

**GENDER AND RURAL WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT:  
CONCEPT PAPER AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

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## Introduction

The purpose of this concept paper is to review some current thinking on gender equity and poverty alleviation in water resources programs and projects. The WID/Gender and Development field has modified some of its key concepts in recent years, expanding from 'women in development' to the broader idea of 'gender and development'. As a result gender specialists now utilize a variety of working approaches. Within many engineering-based projects, however, there are disagreements and misunderstandings about the meaning – or even the worthiness -- of gender equity.

Some kind of 'gender plan' is a standard part of donor-funded projects and programs nowadays. Such plans draw considerable support in Bangladesh from governmental commitments to promoting women's development. The Constitution, for example, guarantees women's human rights and basic freedoms. Article 28(1) of the Constitution states that, "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth." And Article 28(2) states that, "Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life." These general legal assurances are translated into more specific terms in the *National Policy for the Advancement of Women* (1998), which expresses a commitment to "eliminate existing discrimination against men and women,...[to] acknowledge women's contribution in social and economic sphere," and otherwise enhance women's opportunities and status. This document supports increasing women's access to employment opportunities and, most importantly, to increasing women's participation in the decision-making process of all financial institutions and remove the existing differences between men and women."

The Bangladesh *National Water Policy* (1998) also strongly recommends bringing about "institutional changes that will help decentralize the management of water resources and enhance the role of women in water management," and also developing "a state of knowledge and capability that will enable the country to design future water resources management plans by itself with economic efficiency, gender equity, social justice, and environmental awareness to facilitate achievement of the water management objectives through broad public participation...." (p.3)

The challenge of any social development program or project is to translate these stated ideals into concrete benefits for the Bangladesh population. As most interventions inevitably change local society in some ways (some intentional and some unintended), attention to gender and poverty impacts and implications is required.

In fact, gender and poverty considerations are not easily separated. Poverty alleviation and gender equity strategies must be understood together for three reasons. First, as poverty is essentially a state of extreme social and economic insecurity, disproportionate numbers of females are either presently poor or facing the risk of being "tomorrow's poor." Secondly, many rural and urban women involved in social development programs are poor. Finally, many of the same social, political, and economic dynamics that are keeping the poor in their place also create situations of gender inequality.

## The Social & Economic Context

"Gender" usually means "women" or "WID" in many people's minds. Gender specialists are assumed incorrectly to be promoting women's activities and women's position, but not men's. This erroneous assumption reduces the interest of some who consider broader socio-economic inequality to be the heart of social development problems. Some women, of course, are born to privilege and need no outside support, it is said, while some men are in a terrible situation. So taking the women's "side" at all times seems inappropriate and even unjust. Another objection is that considering women's interests too separately from men's interests may create conflict where none existed before. Some sociological background might clarify our thinking and resolve any misunderstandings and disagreements.

"Gender" is a social and cultural fact, not a biological state. The social, cultural, or psychological bases of any gender system are:

- Male and female socialization, perceived capabilities, normal duties inside and outside the household (sexual division of labor) – at each socioeconomic level;
- Social, economic and political value assigned to men's and women's customary work and responsibilities;
- Opportunities & obstacles influencing people's (males'/females') control of economic resources, information, social networks, economic opportunities, and power; and
- Actions of either men or women that express, create, or challenge existing inequalities.

Although the division of labor and related social arrangements are highly variable from one country or ethnicity to another, gender is a universal fact of human social dynamics. Gender is an integral part of all relationships: family systems, patron-client relationships, and all social or economic networks. Gender distinctions thus cross-cut other social categories, such as class, ethnicity or religion, and age. They are strongly determined *by* those categories; and they contribute directly *to* the replication (reproduction) and maintenance of social systems.

Psychologically, we all utilize assumptions about gender in our daily lives. These assumptions color our views of possible and impossible social-economic-professional roles of women and men of different socio-economic classes – what poor/middle/rich women or men can or cannot do. They are the basis of every person's deeply held beliefs about proper and natural behavior. The assumptions determine each person's openness to change, and each person's ability to understand (or accept) the perceptions and practices of people in sub-cultural groups different from their own.

