

Women, water and sanitation

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Picture: Slum residents collect water in Nairobi, Kenya, November 2007. Mathare slum faces a serious water shortage due to major disconnections from slum inlet pipes.



Women, water and sanitation: going the extra mile

Catherine Irura

This year's African Union Summit, 24th June to 1st July 2008, will be on 'Meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Water and Sanitation'. What should African leaders take into account when thinking about how to meet these goals and those of The African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa? Catherine Irura tackles this question.

The African Union Summit is here with us again and on 24th June to 1st July 2008, African leaders will be discussing 'Meeting the Millennium Development Goals on Water and Sanitation'. As our leaders deliberate on this very important topic we must ask ourselves whether our leaders will take into consideration women's concerns over water and sanitation and remind them that women amount to almost more than half of the population in Africa and that their voices must not be ignored. In this article we voice some of the concerns that women would like their leaders to take into consideration as they debate on this issue.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) goal number 7 calls on governments to ensure environmental sustainability. The goal is to reduce the proportion of the people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and states as an indicator the proportion of the population using improved drinking water sources and using improved sanitation facilities.^[1] Whereas the MDG's voices the promise to alleviate poverty from the world it is not legally binding on Governments but instead forms the minimum standards for which all countries in the world should aim to achieve. As a result many countries have continuously used the MDG's as a standard for their policy and planning processes. The MDG's as goal 3 also call on governments to promote gender equality and empower women at all levels including in decision making and policy formation.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa substantially addresses issues and challenges that women face everyday including those relating to water and sanitation. State parties are required to ensure that women have access to clean drinking water^[2] and it further advocates for women's access and control over productive resources and most importantly participation of women in conceptualization, decision-making, implementation and evaluation of development policies and programmes^[3]. This is a home grown instrument that was adopted by the African Union to benefit women in Africa. The Millennium Development goals and the protocol therefore merge in buttressing the place of women in sustainable development, and their incorporation in planning procedures^[4].

Water and sanitation is critical to environmental sustainability while sanitation refers to interventions to reduce people's exposure to disease by providing a clean environment in which to live by taking measures involving both provision of facilities and behaviors which work together to form a hygienic environment^[5]. There are various uses of water such as for food, sanitation, personal hygiene, care of the sick, crop irrigation and for the care of domestic livestock and poultry. Women in Africa in an effort to ensure that their families and livestock are well taken care of will walk 10–15 kilometers to get water and carry up to up

to 15 litres of water per trip ^[6] yet their significant role in water and sanitation is constantly overlooked. Women are direct users, providers and managers of water in households and they are guardians of household hygiene ^[7]. This should be the basis upon which women should be fully involved in public decision making with regard to water resources. Improvement of the quality, quantity and access to clean water liberates women and young girls freeing up their time to engage in income generating activities, education and public life.

States' failure to uphold the right to water for all infringes on the rights of women as household caretakers because they have to go the extra mile to gain access to water, which is a basic right ^[8]. In lower income rural areas, women have to use lower quality water which makes the household susceptible to waterborne diseases ^[9] which in turn drains the limited household resources due to the medical expenses incurred. The unavailability of clean water then becomes burdensome for women reducing the quality of life as they have to forgo other rights to gain basic necessities.

Women usually have no rights and/or access to land for varying legal and cultural reasons yet they are the majority of the world's agricultural producers, playing important roles in farming, fisheries, forestry and farming. They are the least title holders among the property holders in the world ^[10]. For example in Kenya, customary law generally limits ownership of land and only entitles access to communal land so long as a woman is married. Legislative provisions may be gender neutral but the application of land law is gendered ^[11]. Most land is registered in the name of the eldest male of a household. This not only excludes women from the registration process but further predicates the rights to use land to the rights of the male title holder.

Women carrying water from a bore hole near Oromi IDP camp, in Kitgum District, northern Uganda, May 2007



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Additionally, there is little incentive for women to make environmentally sound decisions and their lack of access to credit (of which land may be required as security) hampers them from buying technologies and inputs that would be less damaging to natural resources. As providers, their willingness to eke out a bare existence despite access to agricultural resources and education on viable methods of farming may make them adapt to less labour-intensive crops and practices that may harm the environment [12] and drain the water resources. These factors may lead to declining productivity and increased environmental degradation. Recognition of women as land holders and contributors to development would motivate them to protect the environment and desire to realize the full value of land in agricultural production.



