CHLF funds small scale Water Projects in the Sabie-Sand River catchment and in some areas in the disputed Bushbuckridge area.

Participatory evaluation workshops were held with some of the communities funded by the Foundation. The objective of the evaluation was to see whether the projects have been successful or not, what problems were experienced and how were they solved. In addition to this, the objective was also to identify lessons learnt by different committees and the Programme itself. Among other things, it was found that rural people are committed to development projects even though most of them are illiterate and are not working. This commitment is however largely confined to the older generation, with the youth being largely disinterested. The most striking issue which came out of the evaluation was the poor participation of women in Water Projects. Most of the Water Committees are dominated by men. The few women elected to the committees are passive often take the back seat. Their presence in the committee often has little (or no) impact on decisions taken with regard to the project. Women are generally only involved during implementation stage where they provide labour. They are not put into strategic positions that can make their involvement meaningful.

Nonetheless, women remain the number one collectors of water. They are duty bound to ensure that there is water at home on a daily basis. Experience in the Bushbuckridge area reveals that many women wake up as early as 05H:00 to walk long distances to fetch water. They will then wait for an hour or so in a queue, with no guarantees on the reliability of the source, and return home late. Because they are not actively involved in the projects, they do not form part of the decision-making process. Men will take decisions and women will accept them without questioning.

In order to deal with the above problems, a research study was conducted in a sample of five villages. The primary objective of the research was to find out what is hindering women from actively participating in Water Projects and to recommend strategies which could be implemented to improve their involvement. This was informed by looking at the Water Committees themselves and the activities they are involved in.

### Methodology

The research was aimed at addressing a problem, rather than solely being an information gathering exercise for academic purposes.. To meet this objective, participatory research methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques like Time Line, Matrix, Venn Diagram etc. were used. The reason for using these techniques was to involve as many people as possible. This worked well because such methods are accommodative to both the literate and the illiterate. Group discussions were held with other structures in the community, including the Women's League/ Clubs, Reconstruction and Development Committees (RDCs), political organisations and the community in general. Semi structured interviews were also conducted. House-to-house visits were done to reach those who could not attend the group discussions. In subjects of a sensitive nature, women were grouped separately because they felt free and relaxed when they were alone. After discussions, all groups came together and one person was chosen from each group to present to the entire group.

### Research findings and analysis

Many factors were identified as being the cause of poor participation of women in Water Projects. It is interesting to note that some problems were raised mostly by men while some by women. The way Water Committees are composed have an effect on the way the members will participate. For example women feel free to talk when they are many in a committee, though this rarely happens. Educated women such as teachers, nurses, social workers often do not want to participate in development issues.

### Culture and illiteracy

South African culture was identified as the important factor contributing towards poor participation. In the past women were not allowed to go to school as this was viewed as a waste of time and money. They were expected to spend most of their time in the field while men received education. It was believed that there was no need for a woman to receive education because her traditional role was one of housewife and mother. As a result, most of the women did not attend school, which clearly would have effected their self confidence.

Most of the women do not talk during meetings because they are not sure as to whether what they will say will make sense. They believe that because most of the men are

**Table 1. Division of labour in the water committee**

Activities	Men	Women
1. Organising village labourers	8	3
2. Collecting community contribution	2	7
3. Digging trenches	3	10
4. Leading committees	10	1
5. Fixing broken pipes	9	4
6. Making decisions	10	2
7. Reporting to the Induna and other community structures	8	3
8. Safe keeping community contributions	2	10
9. Participating in other community structures	7	6

*NB. The table above was done using stones to quantify the involvement of both sexes in different activities.*

literate, they (men) can do better than them. For example one will say that because she cannot write her own name, she cannot stand up and talk in the presence of those who are educated. The community at large also prefers to elect educated men to serve in their committees. Women are usually not considered and this in itself is disempowering.

### Women themselves

It was found that in many cases women are jealous of one another. There are very few active women in the communities and they are often criticised by other women who say that they think they are better than others. There is a tendency to say that if a woman talks in a meeting she wants recognition from men. To avoid conjugal conflict, women therefore prefer to remain silent. Women are even jealous about minor things such as clothes they wear. All these demotivate a woman who is prepared to take an active role in the community.