An important point to keep in mind is that, like any other social form, gender relationships are constantly changing. It requires constant effort to preserve gender relationships (or any others). And people are always capable of modifying their 'customs' if they wish to do so. Men and women of all social groups have the capacity to perpetuate or change their gender arrangements, depending on their own wishes, values, and influences. Nothing in human affairs is 'carved in stone'.

Men's views and actions are at least as relevant to any gender system as are women's. Indeed, men can be very helpful in promoting gender equity. The support and encouragement of men is essential to the advancement of capable women. Similarly, women can be either helpful or not in promoting the interests of women in different socio-economic classes. Their actions depend on their perceptions and their special interests. For example, if women value preservation of their class status more than any vision of gender equity, they are very unlikely to make common cause with women of different economic groups.

We speak mostly of "gender equity" nowadays, to convey a sense of equitable distribution of social and economic resources (tangible and intangible) between males and females. If one gender category or another is seriously neglected, oppressed, or excluded, gender equity is not present. Equity does not mean sameness or equality; rather, it implies fairness and justice: meeting needs in a suitable way.

Bangladesh statistics highlight the weaker position of females *vis-à-vis* males. Female child morbidity rates are higher than male; females' average nutrition is poorer than males' at all life stages; and females' health status tends to be worse than males'<sup>1</sup>. Higher morbidity and mortality rates lead to an unusually high male-female sex ratio in Bangladesh, where there are 104 men for every 100 women (or 51% males and 49% females<sup>2</sup>). Literacy rates among females are lower than among males at every socio-economic level<sup>3</sup>. Widespread female illiteracy -- resulting from families' lesser value on

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations 1995

<sup>2</sup>BBS 1994

<sup>3</sup>In 1997 the Bangladesh Health and Demographic Survey found literacy rates of rural males and females (age 5+) to be 37.8% and 27.9%, respectively. (BBS, HDS-PUB-021) But, while women are on average always less educated than men, educational

educating girls, fears about keeping girls in school after puberty, and early marriage -- hampers women's economic options and perpetuates their vulnerability. Such statistics show the over-all human impact of societal practices that discourage gender equity, important policies and special initiatives notwithstanding.

The social and economic causes of women's greater vulnerability are well known. A securely male-centered family and public life reinforces "patriarchal" values at many critical points in the life cycle. Unless she is born into a family with very good social and economic resources, and unless she has grown and prosperous sons or other key relatives protecting her, a rural Bangladeshi woman's economic situation can change for the worse very quickly if she is widowed, divorced, abandoned, or even neglected by her husband. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics *Household Expenditure Survey 1995-96*, approximately ten percent of all rural households are female-headed. But among the poorest households (6% of the total), those surviving on less than Tk.1557 monthly (or less than Tk.300 per capita), 13.6% are female-headed. The incidence of extreme poverty (< 1805 calories/person daily) among rural female-headed households is 45.3% according to the same source. The incidence of poverty decreases sharply as the educational level of the female head increases. (*Rural Poverty Monitoring Survey 1997*, p.82)

Their weaker economic position (lesser access to labor/employment, capital, credit, and markets) ensures that women of all ethnic or religious groups control fewer and less valuable assets than men do. In addition, customary limits on women's physical mobility outside their immediate communities seriously constrain their ability to improve their position by taking advantage of outside opportunities: in education, politics, employment, or economic markets. Violence, the dowry system, and harsh sanctions, such as ostracism, conspire to keep women vulnerable. Despite such obstacles, women's agricultural role is expanding:

Women's role in agriculture, which contributes 50% of GDP, is changing as a direct result of increasing population pressure and deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the rural economy. With men increasingly migrating in search of wage income, women are taking up responsibility, in addition to homestead agriculture, for field crop production on family landholdings. They also are working on family farms when declining revenue prevents hiring of labor<sup>4</sup>.