A Congolese woman asylum seeker washes her children with sewer water, outside UNHCR office in Bujumbura, Burundi, August 2007

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Women are also increasingly becoming heads of households partly due to the numerous conflicts in Africa, HIV/AIDS and other existing social problems. This means that they are solely responsible for providing for their families and take part in farming activities yet they do not have the legal rights to access water and land (which are the main source of livelihood). Since many women do not own land, women and girls constantly face the threat of becoming economically unstable and dependant on their male relatives or husbands. In the eventuality of economic despair they may turn to means such as prostitution or transactional sex, or bowing to certain cultural practices such as wife inheritance that expose them to sexually transmitted diseases and other health risks.

The absence of clean water acutely increases the impact of HIV/AIDS. The causes and consequences of HIV are related to wider issues revolving around poverty, food security and water and sanitation. Bad hygienic conditions affect people living with HIV and they need more water for better health and general hygiene. This somewhat suspends household responsibilities as death takes away family members leaving destitute children and elderly people [13]. In impoverished rural areas, where women themselves are sick and dying it means that they cannot walk long distances to get water.

It is a fact that the proximity of sanitary facilities to the household increases security and privacy for women. It also reduces health and digestive system problems that arise when

women have to wait until nighttime to relieve themselves. Separate sanitation facilities for girls and boys in schools also boost the school attendance of girls and ensure a safe and healthier learning environment. For mothers and pregnant women, improved water supply sanitation and hygiene leads to better health and reduced labour burdens and reduced mortality rates for children.

Poor families cannot afford to buy sanitary towels or tampons for their women and girls to use and women use old rags, leaves, toilet paper or sometimes nothing at all. Poor sanitation heightens the awkward conditions women face during menstruation because it is difficult to concentrate knowing there is no water, proper sanitary facilities or sanitary towels to use. Students and female teachers may feign sickness during their menses to avoid going to school altogether. Given that on average a woman has her cycle 13 times and menstruates 4 days per period, that amounts to 52 days which is almost 2 months in a year. That is a considerable amount of time to miss out on learning and it negatively affects the general performance of girls in school. In Rwanda secondary school girls have even proposed for increase in tuition fees so that schools can provide sanitary towels ^[14].

It cannot be disputed that sanitary towels are basic necessities for women and promotes their sexual and reproductive health. Article 14 (1) of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa requires state parties to respect and promote the right to sexual and reproductive health of women. Despite the separate provisions for sanitation and reproductive health, we need to recognize the relation between sanitation and sexual and reproductive health and their effect on the living conditions of women. Lack of adequate sanitation and clean water makes women susceptible to infections that affect their sexual and reproductive health. The use of materials such as old rags and other unhygienic materials cause a number of health problems for women which in turn can affect their reproductive health. Often women have no resources and even time to seek proper medical treatment and for many women in the rural areas health facilities are often located far away and are inaccessible. States must ensure that when discussing about water and sanitation they take into consideration how the lack of these two impact women and the society at large.

Careers and training areas around water supply and sanitation are dominated by men. There is a need to break the social barriers restricting the participation of women in community based forums or public consultations that influence water policies from the grassroots level. If water management is to be democratic and transparent, it should represent the needs of all, that is to say that men and women ought to have an equal say. This process needs to delineate the specific roles and needs of men and women in water management and how both can be incorporated for equal and sustainable use of resources. Some of the basic rights are intertwined, for example the rights to water and land, and a practical approach needs to be established.

During times of war and conflict, sanitation facilities in camps are generally poor and women rely on foreign aid to cater for their needs. Women are the worst hit by shortages of water and poor sanitation because they have to travel longer distances to search for water under very insecure conditions. Gender inequalities regarding political, economic status, human rights, education and health increase the risks during health hazards ^[15]. There is a need for women to be integrated in the process of peace building and natural resource management.

In conclusion, despite the preponderance of various international instruments underlining



the status of women in access to water supply and sanitation, more needs to be done at the enforcement level. There should be some active reflection of the substance of these laws and adjustment of procedures that hinder access of women to resources. The African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women and the United Nations Millennium Development goals have given Africa leaders standards that they can adopt to ensure that the right to water and proper sanitation is assured to all citizens and most importantly to women who are the caretakers of homes and the users of water and sanitation for the benefit of their families and society as a whole. African leaders can no longer afford to ignore the voice of women.

