Women and Water

Introduction
For the past nine consecutive years (2012-2020), the World Economic Forum has ranked the water crisis among the top five global crises in terms of impact on society. Issues surrounding water include its mismanagement, severe clean water scarcity and contamination of clean water sources. In August 2022, the Asia Water Forum brought together representatives and experts from countries across Asia to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing water scarcity issues and solutions. With a growing global population, greater than ever demand for water resources and the looming impacts of climate change over us, a conversation on water governance is not only convenient but absolutely essential.

The role of gender in water governance.
As with countless other areas of environmental governance and policy-making, any decision made in the water sector has traditionally been gender-blind. The most recent World Bank annual progress report on the Central Asia Water and Energy Programme, for example, does not discuss in detail any gender-specific commitments or approaches. The lack of gender-specific commitments around water policy ignores that women are disproportionately affected by water issues. Firstly, women spend more time collectively and use water resources. All around the world, women spend more time on average than men collecting and transporting water as well as engaging in water-intensive activities such as cooking and cleaning. It has been estimated that women and children spend 200 million hours a day collecting water. Furthermore, the exorbitant amount of time women spend collecting water for their families is valuable time that is spent away from work and school, further contributing to gender inequalities.

Water crisis and barriers to women’s participation.
There is limited information about the gendered impacts of increasing water scarcity. Most countries lack context-specific information on gender and water relations, which hinders gender-sensitive plan development. This includes data on the population with or without guaranteed drinking water supply, the population covered or not covered by improved sanitation and the proportion of the population using safely managed sanitation services, including a hand-washing facility with soap and water. This lack of information is misleading because it creates the false illusion that there is no gender bias in water governance.

This lack of context-specific information on gender is one of the key barriers hindering women’s participation in water governance. Several UN reports have highlighted that numerous social indicator such as gender and poverty, women’s access to assets (including land) and gender and the environment lack efficient and
comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Closing these data gaps is, therefore, essential for achieving gender-related SDG commitments across the world. Other barriers included gender norms, a lack of role models, harassment, a lack of a women-friendly environment, and lack of female representation in key decision-making bodies surfaced in all regions reviewed for the 2019 World Bank study on women in water utilities.

In light of the recurring omission of gender in policy reports, an article published by The Lancet Planetary Health in 2019 reminds us of the urgent need for an intersectional approach to water management. An intersectional approach to water is crucial to allow a more integrated analysis that encompasses specific geographical and social contexts that address the place and context-specific understanding of how gender and water relationships are shaped. This is especially important for water management schemes, policies or development plans that aim to promote equal and sustainable water management for all.

**Conclusion: what does the future look like**

Right this moment, we are facing anthropogenic climate change projections for higher-than-usual summer temperatures and greater unpredictability in the patterns of precipitation. This will only exacerbate current stresses on water resources. We, therefore, highlight that an intersectional approach to water governance is indispensable if no one is to be left behind as we address and face the unprecedented challenges that a warming climate will bring upon us. The water crisis is a women’s crisis. Women need to be active and equal partners in the process of creating more just and effective water governance systems.

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