Wage rates paid to females for on- and off-farm labor are "consistently lower than those for male labourers." Factors contributing to low average wage rates for women include: limited access to education and training, low demand for female labor, a supply of female labor that exceeds demand, and the "weak bargaining power of women"<sup>5</sup>

#### *Is It Appropriate to Consider Women's Economic Interests Separately from Men's?*

Most agriculturally oriented projects work on the assumption that the family or household is a "welfare maximizing unit" governed by the benevolent and altruistic decision-making male head, who ensures that benefits of newly available resources are shared by all members equitably, irrespective of their gender identities<sup>6</sup>. So putting emphasis on women's *individual* economic status is controversial. Some people strongly object on cultural grounds to addressing a woman's economic interests separately from those of the total household. The arguments in favor of doing so are reviewed briefly below.

This point of economic analysis -- whether a project should "dis-aggregate" men's and women's interests in the household or whether to see all household members as a unit -- has received considerable attention in the WID/Gender and Development literature. The generally agreed-upon view is that, to assume a universal harmony of interest within the household in fact keeps women at a

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<sup>4</sup>World Bank 1999: 20  
<sup>5</sup>World Bank 1999: 20

<sup>5</sup>ESCAP 1999:32-33

<sup>6</sup>Matin 1999

structural disadvantage by allowing policy makers and program planners to ignore their special needs and concerns<sup>7</sup>. Studies in which men are assumed to speak on behalf of their female relatives come up with different findings than surveys or participatory exercises which women are allowed to express their own, possibly different views.

Seeking economic gender balance, however, need not lead to gender conflict. On the contrary, it can lead to a greater good. Regarding women's uses of economic resources as compared to men's, studies conducted by members of the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFE) have demonstrated that women actually tend to be more "altruistic" in their use of any available economic resources than men. That is, resources or income under women's control are more likely to be used for children's education or improved nutrition than those under men's control. These are only averages. They do not say anything about specific individuals. But these studies do show that there are economic benefits in putting resources and income directly into women's hands, rather than trusting every household to work out the social equality issues on its own<sup>8</sup>.

To assume that women have no significant economic concerns of their own is to perpetuate gender- and poverty-related problems rather than to contribute to solutions. A woman's lesser economic strength would not be a problem if a household shared its resources equitably among members, if related women also benefitted from men's relative economic advantages. But their extreme disadvantages in the major labor, capital, credit, and market systems keeps most Bangladeshi women dependent on male agents or brokers (relatives and others) who represent them, whether fairly or not. Disproportionate numbers of women are thus in a perpetual state of insecurity and risk of economic decline in the event of any crisis or male malfeasance. As difficult as middle-income or poor men's situation may be, their women's is even worse.

## Gender and Water Resources Management Issues

### *Gender Aspects of Water Use and Management*

Men and women ... have different social roles. Women have an important role as household manager. Men perform a greater role outside the home, publicly and commercially. Thus irrigation may be required for commercial agriculture and domestic vegetable gardens. Both forms of agriculture are vital to the local economy, but only one is registered as an 'economic' activity. Engineers can support both forms by targeting irrigation design to meet the end-users' needs. (Smout, Reed, and Coates 2001)

Socio-economic factors profoundly affect environmental conditions, including of course water resources management<sup>9</sup>. Awareness has increased about the importance of male-female relationships to water and waste management<sup>10</sup>. Involving women and men in appropriate ways depends on accurately understanding all stakeholders' special water and water-related land use interests, needs, and rights<sup>11</sup>. Experts nowadays recommend making "gender- and class-sensitive" inventories of all user groups a standard practice in all water resources development and management programs.

~~Women's economic uses of water should~~ not be underrated. In many societies, women are involved in animal care and also keep several animals themselves to market and to supplement

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<sup>7</sup>Moser 1993

<sup>8</sup>Village women of Bangladesh, of course, are not waiting for policy makers' hand-outs. Formally and informally, openly or secretly, they often save and share and otherwise do their level best to improve their economic situation, usually for the betterment of their children and other close relatives. (White....)