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Gender perspective on water and sanitation

Roselyn Musa

What does gender have to do with issues of sanitation and water?

Roselyenn Musa gives us a multi-faceted gender perspectives that consider the role of African governments, gender awareness and water privatization amongst others.

INTRODUCTION

The upcoming mid-year African Union (AU) summit of heads of state and government has as its primary agenda as 'Water and Sanitation.' Development goals in the water and sanitation sector in Africa typically address issues of access to and the availability of adequate and safe supply and services, health and well being of all members of the society. At the Millennium Summit in 2000, Heads of State pledged to halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water by the year 2015 yet at the end of 2002 some 1.1 billion people or 18% of the world's population lacked access to safe drinking water, while 2.6 billion or 40 % of the world's population lacked access to improved sanitation services.

Gender issues are applicable when conditions are bone dry and also when they are dangerously wet. Women and children are the first to suffer from the disruption of water supply and the provision of sanitation services. They are disproportionately affected by natural and 'man made' disasters as a result of gender inequalities. They play a central part in the provision, management and safeguarding of water and sanitation, but the pivotal role they play as providers and users of water and has seldom been reflected in institutional arrangements for the development and management of these resources.

This essay considers the concept of gender in the context of water supply, sanitation and hygiene development. It recalls the commitments of African governments to gender in the broader framework of international instruments. It then analyses why gender is central to water and sanitation and the implications of water privatization. It concludes with some suggestions to meet the challenge of enabling change, recommending gender awareness as one of the keys to sustainable development in water and sanitation.

DEFINING GENDER AND CONTEXT

For the purpose of this paper the term 'gender' describes the social relations between and characteristics of women and men. It concerns men's and women's participation in the determination of their lives including access to rights, power and control over resources. In most African countries men's and women's gender roles determine their access to, power and control over adequate water supply and sanitation services. Locating Water and Sanitation In International Gender Equality Instruments The United Nations Decade for Women and Development's (1976-1985) themes of equality, development and peace signaled the way for international debate that encompassed the broad spectrum of development issues.



A young girl passes an anti-riot officer in the sprawling Mathare slums, Nairobi, Kenya, July 2007. Police stepped in to break up a demonstration by residents over the disconnection of water by authorities.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (UN CEDAW, 1981) proved to be a major step forward in fostering debate and setting international standards of gender equality. Article 14 (2) calls on states to take account of particular problems faced by women and the significant role that they play in the economic survival of families. It calls for measures to eliminate discrimination against women and ensuring women's right to enjoy adequate living conditions with respect to housing, sanitation, electricity and water supply. The United Nations 4th World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995) also calls on governments to ensure that women's priorities are included in public investment programmes for economic infrastructure such as water and sanitation, electrification etc.

The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of women in Africa in Articles 2 and 15 enjoins governments to provide women with access to clean drinking water, enact and effectively implement appropriate legislative or regulatory measures, including those prohibiting and curbing all forms of discrimination particularly regarding those harmful practices which endanger the health and general well-being of women. It is depressing to note that most African countries' commitments to these instruments remain only on paper.

GENDER ISSUES IN WATER SUPPLY

In developing countries some 3 billion people do not have basic access to a tap. Women and very often young girls are primarily burdened with the responsibility of fetching water for household use, transport, store and use it for cooking, cleaning, washing, and watering household animals. Men are rarely expected to perform such tasks. Yet all too often decisions

about the design and location of water facilities are made without the involvement of the female users, who have most at stake in this regard.

Women and girls spending up to 6-8 hours a day collecting water can consume up to a third of daily caloric intake often bringing back a mere 15 to 20 litres which has to cover the needs of a whole family leading to rationing water in the household. Many infectious diseases are associated with poor water quality.

Carrying this heavy load consumes much of their energy (requiring 600 to 800 calories of food per day). This chore often deprives girls of time to attend school or mothers a job. It presents a health hazard, especially during development and pregnancy periods. They face the risk of drowning if the water source is a river and injuries from attacks during conflicts. With closer water comes less danger, greater self-esteem, less harassment of women and better school attendance by girls.

Water and sanitation go hand in hand, e.g. sewage thrown into the river which is a source of water supply often leads to its pollution. When there is no proper sanitation the risk of disease is higher. It is the women who have to look after sick children, and the young daughters who lose out on education.

