

GENDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE MOVE FROM SUPPLY-DRIVEN  
TO DEMAND-DRIVEN APPROACHES IN THE DRINKING WATER  
SECTOR: A DEVELOPING COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

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## **Abstract**

The international concern to mitigate the shortage of water has given rise to the "demand-responsive approach", as against the "supply-driven approach". Those in favour of the demand driven approach argue that this approach provides so much benefits that users lure to pay considerable proportion of their household income on water.

The international donors, who are active in supporting the water sector in developing countries, have developed seven premises, which seem to overwhelmingly support this approach as being pro-poor and gender sensitive. The premises are: improved water services lead to higher income; payment increases feelings of ownership towards the water supply; private sector involvement leads to effective water services; water is a finite resource and hence it should be treated as a commodity; improved water services lead to higher health benefits; demand-driven approach increases local participation in decision-making; and gender-neutral words can benefit women and men equally. However, the recent studies have countered and challenged these arguments. These studies argue that demand-driven approach will pose a lot of negative implications on poor and marginalised people, especially the women from female-headed households, since they cannot meet the costs of water and hence, will be deprived of the benefits of improved water services.

The poor and marginalised people who have no access to and control over resources; who use water only for domestic consumption and not for commercial purposes; who cannot voice their concerns and influence the decision making process due to their poor social and economic status can in no way, as found by many studies, benefit from improved water services. Because many water projects do not introduce any income generating activities and that there are very few opportunities for women to get involved in other productive activities locally, the argument that women and men can generate extra income from their time saved from water hauling, which can then be used to meet the water costs does not hold true. This is where is the need to view the water also as social good and not just as economic good.

It is worth appreciating the engendering activities initiated recently by some agencies engaged in the water sector in Nepal, such as Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH) funded by WaterAid and Department for International Development (DFID), Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project (RWSSP) funded by Finish International Development Agency (FINNIDA), and Fourth Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project (FRWSSSP) of the Department of Water Supply and Sewerage (DWSS) funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). However, the study of these organisations show that many of the activities are taken as one-off events and not backed up by systematic long term planning exercises. The most important elements in mainstreaming gender are the attitude and commitment of the people in the planning and policy-making level, which can determine the extent to which various gender issues in the water sector are well reflected in the organisational policies. Only through women-friendly policies can organisations engaged in the water sector help to create a society with greater gender equality in terms of sharing of benefits, power and access to and control over resources.

## **CONTEXT**

*This article argues that the lack of gender sensitivity in the international water policies can marginalise poor rural women in the developing countries from the benefits of improved water services. Water supply improvements implemented under such policies neither empower women, a prerequisite for development, nor do they achieve sustainable practical benefits for women and men.*

An estimated 737 million people in rural areas, and 93 million people in urban areas, still have no access to safe drinking water. Even more people are without sanitation facilities (ADB, 1998). A number of conferences have been held and various strategies have been adopted by the international community over the past three decades, to attempt to resolve the problems of the shortage of water supply under the prevalent supply-driven approach. One major outcome of these conferences is that they have strongly emphasised a shift from the supply-driven approach to one that is driven by demand, also known as a demand-responsive, approach.

The main reason for the move from a supply-driven to a demand-driven approach is to improve efficiency by making the beneficiary communities accountable to meet some capital costs and the full cost of operation and maintenance of water supplies. Those in favour of this approach argue that 'users will be willing to pay a considerable proportion of their household income for improved water services if they perceive that they are adequate, better, and more reliable than the traditional sources' (Whittington and Swarna, 1994). A review of the international policy documents shows that the international community is looking at water more from a demand-led cost recovery perspective and less so from a rights-based perspective though the latter would have encouraged agencies to understand that water is people's basic rights and that the rural livelihoods of poor and marginalised people cannot sustain without it. Accordingly, the International Water and Sanitation Conferences held in New Delhi in 1990, in Dublin in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (known as the Earth Summit), and many others have developed some common strategies supporting the arguments of the demand-driven approach in the water sector, which are discussed below.