<sup>9</sup>van Wijk-Sijbesma 1998:14-15

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p.16

the family diet.... The animal protein provided is essential, not only for the growth and development of small children and adolescents, but also for adults, because the protein in staple crops is usually of lower quality. Cash income is earned from vegetable gardens, and also the produce provides a source of cheap and essential food supplements for their families<sup>12</sup>.

Recent studies have demonstrated that women often use water *productively* as well as for domestic purposes:

In Nepal, the cost of constructing [irrigation] canals excludes the poor, and limits their coping options in times of distress – forcing them to dispose of better land first. The buyers are usually from high caste groups, which leads the poor to own only marginal and poor quality unirrigated land. The cost of irrigation becomes even more prohibitive as water sources are far away....Managing irrigation water usually falls with the male, while that for drinking water with the female.

...Women's direct involvement in decision making of water management is quite minimal in Nepal, while they spend considerable time in water uses, particularly domestic [ones]. Thus, while they spend considerable time in fetching water, but they do not take part in deciding where the sources should be developed.....

Micro-credit, livestock production and marketing, water management ... all are intertwined, and their involvement needs to be conceptualized in the context of such backward and forward linkages. (GWA 2002a)

[Women use water] in domestic industries such as brewing and food production, crop growing and livestock production and fishing. Economic use is particularly practised by medium and lower income women and is of significant importance to them and their families. Such uses often go unrecognized and are not reflected in demand inventories and systems operation and demand management. In the resulting scarcity, the women have to compete with others for limited resources.... Failure to design for multi-sector water use can enhance gender-based competition in which the women usually lose out<sup>13</sup>.

#### *Integrated Water Resources Management Principles*

International discussions now emphasize "integrated water resources management," which means "management of water resources as regards their development, use and protection and considering all sectors

and institutions which use and affect water resources."<sup>14</sup> It is generally agreed that one type of water use will have consequences for other types of uses. Thus, the same water sources often are used for both "domestic" and "agricultural" purposes. So all members of a community have an interest in how water resources are managed. This is not a new idea. Indigenous water management tends to be "holistic," all available water sources being perceived as a total package<sup>15</sup>.

A multi-sectoral, integrated approach to water management "leaves space... for such family and community needs as the inclusion of 'minor' subsistence crops, special 'women's fields', livestock as an integrated part of the system, production opportunity for petty trading<sup>16</sup>.... , and yet "the traditional engineering view of systems is limited to provision of water for crops<sup>17</sup>."

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p.20

<sup>14</sup>Nordic Freshwater Initiative 1992, quoted in vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:12-13

<sup>15</sup>vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:42

<sup>16</sup>Kortenhurst 1980:130, quoted in vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:43

<sup>17</sup>Ault 1981, quoted in vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:43

Several case studies suggest that agricultural and other uses may at times compete. “Conflicts over water use and management are more likely to occur where men and women use the same scarce water resources and ownership can be challenged<sup>18</sup>

In Gujarat, India, Schenk... reports how male leaders decided to use water meant for domestic use for irrigation. As a result women had to return to the contaminated village pond. Schenk comments: ‘this is an obvious example of patriarchal power relations...in which a new implemented technology is not of any benefit to the women, because they have no decision-making power over it’. Case studies in irrigated agriculture show that neglect of women’s water and land use for domestic and productive purposes resulted in wrong plans and design and unwanted negative socio-economic impacts later on<sup>19</sup>.

There are direct links between poverty and access to water. Recent discussions have emphasized the need to consider ways to reduce economic vulnerability when planning sustainable water schemes. (GWA 2002b)

#### *Different Sub-groups’ Time and Resource Use Patterns*

Poverty studies have shown that the poor depend on common property resources more than others do. They are gatherers of fuel from village ‘jungles’ and major users of public water bodies because they lack private ones. The poor -- a large percentage of them women -- also rely heavily on self-mobilization, sharing, and community-managed services, because they do not have resources to develop privately owned facilities. Their general economic and social vulnerability means they have the most to gain – or the most to lose – from any program intervention that changes their environment.