GENDER ISSUES IN SANITATION

The UN has declared 2008 the International Year of Sanitation, and a lot still need to be done to make a difference. Human waste disposal is often a taboo subject due to cultural and gender boundaries even though it presents one of the most pressing needs

There is a need to understand the implications of gender in the broader definition of sanitation. Most of the time bad sanitation denotes a lack of toilets or latrines at home, in schools or public places. Sharing of latrines can also be a deterrent to their use by women because they do not want to be seen entering or leaving the toilet and they often have to wait until dark to defecate or urinate.

This has a number of detrimental effects including security in terms of rape and harassment and health in terms of infections that may affect future fertility. Equally invasive are issues of privacy and personal hygiene related to menstruation, washing and bathing. At school there are often no facilities for menstruating girls and where latrines exist they are often expected to share facilities with boys.

While women are mostly responsible for cleaning sanitation units they often do so without any training on the use of protective gloves and antiseptics. This could result in poor hygiene and exposure to bacteria and several parasitic infections resulting in outbreak of epidemics.

PRIVATIZATION AND THE RIGHT TO WATER

Privatization of water services versus the right to water has been controversial. Water for basic needs has been identified primarily as a public good and a human right and not as a commodity to be traded in the open market for profit.

This does not imply that the government should supply water free to the population, but implies that shifting responsibility to large private corporations may supersede attention to human needs and rights and private companies may remain largely unaccountable to the



people they are supposed to benefit. This could force poor women to use contaminated water that is free rather than clean water, which they cannot afford. This of course impacts the health of the community, and may result in much higher costs in health care.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Water and sanitation goals may seem ambitious, but they are very modest as these goals do not envisage providing a tap in every kitchen or a flush toilet in every house. Access to clean water and sanitation does not only improve the health of a family, but it also provides an opportunity for girls to go to school, and for women to use their time more productively than in fetching water thereby contributing more to the economy..

Gender mainstreaming would ensure the participation of women in capacity building, design and management of water and sanitation services, but care should be taken not lead to more work and responsibilities for women and exempt or bypass men, but equitably distribute benefits and burdens between the sexes.

Budgets are a critical tool for mainstreaming. If gender considerations are built into policies and project design, they should reflect in resource allocation otherwise they will not deliver substantive equality for women. Also key is increased gender awareness, through training at all levels to achieving sustainable development.

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Gender and water, and sanitation in Mozambique

SOAWR

Water and Sanitation are critical elements in a sustainable livelihood strategy as it is directly related to issues of access to and control over natural resources as well as basic infrastructure and services. It has been noted that the problems of water and sanitation affect more than 800 million people- 15 percent of the world's population and most of these are in the South of Sahara (ibid). For interested parties to come up with approaches to curb this problem, there is need to have a clear understanding of the interconnectedness of the two. Thus, the benefits of water will not be seen unless attention is also given to sanitation (Anderson 1996).

However, this article is not going to look at the approaches to overcome the water and Sanitation problem. It is going to focus at the role gender plays in Mozambique in the supply of water and Sanitation. Lastly, it will conclude with recommendations to the responsible authority so that they can be in a position to take an active part in ensuring that the Mozambican citizens have the right to better water supplies and sanitation conditions.

THE MOZAMBICAN SITUATION

Through the 2007-8 budget, the Government of Mozambique has clearly defined water, sanitation and urban development as one of its priorities. This is no other than sustainable development of the population life through the improvement of its life conditions. Thus, this brings to focus the importance of water supply and sanitation for the entire population. The National Campaign launched in February is coordinated by the Ministry of Health, together with its partners (governmental institutions, International Agencies and NGO national and international). The general objectives of this Campaign were;