## **MAJOR PREMISES OF A DEMAND-DRIVEN APPROACH**

Some major premises of a demand-driven approach as can be found from the strategic documents of the international donors that are active in supporting the water sector in the developing countries are: improved water services can lead to higher income; private sector should be involved in the delivery of effective services; water is a finite and vulnerable resource and hence to be treated as a commodity; water should be viewed as an economic good; and communities, including women, should be involved in the management of water resources (World Bank, 1996; ADB, 1998; FINNIDA, 1994; and WaterAid, 1996). Because these agencies demand that the recipient governments and their partner organisations should adopt the strategies that they have proposed, it is natural that the latter are also looking at this sector from a demand-driven perspective.

Generally speaking, every change that takes place amongst the international donors compels the national governments to adopt that change, because of the former's financing power. This is illustrated in Table 1, which shows that every time that an event related to water has taken place at the international level it has made some impact upon the plans and policies of the water sector in Nepal. This is mainly for two reasons: i) membership of the United Nations encourages compliance and ii) as two-thirds of its development budget comes from the international community, the Government of Nepal has to follow the international norms, so as to keep its programmes running. Even in cases of government that are not so donor dependent, they may cooperate the international policies for reasons such as a shared set of perceptions based on meetings often, common educational experiences, vested interests, etc.

For example, the policy documents of some donors such as the World Bank (1996) and the ADB (1998) state that they want national governments to design their water programmes by using approaches that respond to demand. They mention in their strategies that they will support the inclusion of full cost-recovery in national water policies and that the sector strategies in each country should outline how full cost-recovery will be achieved in practical terms, both in capital costs and operation and maintenance costs. They also advise that national governments should develop appropriate programmes to phase this policy in as soon as possible. Accordingly, after the Dublin Conference in 1992, which put emphasis on water being treated as an economic good, the Government of Nepal built in this policy in all its Acts, policies and plans formulated thereafter, under pressure from donors such as the World Bank and the ADB. A paper written by Regmi and Fawcett (2001) based on a year-long research also supports that both the government and the NGO sector in Nepal have begun to introduce the concept of cost recovery in their water supply schemes.

However, since women are traditionally responsible for meeting household needs for water, including the need to meet the water tariff, the implications that this approach will have on the lives of poor rural, vulnerable and marginalised women in developing countries are a matter of concern to those working for women's advancement, and to people and institutions engaged in social development. This paper attempts to assess the major premises of the demand-driven approach in the domestic water sector, from a gender perspective, and offers some actions to make them more gender-sensitive.

**Table 1: Major Events in the Water Sector in Nepal in Relation to International Water Events**

International Level		In Nepal	
Year	Events	Year	Events
1975	UN Conference on Women declared 1976-85 as Women's Decade	1976	Equal Pay Legislation
1976 - 1978	Conferences held during this period on water decided to declare 1981-90 as IDWSSD, women's role not yet felt crucial	1975-1980	No specific WID policy in the Fifth Development Plan (1975-1980)
1980	UN Mid-Decade Conference on Women demanded all governments to involve women in water supplies	1980	WID policy mentioned for the first time in the Sixth Development Plan
1982	Action-oriented Inter Agency Task Force formed for fostering women's participation in activities of the IDWSSD	1985, 1986, 1989, 1989	Women's formal involvement in the water supply programmes by Helvetas, UNICEF, Nepal Red-Cross Society, and the government, respectively
1991	UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	1992	WID policy included in sectoral programmes of the Eighth Development Plan (1992-1997)

1992	Dublin Conference on Water followed by a number of conferences emphasising women's role in water	1992	Formulation of Water Resources Act,
1992 - 1998	Various other water-related conferences held supporting demand-driven approach	1993	Formulation of Water Resources Rules
		1997	Gender issues addressed in the Ninth Development Plan (1997-2002)
		1998	A separate section on GAD included in National Water Supply Sector Policy