In developing countries, women spend more time working and less on other activities than men. This is the finding in over fifteen time-budget studies carried out in rural communities where women actively participate in agriculture and other income-generating activities. It has also been found in urban areas.... Compared to men, women work more on expenditure-saving work and women also spend less time in personal care and mid-work rest. Women also have less recreation of a formal kind than is the case with their husbands”. (vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:31)

A program that changes the water regime and mobilizes community-management arrangements is certain to have impacts on the normal work-loads of men and women of different socio-economic classes. With increases in crop production, field laborers will have more employment. Crop diversification may increase over-all levels of business activity *vis-à-vis* subsistence agriculture, perhaps shifting the balance of men’s and women’s duties at the household level<sup>20</sup>. If kitchen gardening improves, family nutrition and health also will improve, with important consequences for care-givers. Attending meetings requires that people adjust

the way they use their time. It is important to be aware of how program responsibilities and benefits are distributed, and how the program itself affects people’s daily lives.

#### *Gender and Water: Recent Discussions and Debates*

Over the past few years increasing numbers of water sector professionals are discussing and debating how and why “gender” issues should be integrated with the other work they do. One group of engineers at WEDC, Loughborough University, UK, has been especially active in this discussion. They urge engineering colleagues to collaborate with social scientists in multi-disciplinary teams that can address the practical and empowerment issues associated with gender. “The indicators defining the primary task will need to address engineering parameters as well as socio-economic issues. These

<sup>18</sup>vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:44

<sup>19</sup> vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:20-21

<sup>20</sup>White\_\_\_\_\_

indicators will need to be varied to express the whole of the project cycle...and include all sectors of society<sup>21</sup>." The advantages of such collaboration, they argue, can be improved program effectiveness, efficiency, and equity:

In order to find out what men and women want from an engineering project they have to be able to voice their concerns. Women, poor men and other socially excluded groups by definition have less of a voice in project design. The process of product development therefore has to specifically include these groups.... Some of the concerns voiced will not have a physical response. A need to provide washing facilities can be expressed and a suitable solution designed. A need to have control over the allocation of water is harder to quantify and address in engineering terms. How engineers can address the strategic issues as well as the practical matters may mean greater changes than just refining the product in response to a revised process<sup>22</sup>.

Another gender-and-water discussion was an electronic conference conducted during the year 2002. An initial summary of the conference discussion emphasized the difficulties in managing projects with gender equity objectives:

Gender equity will never be given as a gift to women from the 'top'. It will require struggles by poor women against vested interests. This requires awareness, confidence and capacity to assert their water demands and negotiate for its realisation. It also means developing their problem solving skills through practical demonstrations. All capacity building/training should be done in the context of facilitating this struggle from the bottom strata. An important element is to make the women aware of their immanent strength as collectives and develop their self esteem/confidence. When these grass root efforts are linked integrally to efforts at higher/policy/intelligensia/advocacy/campaign level, the process can bear fruit<sup>23</sup>.

**...In Chuni village, Menaka Devi was an active and functioning treasurer and did everything that was demanded of the job. Menaka Devi's husband is a pensioner from the Army, working again in a private firm. She also works as the non-formal education teacher in the creche run by the NGO and is paid for this work. Her four children are big and help her in both the house and field. She is enthusiastic, strong and few men in the village can challenge her. However, despite the fact that she honestly and diligently worked to make this the first village to complete the project, she was also one of the**

Deepa Joshi and others have challenged several water and sanitation projects' female empowerment claims by analyzing cases in which social development gains were either limited to the duration of the donor-funded activity, or in which women's involvement in technical construction work is nothing more than a one-off event. They point out that most projects are conceptualized and planned by people outside the communities where they are implemented. Their case studies show that working toward gender equity can entangle a project in many contradictory and sometimes impossible social dilemmas, possibly even causing harm or embarrassment to some potential beneficiaries. In cases of NGO-initiated programs, they point out

that participants often remain "pitifully dependent on NGO benevolence," rather than becoming self-sufficient managers of their own resources. Generally, they argue that,

