

Reducing gender inequality in urban water management in Nepal

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In towns and cities at the foot of the Himalayas, women play a vital role in supplying water and its management, but ironically, their voices are rarely heard in water management decisions.

Despite 33 percent seats reserved for women in local level water management bodies in Nepal, our studies show that gender inequity is escalating, with new forms of marginalisation and disadvantage being reproduced in urbanising areas.

Under climate change, cities are facing either too much (e.g. flood) or too little water (not enough water in the dry season) scenarios. Such extremes are becoming increasingly common in the recent years, creating water insecurity and deepening gender injustice. Climate change impacts water availability and makes water management more challenging, both in urban and rural areas.

With an increase in urban area from 17% to 58% in the span of six years (between 2011 and 2017), Nepali society is rapidly transitioning from predominantly rural to an urban one. One may expect that traditional gender relations may change positively as the society gets urbanised. However, our studies show that traditional gender roles and relations perpetuate in urban transition through quintessentially patriarchal structures and institutions. What is worse, the pre-existing gender norms reinforce hurdles for inclusive and equitable participation in water management in the urban context.

Our research

This brief is based on the analysis of water policies, as well as the narratives of men and women involved in drinking water management practices. We also draw on the views of the stakeholders who are part of water governance in three small and rapidly expanding towns in Nepal (Dharan, Dhulikhel, and Bidur). We distil key policy lessons by analysing the emerging dynamics of gender inequity concerning access to and control over water resources.

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Key policy messages: What can make water sector more gender equitable ?

Current situation	Focus required on
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number focused approach does not necessarily make water sector gender equitable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity strengthening of women to effectively voice their concerns and interests Public awareness on women's changing public roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's entry in public domain is increasing but support mechanisms have hardly changed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women focused support mechanisms need to be developed and executed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women's issues in water management are seen in isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address women's property right issue as a prerequisite of women's empowerment in water management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change pathways are not clear and success stories are unreported 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Success stories of empowered women are to be documented with examples of what has or has not worked in different conditions

National policies supporting gender equality

The current Constitution of Nepal (2015) takes a bold provision to achieve equitable representation of women and disadvantaged communities at all levels of state mechanisms. For example, in the national parliament, 33% of seats are reserved for women. Similarly, women occupy 41% of elected positions in local governments since 2017 local elections.

Nepal is committed to achieve UN SDG Goals 2030. SDG Goal 6 is to "ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all," with

explicit attention to gender equality and social inclusion. Earlier, women's involvement in water management started some 20 years ago when Drinking Water Rules (1998) required at least two women members in the 'users' committee' to develop and operate a water supply project. After that, the National Water Supply and Sanitation Policy (2003) and Rural Water Supply and Sanitation National Action Plan (2003) further strengthened gender equality policy, reserving 30% memberships for women in local water management committees (including some leadership positions).

Continuing this reform journey, the National Sanitation and Hygiene Master Plan (2011), has expressed its commitment to Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) embracing two GESI responsive objectives: i) to help ensure equity, inclusion and sustainability through participatory planning process; and ii) to develop a mechanism for ensuring access of the poor, disadvantaged, and other socially excluded groups to toilets and other hygiene facilities.

However, there is one exception. The Water Supply Management Board Act (2006) with significant role to manage water at municipal areas does not have a mandatory women membership at its Board.

Key Findings

Our findings from the research shows gender inequality is worsening in practice, as outlined below:

1. Participatory exclusion persists despite women's increasing physical presence in the decision-making bodies.

The policy assumption on increasing number of women in the decision-making bodies of water management hardly addresses structurally embedded gender inequality. Women's physical presence has increased

following a suite of water sector policies reserving one-third seats for women, opening up previously 'male-occupied' public spaces to women. However, this increase in physical presence of women has often been used to reinforce existing gender injustice, creating a situation of 'participatory exclusion'. Conceptually, the focus is still to maintain and increase the critical mass of women following the old legacy of 'Women in Development'. Attention to more important aspects such as increased critical awareness and enhanced women's agency for change remains limited.

2. With new public roles, women are facing multiple challenges of dealing with increased workload and family responsibilities

On a positive development, women have transgressed into new public spaces, assuming public roles, previously limited to men. However, men are yet to assume their share of responsibility in the domestic



Figure 1: Participants in Dhulikhel Water Forum
(Photo: KBP/SIAS)

sphere. Without considering the balance sheet of roles and burdens underpinning social relationships of gender, empowering or otherwise supporting individual woman in isolation is not enough to affect positive

Insights from the field

- Women's representation at local level water management decision making bodies has given public space to women but women are rarely recognised as legitimate decision makers.
- Women's increased representation in local government has led to positive outcomes in voicing women's concerns in water governance.
- Despite policy attempts of making gender balanced water management bodies, women have experienced isolation and exclusion in making decisions.

