

# The Role of Women in Water Resources Management: The Tanzania Case

BENEDICT P. MICHAEL

*Ministry of Water, PO Box 35059, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania*

**ABSTRACT** *The case of Tanzania regarding the role of women in various aspects of water resources management is typical of many other African countries having a similar cultural background. In most African communities culture dictates that women are subordinates to men and, hence, are socially marginalized to the domestic chores which, though directly related to the use of water, give them no room for decision making on how to utilize this resource. The various decision making levels related to water resources management in Tanzania depict a conspicuous gender imbalance which is a product of a strong cultural background biased against women. This negative male attitude in Tanzania has seriously undermined the development potential of most women who also engage themselves in non-domestic economic ventures at an entrepreneurial level. Through various approaches, the government is now uprooting the main sources of this socially negative situation in Tanzania.*

## Introduction

It is a historical fact that water is an indispensable resource not only to life existence but also to human development. There are few issues that have greater impact on our lives and our natural environment than the management of this precious resource. This therefore appeals for unlimited concerted efforts, financial and intellectual resources to manage water resources for the benefit of all.

One of the major factors affecting the economies of most developing countries is the poor management of their water resources. There are still many inconsistencies and conflicts regarding the practice of water resource management. Water problems are not all related to scarcity or quality only. The primary error derived from water resource planning and management begins when male needs and priorities provide a standard against which female interests are measured and often minimized. In most African societies, this error is rationalized on cultural grounds.

Because household water provision is still considered a woman's social responsibility in most African cultures, especially in rural areas, donors and governments have tended to assume that women's strategic interest in water is concentrated primarily in having access to convenient, reliable and safe sources close to the homestead for their domestic responsibilities. In the majority of cases, this assumption is certainly invalid because rural African women also need access to water to undertake work with direct economic benefits for themselves, their families and their respective communities as well. Sometimes

their needs are in direct conflict with those of the male members of their households. Where access to water is limited, it is invariably the women who have to use up their precious time and energy to fetch water from traditional sources. Traditionally, men are seen to be decision makers, but generally they have little appreciation of water problems or the labour involved in collecting it.

### **The Outstanding Need**

Because there is considerable evidence to suggest that, on cultural grounds, women are not given an equal voice in deciding on key issues which directly affect their lives, especially those related to water resource management, the outstanding need therefore is to break the limiting cultural barriers so as to ensure that women are equally involved not only in the decision-making process, but also in the actual planning, design and construction of water supply structures and in overall water resource management.

### **The Tanzania Case**

#### *General Situation*

Tanzanian women, like those of other African countries, *are not significant decision makers in almost all water management issues*. The distribution pattern of women at various levels of the entire Tanzanian community is one of the basic indicators of the validity of this fact. Though women constitute more than 50% of the total Tanzanian population of about 30 million people, their participation in management and decision making is still very low. At the top (executive level) where the decision-making process is normally expected to be effective, there are hardly any women professionals in the technical/engineering fields. The few women who are in top management positions in government and politics include Members of Parliament, Ministers, Principal Secretaries, Regional Commissioners and District Commissioners. Whereas there are more than 15 Water Engineers at the Ministry of Water headquarters who are responsible for the development of the water sector in the country, none of them is a woman. The majority of the women at the headquarters are either in the Accounts department or in the Personnel and Administration department or in other support services (e.g. the registry or secretarial cadre). There are more than 20 Regional Water Engineers who head the various upcountry regions, and more than 60 District Water Engineers, but none of them is a woman water engineer. The majority of the women in both the regions and districts fall in the technical cadre where they simply implement decisions coming from the top and they have no mandate to alter them in any way. About 75% of the Tanzanian population lives in the rural areas. This is where the cultural practices are relatively stronger than in the urban areas, and the people there are mostly semi-literate. This means, therefore, that the woman's decision-making input here also has negligible effects owing to cultural limitations and their lack of assertiveness and self-confidence.