Empowerment cannot be achieved by separating and isolating women from the context of social relations in which they live, as women cannot on their own resolve their subordinate

<sup>21</sup>Smout, Reed, and Coates 2001

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Gender and Water Alliance 2002a, pp.5-6

position and condition..... 'Gender inequalities do not operate within a social vacuum but are products of the way in which institutions are organized and continuously reconstituted.<sup>24</sup>

### Devising Gender Strategies for Specific Programs or Projects

.... Agencies involved in development work, including water projects, need not only to be aware of the social realities in the communities with whom they are working, and to strive sensitively to bring about real changes in men's and women's lives there. They also need to examine and deal with the inequalities and inequities in their own agency values, principles, structures and practices. Only then will they be able to better support their work with poor communities and only then can we claim to be really empowering women through our work<sup>25</sup>.

Because they affect (and are affected by) the whole society, gender issues will come up in connection with all social development components of any given project. Like poverty alleviation, meeting gender equity goals requires commitment and effort on the part of all staff, not just a few WID specialists. As a local change agent a project can foster gender equity in at least three ways:

- A. By addressing "practical gender needs"
- B. By promoting "strategic gender" advancement
- C. By increasing gender sensitivity: among program participants, and also among staff and consultants

#### *Meeting Practical Gender Needs*

In at least two major Bangladesh water resources management projects – the Early Implementation Project (EIP, 1975-1998) and the Small Scale Water Resources Sector Development Project (SSWRDSP, 1995 to the present) -- among the most appreciated project services has been the training of rural people in practical skills that improve their livelihoods. Women and men have been

In a Sri Lanka study on multiple uses of water in irrigation systems, there was a clear gender dimension in water for commercial uses, since men and women had different enterprises that they had primary responsibility for (and control over). However, the field crops and (to some extent) fishing, which were primarily male responsibilities tended to get recognised more. Many of the women's activities were considered "marginal", or were counted as "domestic", even when they were commercial. A big case in point was homestead gardens. Though often dismissed as "kitchen gardens", in fact these were high-value horticulture. Because they were under women's control, the income from these played a major role in household welfare, as well as women's bargaining power within the households. The same pattern was found in a study of vegetable cultivation in Bangladesh. SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) similarly points to the importance of water for women's enterprises in preparing foods.... (GWA

trained on vegetable production, improved seed production and management, modern agricultural methods, and poultry rearing. The knowledge gained, according to field reports from both projects, has improved people's technical ability in their normal work. Some trainees have gone on to become local experts who train others. Such training helps to improve balance in gender relationships, by stabilizing and strengthening skills needed for normal productive work. Family nutrition benefits, and many earn income from new ventures in fisheries, poultry, and vegetables. Some women in communities covered by EIP cultivated new vegetable gardens on a sharecropping basis.

Other practically-oriented project initiated activities may be savings, microcredit, and employment schemes for very poor people, especially destitute women, through Labour Contracting Society (LCS) earth-works, road construction, embankment maintenance, in tree plantation, and other low-skill activities.

<sup>24</sup>Joshi and Fawcett [2002], quoting Kabeer and Subramaniam 1999

<sup>25</sup> Joshi and Fawcett [2002]

Although it is common to focus on the needs of destitute women, it is important to point out that practical training programs, micro-credit, and savings activities, have been of value to women at *all* socio-economic levels, especially those in small farming households. In their socially broad impact, they complement the traditional focus on rice farming and provide some degree of gender equity in project benefits.