### **Premise 1: Improved water services lead to higher income**

One argument put forward for the demand-driven approach is that local people can achieve higher income from the improved water services, due to their adequacy, quality, accessibility and multiple uses for domestic, agricultural and commercial activities. Hence they will be willing to pay for the services (World Bank, 1996; ADB, 1998). However, because the households in general and women in particular are so poor in the rural areas of countries like Nepal (Joeke, 1991), the idea that they will be willing to pay for the improved water services does not hold true even if the services are better than before. This statement is supported by one ADB (1998) assessment of water schemes, which is based on 122 project performance audit reports and 18 project completion reports. This evaluation shows that the success rate, which was determined on the bases of a number of indices, including economic internal rate of return, declined in the drinking water and sanitation projects between the periods 1968-1979 and 1980-1990. In contrast, the success rate in hydropower and flood control and irrigation and drainage projects either increased or remained constant for the same period. What can be inferred from this finding is that because the poor and marginalised people, including women, did not derive substantial income from the improved water supply, as it was mainly used for domestic purposes they could not pay the water tariffs, and thus this led to low success rate in this sector.

Other experiences also indicate that the argument of access to higher income resulting from multiple uses of water should enable users to pay for the improved water services applies to water used for irrigation and other commercial purposes, which is possible in urban and semi-urban areas, but not to water used for household consumption in rural areas. This is illustrated in Box 1. In turn, the women from such rural areas may return to their unhygienic traditional sources, resulting in many damaging health implications not only in their own lives but also in those of their entire families. There are many experiences of such women going back to their traditional unhygienic water sources (van Wijk, 1998; Joshi and Fawcett, 2001).

#### ***Box 1: Improved water services lead to higher income in urban/semi-urban areas***

*In Hile village in east Nepal, a big commercial centre for people from adjoining villages and districts, the improved water supply is used for commercial purposes, such as running tea shops, hotels and restaurants, and thus women and men have been able to increase their income from the time saved from water hauling. This is not, however, the case in three villages in west Nepal namely, Gajedi, Motipur and Magaragadhi, where improved water is used simply for household consumption. As a result, the women from such areas, are having difficulty to pay the water tariffs. Discussions with such women suggest that they are very likely to go back to their unhygienic traditional sources, if they are required to pay, resulting in the failure of such projects (Regmi, 2000).*

Because the poor rural women do not have appropriate skill, access to credit and market, and enough time to do productive work, the notion of improved water services alone leading to higher income needs to be reexamined.

## **Premise 2: Payment increases feelings of ownership towards the water supply**

The demand-driven approach emphasises that the cost-recovery concept suggested both at the capital formation and operation and maintenance stages can be instrumental in raising people's feeling of ownership towards the project, which will eventually lead to the higher chances of the sustainability of project benefits (World Bank, 1996; ADB, 1998). However, such statements do not highlight the need to distinguish who in the family, men or women, are responsible for the payment of water services and thus whose - men's and/or women's - ownership towards the project needs to be increased. It has been reported in many studies (Ahmed and Raza, 1999; van Wijk, 1998; Fong et al. 1996) that because women undertake most of the water-related activities in the household, the men in the family place lower value on spending on water, taking it for granted that women should be responsible for this expenditure. These studies have also shown that men in general expect their women to pay the water tariff and that women have been taking this responsibility in many projects around the world. However, the studies also report that there are many cases where women have been unable to do so, though they are willing, due to their lower access to and control over family income. This is illustrated in Box 2.

In this regard, Cleaver and Elson (1995) argue that 'the mis-match between the willingness to pay and the actual ability to pay puts women in a vicious circle - without improved water supplies they have no spare time for income generating activities, but without the income they cannot pay for new facilities'. This lack of gender sensitivity in the water policy means that women are under pressure either way - if they want to use the services they have to work very hard to pay for them; if they do not use the services they have to walk long distances to collect water. Because of this situation it is very difficult to expect that the demand-driven approach can raise people's, especially women's, feeling of ownership towards the improved water services. This lack of feeling of the ownership of the water supplies among women raises doubts about the sustainability of the projects as they, as the main drawers of water for domestic supplies, are also seen as the 'natural' domestic water managers (Cleaver and Jobes, 1996).