### Time factor and culture

The normal practice in rural areas requires that a woman wake up early in the morning, cleans the house and yard, cooks, goes to the field, fetches water and firewood and looks after the kids. All this is done without the involvement of men and it is considered normal. This means that women do not have time left to devote to other activities taking place in the community. The research indicated that women spend up to 15 hours a day doing home chores while unemployed men spend only 6 hours. In some communities where the majority of men are working, meetings are held from 18H:00. Women often have problems with such times especially those whose husbands are working locally. Due to the problems such as crime and the fact that it is considered immoral for women to go out and meet with men while their husbands stay at home, they are normally unable to participate in such meetings.

### Poor communication

Often important things happen in the community without women knowing about them. Development organisations and consultants when visit the community usually go via the Civic, Induna and other local structures such as like the RDCs or Forums. All these structures are male dominated

and meetings are often conducted in English, even if all of them can understand the local language. Important messages do not reach women and it becomes difficult for them to participate during mass meetings.

### Political riots of the past

During the apartheid era, lot of people were killed in the struggle. Youth were in the forefront and they demanded everybody to join the struggle, including women. Because most women in rural areas were not well informed about politics, they found it difficult to participate in such events. What made matters worse was to loose their children and their loved ones in the struggle. The best solution to them was to stay away from public appearance, not attending mass meetings and marches. They did not want to be seen in public because of fear of being victimised. In one Water Committee where all the women are active, it was reported that involvement in the struggle played a very crucial part in their lives in general and their public participation level in particular. Other Water Committees were made up of people with different political orientations. That brought a lot of tension in committees and women were forced to resign fearing for their lives.

Looking at the above table, men are given responsibilities such as leadership, co-ordination, reporting back to the community, technical issues and decision making, while women are more involved in collecting community contributions, providing labour and caring for water. All responsibilities that are female dominated involve neither critical thinking, public appearance nor technical work. This puts women in a subservient position and also restricts them from doing activities which will empower them.

### Strategies for improving the participation of women in water projects

#### Changing culture in meetings

During meetings women should be given a chance to facilitate. Men have taken this role for a long time hence they should have the skills to transfer to women. Facilitators need to assure men that this is not aimed at power away

from them, but it is a way of empowering women as well. Women should be encouraged to sit in front where they can be seen by every body. They should be encouraged to ask questions and give their opinions.

Because of the high level of illiteracy amongst rural women, local languages must be used. This will ensure that every body understands the issue under discussion and also will avoid misinterpretation.

There are cultural attributes and practices in rural areas that perpetuate gender discrimination. Although culture-related causes are not easy to address since culture has to do with the way people live and do things, some steps have to be taken to make sure that women are not left behind. This can be achieved if the development workers work through community leaders who have a greater influence in the community.

#### **A supportive policy framework at project level**

The national Policy on Water Supply and Sanitation encourages the participation of women. This needs to be carried down to project level by development workers. The committee constitution should endorse the fact that women are equal partners in development and that they should be treated as such.

#### **Influencing the practice of engineers**

Engineers normally work very closely with the leaders of the community and the chairperson (who is almost always a man). In a case of infrastructure projects when water sources and siting are to be identified, engineers usually go around with the leaders and/or the committee chairperson. Women, the water users are not considered. Some communities end up with facilities which are not used because of the way in which they have been designed, for example hand pumps, which are either too high or strenuous to operate. Women as the users of these facilities should be actively involved to ensure that they are user-friendly.

#### **Good co-operation between women themselves**

Structures like the Women's Clubs should discourage jealousy among women. They need to develop a culture of supporting one another and reprimanding those who gossip. Workshops with women should be conducted to build their capacity and restore their confidence. We need to articulate that in development every one is in a learning curve and we develop our skills as we proceed.

#### **Conclusion**

The above strategies cannot work if development workers are not facilitating the process. They need to be gender

sensitive always because may be the way they interact with rural communities is in itself gender biased. They need to familiarise themselves with all the factors which serve as obstacles towards women's full participation.

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MISS AUDREY LUBISI, Project Development Facilitator,  
The Mvula Trust.

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