#### *Practical Suggestions for Project Staff*

Field level staff are in a good position to offer opportunities to women along with men: for example, training opportunities. They will be able to do this if they have the necessary social background information. Suggested steps for field staff are:

A. Prepare a listing of women *and* men of middle-/low-income households, people who might benefit from the project's social development activities;

B. Using the list, establish contact with those individuals. Speak with them, deepening their understanding of opportunities available through the project. Seek their opinions about the WMA and project activities;

C. Once people become interested, make plans to engage them in training and other activities.

Changing the position of a group within society is a longer-term process, whether it is promoting racial, political or sexual equality. This requires a *strategic* plan to change the attitudes of both the *dominant* group and the *disadvantaged* group. Dominant groups have to give those excluded greater public acceptability. The socially excluded need the confidence to take on roles previously denied them – supported by the training to carry out these roles. Thus if women or the poor are to have any influence on infrastructure projects and participate in their management, society (men) have to realise the benefits of including and involving women in decision making, whilst the women need to be *empowered* to take up this new role. (Smout,

While helping people to be more successful in the work they already do, a gender-sensitive approach to rural social life also needs to view the sexual division of labor in a creative way. For example, it is wise to avoid common stereotypes such as labeling women's work as "non-productive" and men's as "productive," since in rural economics both men and women contribute greatly to maintaining livelihoods. Is homestead gardening or animal care less a part of "agriculture" than staple crop cultivation? It is advisable to keep an open mind concerning changes and regional variation in the division of labor. Some women (and *not* just the very poorest) work outside in the fields everywhere, and in large numbers in some places<sup>26</sup>. Women of farming families are knowledgeable about agricultural production processes; and some directly supervise farm work in the absence of competent males. Studies have found women here and there to be involved in open water fisheries, though often secretly<sup>27</sup>.

An important principle is not to think rigidly, to remain open to new social possibilities. This may mean, for example, not assuming too much conservatism; or not sitting quietly when locally influential men express reluctance to include women in project activities because it may challenge local gender relationships.

Many projects nowadays have a clearly expressed commitment as a *de facto* local change agent to ensure that the changes it initiates benefit all -- including females and the poor – i.e., not just a few elite males. This commitment carries with it a responsibility to offer its opportunities to both women

<sup>26</sup>The only practice resembling a general taboo is for women to use a plough (*langal*), but they certainly do make great use of hoes (*kodal*).

<sup>27</sup>Personal communication from Kazi Rozana Akhter, Department of Fisheries; see also Matin 1999.

and men, and to create an environment in which all can gain from local economic stabilization and improvement.

### *Meeting Strategic Gender Needs*

Hierarchy and power are crucial parts of the society in which gender relationships exist, and improving the situation of those with less power is a major part of the gender equity concept. This is not something that any outsider can do, of course, except temporarily. The only way to help meet “strategic” needs, such as gaining more influence in local decision-making, is to help less powerful people (the poor and women of all economic levels to one extent or another) gain access to whatever opportunities the project can offer. This means, for example, offering leadership options to women as well as men.

Practical training activities also strengthen strategic gender objectives, because they increase family food security and build self-confidence. Their strategic importance should not be underestimated. The connection is especially true in the case of those who have become recognized local “experts” after being trained, for example, on fisheries, environmental issues, or seeds production.

Simply making sure that *women are included along with men* in project decision-making and training activities is the most important way that staff can meet strategic gender needs in their daily work.

Some specific activities and skills-building that promote strategic gender equity objectives are listed below. People take pride in contributing to their community's improvement. And women will come forward to seize opportunities to develop leadership potential. Training topics that can build leadership and self-confidence are:

- Running a meeting
- Facilitating a public discussion with opportunities for both men and women to express their views
- Public speaking skills
- Organizing a successful local activity
- Awarding prizes or other public recognition to successful women *and* men

### *Increasing Gender Sensitivity*

There often is a need for wholesome debate on controversial points (some mentioned in this report). All activities should be viewed through a gender-and-poverty lens, and field-level experimentation should be encouraged. The heart of this effort is sincere dedication to the difficult community organizing work that can conscientize staff and beneficiaries alike. It is not something that can be done hastily.