### ***Box 2: Water tariffs are usually women's responsibility***

*In one meeting related to the collection of water tariffs amongst the user households in Gajedi village in west Nepal it was found that the water tariffs were mostly paid by women and among the 28 defaulters, 22 were women whose husbands had either died or gone to other places as migrant workers. One decision that was taken in the meeting was that if the defaulters did not pay their dues in two weeks their use of improved water services would be curtailed. Two of these defaulters were contacted as a matter of curiosity. Both these women were shocked when they heard this decision since both of them were very poor and relying on wage labour work for their own as well as their children's survival. Once this decision is translated into action they will have no choice except to revert to their traditional sources located far away, requiring them to spend a lot of their time and energy in water collection (Regmi, 2000).*

What is alarming is that the concept of cost recovery is not only promoted in the water sector but also in other sectors such as health, education, etc. However, there is no yet answer to questions such as how do poor and marginalised people, especially women, as they are the permanent residents of the households, meet all these cost recovery demands. The facts that a majority of Nepali rural women are illiterate, lack confidence, and cannot voice due to existing socio-cultural practices which are always in favour of men, further compound this issue of demand-based cost recovery concept.

### **Premise 3: Private sector involvement leads to effective services**

Another argument put forward in support of the demand-driven approach is that the delivery of water services should be delegated to autonomous and accountable private agencies for an appropriate fee (ADB, 1998; World Bank, 1996; Vickman (1998) discussing FINNIDA) as they can be more efficient than the government departments. However, because the private sector normally runs for profit it will not be concerned about the financial limitations of poor people, especially women in general, and women from female-headed households in particular, to pay the water costs both for construction and for operation and maintenance. By virtue of being known for charging “appropriate fees for appropriate services”, the private agency will easily stop serving people who do not pay for its improved services. This clearly means that women, who take care of meeting the household need for water, will be excluded from the benefits of improved water services and compelled to go back to their traditional sources, which are not only unhygienic but also present difficulties as they demand more time and energy.

Hence, it is essential that the demand-driven approach highlights how the private sector can be made accountable in continuing their services to the poor who have problems in paying for the services. In this regard, DFID (1998) comments that “for the private sector to be accountable to the poor is to monitor in great detail against appropriate indicators the level of service provided to the communities, before and during private sector participation. Appropriate clauses will need to be included in the contract”.

Though the international agencies such as FINNIDA (Vikman, 1998) and the ADB (1998) have briefly stated that there is a need in particular cases to subsidise services to the poorest among the projects' beneficiaries they have not made clear how such subsidies should be provided nor who should provide them. There are many cases where the benefits of subsidies have been controlled by the well-off households rather than the poorer ones, in the absence of proper mechanisms (van Wijk, 1998). As a result, poor rural women cannot come forward with any demand to benefit from the better services that the private sector provides. If in some cases, they do, this may be at the cost of reduced water consumption and consequently of giving up some requirements that are essential for their survival. van Wijk (1998) has documented a number of experiences from different parts of the world, where poor households in general and women in particular have tremendously reduced their domestic use of water for health and hygienic purposes, resulting in many implications on their health. DFID (1998) also supports the principle that high water tariffs may result in cutting food consumption, and hence reduced nutritional status, inviting health risks. Hence, the poor need to be subsidised and the government should ensure that private sector makes provisions for this aspect in their agreements and that implementations of such agreements is carefully monitored.

The concept of privatisation is so seriously taken in all sectors that this has put the poor and marginalised women and men in a state of uncertainty and confusion even for their basic livelihood.

### **Premise 4: Commoditisation of water**

Water has been regarded as a resource to be treated efficiently in its multiple uses. To control the unaccounted use of water, emphasis has been placed on seeing water as a finite, vulnerable resource and thus to be treated as an economic good (ADB, 1998; Garn, 1998). Supporting this principle, Wakeman et al. (1996) note that an economic analysis of water from a gender perspective, which shows the gender differentials in activities, resources and benefits of household water use, can be very useful while preparing plans. They go on to say that, as women and girls are often the primary managers of water facilities, determining what kinds of services they prefer, as well as those that men prefer, will be essential. This should lead to the control of the misuse of water.