#### *Decision Making at the Top Level*

As far as water resources management is concerned, the Ministry of Water in

Tanzania is wholly responsible for all matters related to planning, design, construction, water quality, distribution to water users and issuing of water rights to private water consumers. This is one of the biggest ministries with highly technical responsibilities. The key decision-making levels of this ministry are placed at its headquarters, the regional headquarters and the district headquarters where water engineers, hydrologists or hydrogeologists are the heads of Directorates, Regions or Districts. In all of these key levels, there are no women. There are many reasons contributing to this situation, but the major ones will be discussed in subsequent sections.

### *Decision Making at the Middle Level*

Tanzanian women's capacity to have input into the decision-making machinery concerning water resources planning and management is partially hampered by their lack of exposure to scientific and technological fields related to the development of the water sector in general. Though there has been a considerable number of educated women in Tanzania since independence in 1961, most of them are in non-technical fields, and the few who have been trained in technical fields do not hold positions which give them the privilege to influence decisions favouring them in the water sector development process. They simply implement what is decided by their senior male bosses.

The question of women holding inferior official positions to men is believed to be due to the existing misrepresentation in the Civil Service Commission which is the sole body responsible for establishing appointments and promotion procedures to senior positions in the government. The influencing forces here are cultural and the relative level of education which is in favour of men. The traditional negative male attitudes towards females may also be a partial influence though, of course, the attitude is unjustifiable because there have been cases where women have been given high executive positions and have proved more competent than men. The parastatal sector in Tanzania, which is the largest employer in the country, has no better history in relation to gender balance in key decision-making positions. The few women who succeed in making their way to the top are concentrated mainly in gender-stereotyped roles such as personnel management and administration.

### *Decision Making at the Bottom Level*

The gender imbalance, which is prevalent in Tanzania's decision-making machinery, has a natural downward trend for a socioeconomic development bias against women in all stages of development project cycles. The general development planning process in Tanzania adopts the bottom-up approach with the assumption that the people themselves can better identify their problems, and what they may need from the top is only technical and financial assistance to solve those problems. Valid as it is, this assumption is highly impractical because of a number of inconsistencies inherent within the Tanzanian community. The case of water resources planning and management clearly highlights these inconsistencies. For example, since it is known that household water

provision is traditionally a female responsibility in most African communities, one would therefore expect that female members of the African communities would dominate the bottom-most planning stage so as to correctly identify what they consider to be the key water problems worth considering in the planning business. Contrary to expectations, these so called local planning committees are overwhelmingly dominated by the male members of the community, most of whom do not have the slightest feeling for the pressure of the domestic chores which is experienced by women in their families. Most of these chores are associated with the use of water, which normally has to be fetched manually from distant sources by the women themselves.

In Tanzania, most villages have established what are generally known as Village Water Committees, which are charged with the responsibility for all matters related to water-supply issues in their respective villages. As with the planning committees, women are also greatly under-represented on the water committees. The main factors leading to such a situation are the women's lack of self-confidence which, again, is mainly influenced by cultural limitations, and the low level of literacy relative to the men. Parallel to this is the factor of women's commitment to other domestic roles which are paramount to their social welfare and that of their family members, e.g. cooking, child care, general sanitation etc.

These factors not only limit the women's right to decide on issues which directly affect them, but also contradict one of the key principles for integrated water resources management as cited in Agenda 21 which requires that water should be managed by those who use it most and that all those who have an interest in water allocation and use (particularly women) should be involved in decision making.

### **Socioeconomic Considerations**

If a quantitative assessment of the women's productive potential was to be carried out precisely in Tanzania, it would reveal the negative socioeconomic impact which is derived from the gender imbalance in water resources management. This is because macro-level water resources planners do not take women's productive roles into consideration. The Ministry of Water tends to focus primarily on the attainment of overall objectives and inadvertently overlooks the needs of the household water users. Although it is expected that local populations will use installed water systems, water engineers rarely examine the pattern of needs of different groups of potential users when designing for the systems. They tend to assume that the water users will adjust equitably to new water sources and that individuals and groups will have access as required. In practice the assumption is not always true.

