



Gender in rural water projects

Ntombentle Zungula, South Africa



THE PURPOSE OF this paper is to highlight some gender issues that affect, positively and negatively, water projects in rural areas. Rural Support Services, (R.S.S) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) involved in integrated rural development through water, sanitation and health provision in the Eastern Cape.

Since its inception in 1993, Rural Support Services (R.S.S) has assisted some 38 000 people in rural Eastern Cape Villages acquire clean tap water. It is estimated that in the Eastern Cape as many as 76 per cent of the population does not have access to water Services.

Rural Support Services intends to create an understanding of the water project in all members of the communities with whom we work with equal participation and understanding of the project. As a field worker for Rural Support Services, I appreciate the idea of promoting development and cultural values concurrently as an important principle. Each society has its own culture that they need to observe. It is always a good idea to use these cultures as an entry point in each community. Communities have their own culturally appropriate methods to bring people together in order to solve their social, economic, welfare and spiritual problems.

These meetings play an important role in educating people to play an active role in their communities.

Although R.S.S is concerned about gender imbalance in our projects, it is difficult to isolate gender from culture. These two concepts are very much intertwined. Culture is broader in a sense and it decides activities related to men and those related to women. Because of cultural influence gender fits as just one aspect of culture and it becomes impossible to single it out.

In South Africa, water is a scarce resource. Rural communities are areas that are most affected by poor conditions of water supply. It is always in our interest, as rural development agencies in the field of water and sanitation, to include all members of the community.

In some areas women do not attend meetings where the husband, father-in-law or mother-in-law are present. Meetings are attended by elderly people only. This is because newly married women cannot speak in public. This custom has a positive intention of protecting the young women from temptation. There is a belief that if a young woman is talking too much in public, she is exposed to bad temptation and loses her dignity. This kind of feeling already limits full participation of young women who are still active and might have bright ideas about keeping the system running well. Also young women are

not given a chance to prove loyalty to their marriage themselves by dealing with unknown temptations. This kind of thinking raises another problem relating to the ongoing maintenance which can be highly affected if the management skills are invested only in elderly people.

While men may support water and sanitation projects as being positive developments for the health and status of their communities, they may also have reservations for cultural reasons. For example the Reconstruction Development Programme (RDP) standards is access to water from taps no more than two hundred metres away, a number of young tribal men may object to that. They claim that by having water so close they cannot measure the strength and the abilities of a woman before they marry her. It is a common practice that a young woman should prove beyond expectation to be diligent before she marries. She must be able to carry a bucket of water, a bundle of wood, hoe, reap, and at times to know how to span oxen when the man is away. At the same time she should make sure that food is ready. All these issues affect our intention of providing clean and accessible water to communities.

In villages where these beliefs still exist, it becomes difficult to promote integrated development. These things can be taken very lightly, but they mean a lot to the believers. In one project in Mt Frere (Baca tribe), the government built a reservoir and communal stand pipes. Young men felt very much offended for the previous stated reasons. In order to avoid interfering with government property, they dropped a dead dog into the reservoir to stop people from using the water from the taps. This was a successful weapon, because even after the government drained and washed the reservoir, people still refuse to use water from the reservoir.

In most rural areas young men are scarce because they spend most of their time in cities where they are employed. December is the normal time that they are at home. It is during this time that projects supported by women suffer, during holidays women have to look after their husbands. A woman who travels back and forth away from home is considered to be somebody who does not respect their husband or the other way round, it means that the husband is failing to fulfil his role as the head of the household and the woman therefore is seen as somebody begging in order to support that same man.

Decision making

In rural areas, women have to be permitted by their in-laws to participate in community projects if her husband works

elsewhere. This process delays the project, although the women are the ones who suffer from the lack of water, they are the ones who draw water from far away.

Although culturally all this is done innocently as a way of protecting women, rural women have lost hope. They have accepted that they cannot do anything beyond domestic work. A powerful woman will always be labelled as a woman who is not associated with men. Consequently rural women now lack motivation. As such they can be like the marginals of the 20th Century as John Adams describes them: "The moor man's conscience is clear, yet he is ashamed; he feels himself out of sight of others, groping in the dark".

The dimension that is of special concern here is that rural development agencies should encourage women's involvement, but there is always special care needed around these issues. In order to support government policies and the development agency, women always seem to be nominated for a secretary position. The secretarial positions are associated with women and referred to as soft jobs. Chairmanship and treasurer positions are still monopolised by men. These are regarded as status positions and as for money, women are regarded as an extravagant group.

During implementation foremen are men and technical skills transfer is usually reserved for men. When questioning some of their choices there are already prepared answers. One being that men, in the interests of civilization do not want women to work.

Development demands community contribution and men have shown that they are most interested in the financial aspect of development i.e. paying jobs. Women, because of direct and long lasting benefit to themselves

tend to be flexible about voluntary contributions. In many rural projects one can see and assess the skill and determination of women in group interest projects such as poultry, sewing and welfare related projects. This separation shows that in water projects, women's participation is limited because of circumstances, cultural constraints, technical aspects of the project and payment of labour.

However as a field worker, one has to explore different methods of changing some of these beliefs. Men believe that women are not strong for doing technical jobs. This is in obvious conflict with the 'cultural' standards set for manageability!

To convince the men one should have separate meetings of men alone and convince them that women can run the project, using examples such as running a home when the men are away for eleven months from home leaving children and livestock with the home. This could be done by asking them how many of them find their things damaged. These are means of creating awareness and encourage men to give their wives freedom to participate in the projects.

As a member of a development agency, I feel very strongly that women should be involved without conditions, for real development of all the people. Development means to increase the level of their consciousness, participation by the majority in decision making and continuous future development as a process, now and in the future.

NTOMBENTLE ZUNGULA, Training Unit Co-ordinator,
Rural Support Services.