However, once water is considered as a commodity, those who can use it for multiple productive purposes for greater economic benefit, such as large industries and big land holders, will have the power to pay for unlimited use. This can lead to severe curtailment in the supply of domestic drinking water. Documentation of these experiences can be found in a technical report written by van Wijk (1998). Even though the international stakeholders have apparently appreciated, at least in their policy documents, that priority in the supply of water should be given for drinking purposes, this might not happen in reality once the private sector takes on the responsibility for water supply, as is highly encouraged by the international community. The effect is that women, who are responsible for managing water in the households, are hard-hit by such a situation as they have little voice with which to justify the need of their families for water for basic survival, as they are less able to pay for it than other high earning consumers.

Furthermore, the concept of the economic good of water can also create conflicts between women and men at the micro level i.e. at the household level, since experiences (van Wijk, 1998) show that women are more concerned with its household use, while men are more interested in the use of water in agriculture, for irrigation. Though supporting the concept of economic good, Wakeman et al. (1996) write that these varying roles need to be recognised; that both women and men need to be involved in discussions about protecting water resources for their efficient use for various purposes. Experiences from various studies in Nepal (Regmi, 2000; Mustanoja, 1998; Shtrii Shakti, 1995), show that rural women in such developing countries have very little decision-making power on household matters, especially those related to economic aspects. This is illustrated in Box 3.

***Box 3: Women lack decision-making power on economic matters***

In four villages studied in Nepal, namely, Hile in the east, and Motipur, Magaragadhi and Gajedi in the west, it was found that the local women had considerable participation in making decisions about agriculture-related activities, but not in those related to cash crops. However, they were much less involved in making decisions about household expenditure and almost not at all when it came to the time of making decisions about capital oriented expenditure (Regmi, 2000). Another study carried out in Nepal also reports that of the total household decisions 88% were made by men and only 6% by women. Similarly, in decisions about domestic expenditure and disposal of household products, and capital transactions, the men's share was 86% and 89% as against 7% each for women (Shtrii Shakti, 1995).

As a result, men can divert the use of water for their own purposes, leaving women to continue using their traditional sources, located at some distance (van Wijk, 1998). Because of the diversion of water for these uses, the domestic use of water receives lower priority, which can, in turn, have a number of effects on women: i) they will have to walk longer distances spending lots of energy to fulfil the domestic need for water which could have serious implications on their health; ii) women will continue using their unhygienic traditional sources which will affect the lives of millions of poor rural people and also demand them to spend a significant amount of money on medicines and treatment; and iii) women's established role as carers for family health will be ignored affecting the employment of millions of women world-wide who are currently employed in the health sector (van Wijk, 1985; and Cleaver and Elson, 1995). Cleaver and Elson (1995) argue that 'the shift in emphasis from health to economic aspects of water has undermined the recognised role of women as informal hygiene educators at the household level. This shift has affected women more than men as the former are more active in the health sector than the latter; with this shift, there is a possibility that the number of women working in this sector will be reduced'. The ultimate result is that the possibility of women contributing in the formulation of gender-aware water projects and water policies is reduced.



### **Premise 5: Possibility of higher health benefits**

Drinking water has a very significant impact on the health of human beings. One WHO estimate claims that 80% of sickness and disease in the world is due to inadequate water supply and sanitation (New ERA, 1991). Hence one strong argument put forward for the cost-recovery approach to water services (World Bank, 1996 and ADB, 1998) results from the enormous health benefits to the family, especially to women and children, which arise from more efficient and effective water services. Tadle (1990) also argues that ‘the strongest and the most frequent argument put forward for expenditure on domestic water supplies is the observed correlation between better water and health; several studies have shown that differences in water quantity or quality are associated with differences in morbidity’.

Supporting the idea of women and girl children receiving health benefits from the improved water services Wakeman et al. (1996) also note that because women and girls are so closely involved in household water supply, they often benefit the most when the village supply is improved. In principle, “when water quality and quantity improves and water is available closer to home, girls and women take shorter trips carrying heavy containers, which can have tremendous positive effects on their health. Women can save their energy for many other productive activities and for leisure, which will have compound positive effects on the health of other family members, and girls may have time to go to school and spend more time there”.