If, for example, women were to have an effective input into the decision-making machinery at all levels of water resources development and management, consideration would also have to be given to provision of water for the non-domestic activities which women are also obliged to carry out as part of their duties in the family division of labour. These activities are extensions of the women's domestic roles and are commonly undertaken either within or outside the premises of their homes. Most of these businesses require access to water for both production and sanitation purposes, e.g. processing and vending of cooked foods, selling of local brew, running of tea/fruit juice kiosks etc. All such

non-domestic activities undertaken by women have direct economic benefits not only for themselves but also for their family members and community members as well. However, as in most developing countries, such informal economic activities in which women are particularly concentrated are not included in the estimates of the GNP. Though such activities substantially contribute to national income in terms of taxes, labour statistics consider them as non-productive. In its basic principles for integrated water resources management, Agenda 21 highlights the fact that water as a scarce resource should not only be treated as a social good but also as an economic good and it should be managed within a comprehensive framework, taking into account its impact on all aspects of socioeconomic development. In overlooking this fact, water resource planners have seriously undermined the capacity of women to make a substantial contribution to national development processes.

### **Remedial Approaches Adopted**

The domestication of both women's social and economic roles in society is a historical tendency which has always stirred up a bitter outcry for gender equality from representative victims and sympathizers from advocacy groups, political and non-political organizations. Various approaches have been adopted by various countries to redress this gender issue. In Tanzania, the following are some of the attempts which have been and are being made in response to this outcry.

#### *Establishment of a Women's Affairs Ministry*

This was established about 10 years ago with the general aims of building up capacity in the representation of the womenfolk in the government, and of involving women more in all relevant economic development activities.

#### *Adoption of the PROWESS Programme*

The establishment of the Ministry of Women Affairs had a remarkable influence in raising awareness and encouraging the women towards taking part in key activities of developmental significance in the country. In the water sector, PROWESS (i.e. Promotion of the Role of Women in Water and Environmental Sanitation Services), which is a UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation programme whose objective is to promote ways to involve women more fully in water supply and sanitation projects, was adopted in 1988. A woman national coordinator of PROWESS was appointed in the Ministry of Water. About a decade since then, the programme is apparently in total stagnation. In fact the majority of the Tanzanian women know nothing about it, despite its well-intentioned adoption. This is true even for those women working in the water sector itself. The reasons all hinge on the prevailing gender imbalance in the country at various levels of socialization and employment as mentioned earlier.

#### *Provision of Equal Educational Opportunities*

The historical trend of giving first consideration to males in educational opportunities has now been abolished. The criteria for selection of candidates for

higher education is now based purely on examination grades scored by candidates. On this basis, many girls have gained access to higher levels of training in competitive endeavours with boys. Whereas there used to be more boys' secondary schools in the past, now both groups (boys and girls) are competing for the same chances available in schools, most of which are now coeducational in status. The same thing applies to admission to post-secondary school colleges and universities. At universities, courses which historically used to be dominated entirely by boys, e.g. engineering courses, are now enrolling a reasonable ratio of girl students.

### *Water Policy Review*

A recent Water Policy Review has accommodated provisions which give women a position and right to give their opinions in matters of water and sanitation at relevant levels of water development.

### **Bibliography**

Rathgeber, E.M. (1996) *Women, Men and Water Resources Management in Africa. Water Management in Africa and the Middle East. Challenges and Opportunities* (Ottawa, IDRC).

Van Wijk-Sijbesma, C. (1985) *Participation of Women in Water Supply and Sanitation; Roles and Realities*, Technical Paper no. 22 (The Hague, International Reference Centre for Community Water Supply and Sanitation).

Swartz, M.-L. (1985) *Women in Development: A Creative Role Denied? The Case of Tanzania* (London, C. Hurst & Co; New York, St Martin's Press).

Rogers, B. (1980) *The Domestication of Women. Discrimination in Developing Societies* (London, Tavistock Publications).