Women's increased burden with limited reward

"I have additional public responsibility besides managing water for my household. Women in my ward accuse me of not fulfilling my election promises such as addressing the issue of water scarcity that women are facing acutely. What they don't understand is that despite our political position, our (women) situation is not different from theirs. I too as a woman ward member, face challenges as we women have little influence over the decisions of municipal level decision making processes." (A woman local government representative, 2019).

change. Sharing of household chores and support from women's family members are important to women wanting to step into water management decision roles. At present, women are forced to make an unfair choice between a public role and personal and family wellbeing matters. In one worst scenario, we identified a case of woman leader who had to divorce as she was unable to undertake all household chores alongside public leadership roles.



Figure 2: Women and girls of squatter settlement in Dharan collect water from Shardu River
(Photo: Kaustuv R Neupane/ SIAS)

Water scarcity and gender inequality are co-evolving in the complex city environment. With expanding urbanisation and rapid infrastructure development, a large number of settlements are connected to piped water supply systems. However, the flow of water is not regular and yet the amount of flow varies across settlements depending on how rich or poor these settlements are in the city-wide economic and political landscape. We found that poor households, usually residing outside of the water distribution grid, experience water scarcity for almost half of the time in a year. This refutes the understanding that the modern water supply system of a city can serve everyone equally. As a result, as shown in Figure 2, women and girls have no option but to collect water from unsafe sources and far away from their settlements.

3. Despite intersectoral complexities of water management and gender equality, interventions till date are limited to sectoral policy silos

Women are not supported and provided an opportunity to nurture their skills to effectively participate in the decisions. Gender discriminatory practices in water management are hardly recognised as a matter of public debate by government and even development agencies. Existing structural inequalities such as the existing property ownership are biased towards men, and create barriers for women to get membership

in water management bodies. One has to be a legal owner of either land or a house to be eligible for a tap connection and also to become a member of water management bodies. In the majority of the cases, men continue to be the legal owners of the household land and property.

4. Gender equality interventions are treated as one time and ad-hoc interventions without any clear theory of change.

Our analysis shows that gender equality interventions in water management do not follow any tenable theory of change. These are instead seen as one-time intervention tasks such as electing/selecting women as a member of a water management body. There are hardly any women empowerment programs that enhance women's capacity and confidence and there



Figure 3: Participants in Dharan Water Forum
(Photo: CAMPS/SIAS/IDRC research project 2016)

are no programs to track the progress, not to mention the lack of clarity on what to expect from women's representation apart from fulfilling the quota.

5. Sectoral fragmentation of development interventions ignores gendered social system

Too often, gender equality interventions do not consider water security in the wholeness of the problem. First, scale dimension is missing. Sectoral policies including water focus too heavily on community level interventions, but there is limited consideration to link processes of change across different levels: individual, family, community, subnational, and national levels. Second, not all the gender discriminatory practices originate in a specific sector of development such as water sector; they instead are rooted in the wider society. Due to the lack of capacity to recognise and

address the social embeddedness of gender injustice, it is not possible to address gender inequity in its entirety. For instance, work related to water management cannot ignore women's access to land and property ownerships. Likewise, staff from support organisations

insecurity are co-evolving in Nepal's urbanising areas as another critical problem in sustainable development. Tackling gender inequity issues in water management requires transformative approach that takes into account three fundamental aspects: women's voice in decisions, critical awareness of context and dynamics, and inclusive and knowledge informed deliberation.



Figure 4: Women's burden continues even with increased urbanisation
(Photo: Hemant R Ojha)

need to be fully aware of such inconsistencies that play an important role in addressing such inequitable structures and gaps.

Conclusions

Women's lives and income-generating opportunities in the poor urban communities are profoundly shaped by their access to water. The three case studies show that women are facing increasing challenges in getting their voices heard in urban water governance system. Despite good policy intentions and positive policy shifts in the past decade, gender inequality and water

This three pronged strategy requires going beyond water sector development activities, and addressing underlying inequitable social structures such as a) property ownership structures that is currently skewed towards men; b) appropriate support structure and women's empowerment programs in place; and c) actionable plans with clear and plausible theory of change informing the work of government and all development agencies.

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