However, improvement in women’s health as a result of the reduction in their water fetching time will not arise so easily in the absence of mechanisms for women’s work to be shared by men. As experiences from various studies (Regmi and Fawcett, 1999; Mustanoja, 1998; Wakeman et al. 1996) show that the consumption of water tremendously increases in correlation with its proximity to the home. This is illustrated in Box 4.

Further, the fact that women are not able to pay for the capital costs or for the operational costs of improved water services due to not having access to, and control over, financial resources, will naturally distance them from health benefits. The lack of access to safe and clean water due to the inability to afford it, may again lead to negative effects on the health of all the family members leading to an increase in women’s burden as they take care of sick persons in the family. This is the origin of the opinion that water should be regarded as a social good and not only as an economic good.

#### ***Box 4: Improved water services might not save women’s time***

*In the lowlands in Gajedi village in west Nepal and Motipur and Magaragadhi villages in mid-west Nepal, the women contacted for focus group discussions reported that in the past they collected water 4 or 5 times a day, amounting to a total of 80-100 litres per family per day before their villages were given improved water services. But, after they got the water near their homes, the collection increased to 10-15 times per day, with the use of nearly 200-300 litres of water a day. This was due to very high temperature in the lowlands, and thus, everyone wanting to drink and wash in the fresh and cold water straight from the tubewell rather than that stored in the house, which is mostly warm. Similarly, in the uplands in Hile village in east Nepal, which is often very cold, women now carry water all the way to their homes, several times each day, spending significant amounts of energy to bathe freely and wash the clothes used during menstruation comfortably. They are unable to carry out these activities freely at the new tapstands, which are located along the roadside, where there are higher chances of men and boys seeing them performing these activities. The women said they did not have this problem while using the more distant, traditional sources, where there is no chance of men being in the vicinity (Regmi and Fawcett, 1999).*

## **Premise 6: Local participation in decision-making**

Donors who support the demand-driven approach also argue that water supplies are more likely to be sustainable when communities make decisions about the services that they want (World Bank, 1996; ADB, 1998; FINNIDA, 1998). They also note that since women usually manage household services, they need to be involved in decision-making about these services. As women are often the managers as well as the direct users of water facilities, involving them as well as men in management and decision-making helps ensure that systems meet women's needs. Women use systems frequently and are in a good position to provide accurate, up-to-date reporting on the functioning of a given system. If a system breaks down, it is women, not men, who will most likely be the ones to travel further to get water. Women, therefore, need to be involved in making decisions about the water supplies (Wakeman et al. 1996).

However, the weakness in this argument is that it does not explain how this should be done, especially in the case of women from developing countries where patriarchal and other social biases are so strong against allowing women to be involved in activities outside the home. Because these women are so powerless in the communities, due to their lack of education, reduced access to and control over resources, and other social and cultural factors, the chance of their involvement in the management of water resources is bleak. Even when they are involved, their number and voice is very small, as seen in many water committees around the world, so that women are not able to voice their concerns effectively (IDRC, 1985; Carloni, 1987; IRC, 1994; Mustanoja, 1998; van Wijk, 1998; Regmi, 2000). The chance of women from female-headed households being involved in the management of water supplies is even less, as they have to struggle with their meagre resources to meet the various family needs; hence, there is no question of their being able to pay the costs of water or of their getting involved in the management of water supplies. This is illustrated in Box 5.