A gender-sensitive and coherent approach to water management is mandated at all project or program stages and levels. Some key principles to keep in mind are:

- Utilize a sound approach ensuring that men and women in different socio-economic classes are able to express their demands and concerns, and to see them honored<sup>28</sup>.
- Men and women in different socio-economic classes and societies have different needs and demands from the project, based on their different water use patterns;
- Women in staff deserve the same level of professional respect as is given to their male colleagues; and

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<sup>28</sup>van Wijk-Sijbesma 1998:17

- Careful impact monitoring of field level gender impact can offer a valuable opportunity to learn from experience.

Project staff should themselves remain aware of gender issues and not fail to observe women's work along with men's:

.... Since women's water and land use are part of the informal economy and indigenous management system, there is a risk that such uses and users do not show up, unless consciously looked for at a community level and below<sup>29</sup>.

- Get the views of both men and women about rich/middle/poor women's and men's appropriate roles in the sub-project. Ask questions, study cases. Do not assume that you already know about life in a place. Be open to surprises and prepared to explain the project's gender objectives when conducting institutional development or other project activities.
- Observe social situations in sub-project areas. Ask yourself as you observe: Are women here treated with respect? Are they allowed to speak their minds? Is the project expanding their practical and strategic position? (Just as you might ask, Are poor people finding work and other advancement opportunities?)
- Avoid the temptation to accept local elites' view of poorer men *or* women as victims or 'irrelevant bystanders' in project processes. The project can be a positive change agent.
- Include women staff in field visits as much as possible. Seeing them, local women are encouraged to come forward and express themselves. They feel more welcome in the project if female staff contact them. The women staff may need to travel along with other women, or they may not. It is worthwhile to discuss their logistical needs with them in a respectful way.
- You yourself must respect the women in project areas and your female colleagues as well. Avoid the temptation to be extra critical of women or to use double standards in judging their professional capabilities. Understand that women are full persons with their own capabilities, interests, and needs – both for themselves and on behalf of their families, larger social groups, and this project. In a project with a formal commitment to gender equity it is each staff member's official responsibility to give equal respect to women and men at all levels.
- Identify suitable “practical” and “strategic” opportunities for capable men *and* women at all levels of society. Start this identification process at the very beginning of project activities. Be sure to follow up on local queries and requests made by *both women and men*..
- Develop and use a formal monitoring system with gender-disaggregated data, but try also to learn the picture behind the formal reports, in order to gain insight into local processes put into play by the project. Cross-check gender related monitoring data during field trips.
- Make a point of interacting with women during field visits to sub-project areas. Meet both men *and* women in WMA committees (and general members too, of course) and learn about their perceptions of their duties and benefits. Ask men their views about including women: Is this new for them? Do they understand why the project expects women's involvement?

## Conclusion

Giving attention to gender equity will liberate human resources to the betterment of the total society. This is true of water projects and of any other social development activity. In Bangladesh, however,

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<sup>29</sup>vanWijk-Sijbesma 1998:27, quoting Bagchee 1993

ensuring women's rights to water requires a re-conceptualization of least two major issues by development professionals<sup>30</sup>:

1) *Seeing women as economically "productive" members of society*, not just as domestic persons or manual laborers. Women contribute significantly to the national economy as cultivators involved in field agriculture, sowing, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting; in homestead and fruit cultivation; and in other productive rural activities, such as care of livestock and poultry. All these activities require access to significant amounts of water.

2) *Adoption of a dynamic concept of water resources management* -- a concept that recognizes the multiple uses of water by numerous male and female stakeholders. Program development thus would be based on the social rather than the technical dimensions of water resources management; and local people, both men and women, must be central to the formulation of plans, programs, and policies.

3) *Recognizing that projects and programs do influence both intra-household gender balance and gender relationships within the wider community*. As powerful change agents, water resources projects must consider the needs of women and men separately, and the different impacts their activities have on women and men.

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<sup>30</sup>These points are adapted from Matin 1999 and Safilios-Rothschild 1989.

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