### ***Box 5: Women's presence, a tokenism, in local water committees***

*In a local water committee that consists of 11 members in Gajedi village in West Nepal, only one woman is included by men as a member. Similarly, in Hile village in East Nepal, two women have been included by men in a committee of 13 members. All these women are relatively better-off than many other women in these villages. Because these women have not experienced the difficulty of collecting water, spending hours of walking, unlike many other women in the community they seldom come to the meetings. Even when they come they find it strange to speak in presence of a committee composed of almost entirely of men. Interestingly, in the case of Hile village, the two women selected as members in the committee, did not know for months that they had been selected by men to be in the committee. The reasons that came out from discussions with men for not including women in the committees are: they are illiterate, they are good for household chores, they lack experience, they do not have exposure, and hence, lack the decision-making ability (Regmi, 2000).*

In turn, the lack of women's involvement raises questions about the sustainability of water supplies, as experienced in many countries in the world (Mathew, 1991; IRC, 1994; Fong et al. 1996; van Wijk, 1998; Regmi and Fawcett, 1999). This issue also raises doubts about the long-term benefits that people can receive from the massive investment that has been put into the drinking water sector in the 1990s by various international agencies, if women continue being bypassed in the management of water supplies. Therefore, it is necessary that such a principle is further elaborated to clarify the 'how' aspects of women's participation rather than simply saying that women's participation will be sought, because the danger is that women's participation can

be misinterpreted only as their involvement as project beneficiaries but not as active change agents in society. In order for this situation to improve, changes are needed in the organizations that promote new policies.

For example, a number of international agencies have emphasised the need for women's incorporation in professional, managerial and technical positions at all levels so that water projects may be more effective, not only in meeting people's needs but also for women's economic and social development (UNDP/PROWESS, 1990 in FINNIDA, 1993; UNCED, 1992 in IRC, 1994; IRC, 1994 referring to UNICEF). To take one example, of UNCED and the World Bank, they have singled out women as a special category within Chapter 18 of Agenda 21 of their policy paper instead of integrating them into the mainstream. The policy paper has taken account of women's role as providers of water for domestic consumption, but not as those who are active in productive activities as well (Green and Baden, 1994). These authors further argue that this kind of compartmentalisation of women distances them from their relationships with men, and reinforces the gender gap even if they have been mentioned in the policy document. These agencies have failed to discuss women in relation to men, nor have they defined how the system of social relations (including gender relations), within which they operate, determines women's participation in the management of water projects.

#### **Premise 7: Gender-neutral words can benefit women and men equally**

The sector strategies of the donors that advocate the demand-driven approach use gender neutral terms, such as 'people', 'users', 'community', 'stakeholders', 'beneficiaries', 'poor', etc., assuming that women and men have the same needs and concerns and can benefit equally when new water supplies are implemented in their communities (World Bank, 1996; ADB, 1998). However, experiences prove that women and men have different needs and they need to be dealt with separately. For example, in its section on capacity building, ADB (1998) does not specify the need for building the capacity of local women more than that of men, though the former's involvement in operation and maintenance of water systems has been proven to be an effective means of achieving success (IRC, 1992; Fong et al. 1996). The same is true in the case of WaterAid (1996) which has mentioned the role of women only once in its strategy document despite the latter's unquestioned role in all stages of water supply schemes. The implication that can be drawn from the use of terminologies that appear to be gender neutral, but which are not in reality, is that they distance women from meeting not only their strategic needs but also their practical needs since all training, skill development, capacity building and decision making activities will be centred around only men (Regmi, 2000 and Moser, 1993). The following brief discussion attempts to show the implications of the use of gender-neutral terms on women though the readers must be cautioned that certain changes are taking place in the agencies discussed below from the time this research was undertaken.

The vision, aims and objectives of the World Bank (1996), ADB (1998), FINNIDA (Vikman, 1998) and WaterAid (1996), do not mention anything specific about improving women's lives or meeting their strategic gender interests. This has led to the formulation of strategies that cannot properly address women's and men's concerns. For example, WaterAid's strategies aimed to help partner organisations to develop their capacity to undertake integrated water projects, do not specify the need to develop their skill and ability in gender analysis and in addressing gender issues in the projects. They also do not specify how women's strategic roles can be enhanced to ensure that the projects become effective in meeting both their practical gender needs and their strategic gender interests. Because all the agencies aim to influence their other organisations, as well as their partner organisations, by their approach, the lack of gender sensitivity in their policy documents can easily affect the policies of others. Moreover, WaterAid has identified 13 key issues that it aims to communicate to its partner organisations. However, gender as an issue is not found in this list. Gender issues are also not considered when WaterAid discusses the ability to

pay for water, which may determine whether women can really have access to improved water services.

Some examples from WaterAid's strategy document (1996) also illustrate that donor agencies are also weak in appreciating women's role in water supplies as follows. In one of its strategies, WaterAid indicates that the UNDP estimates of 1.4 billion people around the world lacking access to safe water and two billion people lacking effective sanitation, are underestimated, as these figures do not take into account the lack of repair and maintenance to existing systems. However, the irony is that WaterAid does not indicate in its strategies that one major reason for this failure is the exclusion of women from project activities and hence, the need for women to be actively involved while designing its water projects. Similarly, another example can be cited from one of the criteria which WaterAid uses to assess project proposals. This criterion concerns whether the technology involved is cost-effective, appropriate and affordable to the community. WaterAid's bias in this criterion is that it has not mentioned that the technology needs to be appropriate and affordable to women, as experiences from all over the world show that women use, protect and manage water systems more than men (van Wijk, 1998; Fong et al. 1996; IRC, 1991). Such biases may be caused by the development sector in general being biased against women and, in particular, agencies in the water sector being excessively influenced by the technical components.

Another bias can be seen in another of WaterAid's strategies (WaterAid, 1996), which mentions that advocacy has considerable long-term potential to bring lasting benefits to some of the world's neediest people. Again, WaterAid does not indicate that a majority of those neediest people are women, who suffer most from the lack of water supplies. This is an indication that the strategic framework is designed by engineers and technicians who have little empathy towards women and the problems they encounter in the absence of improved water services.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The above discussions indicate that the current thinking of the international donors about managing the water sector within the frameworks of demand-driven, cost-recovery, economic good and privatization have a lot of implications on poor and marginalised people, especially the women from female-headed households, since they cannot meet the costs of water and hence, will be deprived of the benefits of improved water services. Since the domestic use of water cannot generate any income directly, water used for this purpose needs to be viewed differently, unlike the water used for irrigation and other commercial purposes. The argument that women and men can generate extra income from their time saved from water hauling, which can then be used to meet the water costs does not hold true in the absence of the promotion of such activities as a complement to water projects, and lack of other opportunities available locally. The need is, therefore, to create opportunities for women and men to increase their income. This will not only help to meet the water tariffs to fulfil their practical needs, but also will increase women's status and their bargaining power in the household and the community, as increased income results in greater decision-making ability, as proven by many studies (Elson, 1991; Jazairy et al. 1992; Moser, 1993). At the same time, it must be recognised that subsidies are needed for the poor and vulnerable, who are often women, in order to ensure that they are not excluded from their rights to a decent water supply.

Further, efforts should also be made, through gender sensitisation processes, to make men feel that water is not only a women's need but the need of the whole family, and thus, the payment of water tariffs should not be left to women alone. This is true that some engendering activities are being undertaken by some agencies engaged in the water sector in Nepal. For example, Nepal Water for Health (NEWAH), a leading NGO in the water sector funded mainly by WaterAid and Department for International Development (DFID), has been formulating many gender sensitive

policies and practicing them as well. Similarly, the third phase of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project (RWSSP) of FINNIDA has also introduced a number of gender sensitive activities as compared to what it was in the first two phases. Finally, the Fourth Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Project (FRWSSSP) of the Department of Water Supply (DWSS) funded by the ADB/Manila has also proposed various activities that can help integrating gender into their water schemes. However, because the agencies are implementing these activities as one-off events without any long term systematic planning, one can raise the question of sustainability of the practical and strategic benefits of their water schemes. Experiences show that there is a need for more systematic, thorough and careful planning backed up by strong commitment and positive attitudes of planners and policy makers so as to sustain all kinds of benefits to both poor and marginalised women and men. All these issues need to be well reflected in the policy documents of the donor agencies so that the water supply improvements implemented by them or their partner organisations can also lead to a society with greater gender equality in terms of sharing of benefits, power and access to and control over resources.

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