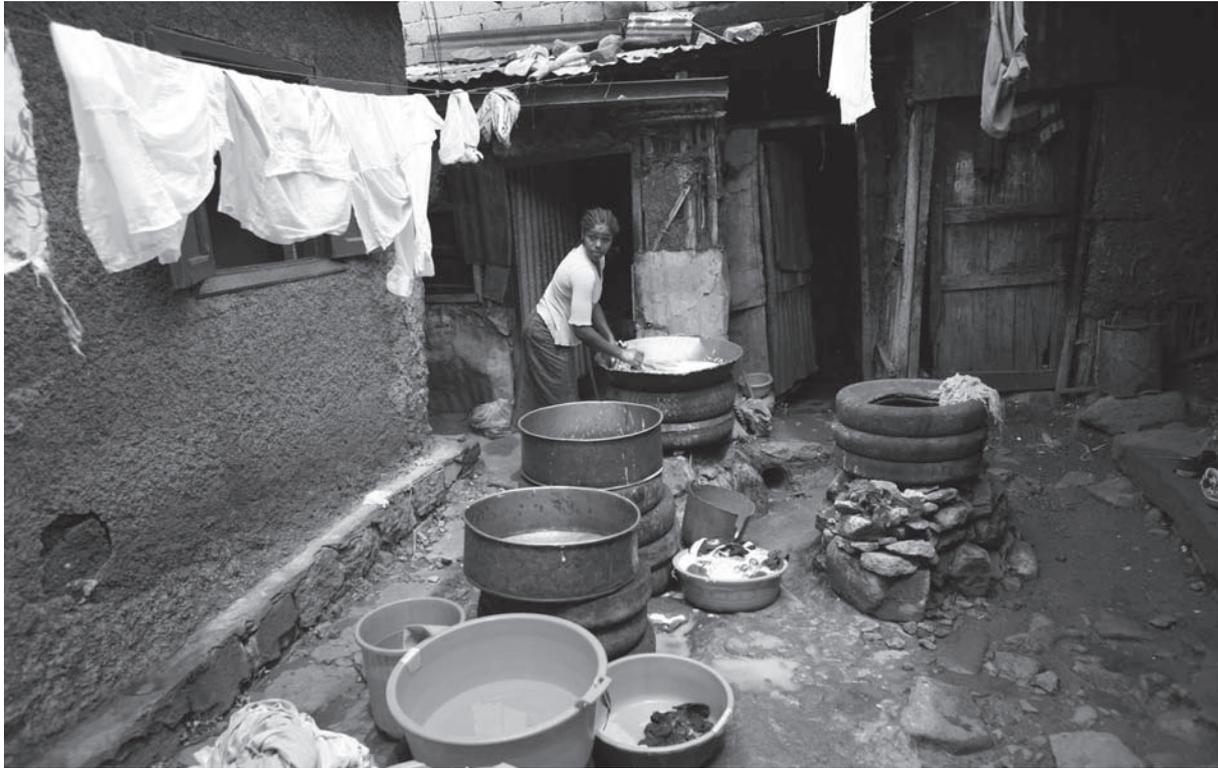
- To contribute for the change of hygienic habit of the citizens. - To improve the individual hygienic conditions, conscientise and appeal people in order to change behaviour related to their habit of individual and collective habits of hygiene.
- To concretise its efforts and calls for the participation and involvement of all the citizens to promote better water supply and sanitation.

THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION

As far as water supply and sanitation in Mozambique are concerned, gender plays a paramount role. In most African cultures, it has been noted that women are the most responsible for the use and management of water resources, sanitation and health at the household level. Mozambique is not exception.

WOMEN

Both in cities and rural areas, women have the responsibility of fetching water and educating children hygienic matters. Women and girls are often obliged to walk many hours every day queuing in water points in the cities or walking long distances to fetch water, mainly in the rural areas, while men are rarely expected to perform such tasks. As they are linked to the



A woman washing clothes outside her home in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 2007. Many citizens lack running water or electricity.

house chores, they are mainly the ones who bear the heavy burden of trying to provide it to the family. They make sure that the laundry is done, flowers and gardens are watered and animals are given water. Women do little as far as building water sources (Water fountains) are concerned. The same applies to sanitation. They are not the ones who build the toilets (pit latrines) but they take an active role in making sure that they are clean. They also participate in community activities while men were linked to the culture.

MEN

Men are generally concerned with the building role. They are the ones who make sure that the water structures are built. In the rural area, they are the ones who dig wells and build them. They are also responsible when it comes to digging and construction pit latrines. Unlike women, they do not take an active role in maintaining the structures.

Given the fact that the Mozambican society is male dominated, most of the decision-making regarding the issue of Water and Sanitation lies in the hands of men. On the other hand women are given less opportunities to air their views and ideas on those issues. This makes them not heard. Therefore, they have very little contribution as far as this issue is concerned.

SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

The latest report assessing progress on water and sanitation in Mozambique noted that rural water supply coverage grew significantly out of 1.055 planned water sources the number of spread water sources was 1.529. The rate of coverage also has shown the increase of rural and

urban water 48.5% and 40% respectively. This gave access to drinking water to more than 9.871.523 families.

On the other hand the coverage of sanitation also increased to 47% in urban areas. Within the scope of decentralization of funds, the sector defined a new role in each level and started the process of decentralization of funds of District and Provincial levels to help with the implementation of the strategic plan of rural water and sanitation.

However the audit of performance on water for 2006-2007 found problems in finance management, a weak performance in relation to revenues, a lack of data on fund use, and lack of desegregated data on gender in terms of access.

Nevertheless, water supply within the rural and urban communities can greatly reduce time and efforts for women looking for water.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the role of gender in the supply of water and sanitation in Mozambique, here are some of the recommendations we can make;

- The management of water and sanitation becomes the most important strategy resource essential for the sustainable life and achieving of the sustainable development in our country and the government should stump its efforts to up lift the lives of its citizen. It should also see to it that priorities are given to the right people. There have been situations of a project failing because attention was targeted at the wrong people.
- There is need to offer equal opportunities for sharing ideas and views for both men and women regarding water and sanitation issues.
- There must be enough consultation to the targeted people or communities be it in the urban or rural areas.
- All the gender needs should be addressed from the planning stage up to the evaluation.
- All responsible NGO working for the improvement of water supply and sanitation should work collectively to combat this problem.
- As both men and women play very significant roles in the society, there must be avenues to enhance educative programs in which the roles of both parties are stressed. There is need also to overcome the presumption of female inferiority.
- It is also important to recognise the different roles played by man and women whenever we design the project or in the planning thus can increase chances for project sustainability and at the same time for the development of the country.

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Burundi: Access to water is a human right

Concilie Gahungere

If women had control over water as resource “they would be better placed to manage its use, especially in agriculture, which is the principal economic activity in Burundi, and is controlled by women.” Concilie Gahungere looks at the access to water in Burundi in relation to gender.

Mrs Immaculee S. lives in Gikungu Rural location, which falls in the urban Gihosha district. She is 65 and lives alone with no children or domestic help. Even though she lives close to a residential area, she has no access to clean water. Everyday, she takes a 10-litre jerrican, and goes off in search of water. With her jerrican, she begs her neighborhood “bosses” for a little water. With an air of resignation, she describes how her neighbors receive her: “sometimes they open their big gates, and other times they look at us through the gate, without opening it”. She says the administration must look into providing clean water for the poor and the old. “We are old and poor, we neither have the money to pay for water, nor do we have young children to look after us”, she laments.

Mrs. Immaculee is one of many Burundian women without access to clean water. Article 15 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa stipulates under the right to food security, that states must ensure women’s access to adequate and safe nutrition. In this regards, it sets in to necessary mechanisms to:

- provide women with access to clean drinking water, sources of domestic fuel, land, and the means of producing nutritious food;
- establish adequate systems of supply and storage to ensure food security.



A girl buying water from a private well in Timbuktu, Mali. February 2008. Each small bucket of clean drinking water costs the equivalent of 10 US cents.

Mrs Odette Kayitesi is the former minister for environment. In her view, the Burundian woman's access to clean water is a critical issue that has been debated for a long time and is still not resolved. The access water, Burundian women have to travel long distances. Often, she covers these huge distances to obtain water that is, in the final analysis, not fit for drinking. She is sometimes forced to draw water from streams for all her home needs, including drinking.

Mrs. Kayitesi laments that the lack of water points within easy access has grave hygiene consequences for the family, both in terms of the transmission of disease, and the future of the girl child. Young girls are forced to abandon the education in order to help their mothers seek out water for household use.

In Burundi, some regions have very few water sources or catchment areas. Even where there is water, the difficulty lies in making it easily accessible. This is the case in the North, the East and the North-Eastern regions. On the other hand, the central plateaus, and the Munirwa regions have sufficient water supply.

WATER ISSUES IN THE CITY

Women living in the city are not spared either when it comes to lack of clean drinking water, states Kayitesi. Some women are forced to draw water from the rivers that criss-cross Bujumbura, such as the Ntakangwa and the Rusizi. In Kayitesi's view, there is a problem of lack of sensitization, because too many women are still underestimate the importance of clean drinking water. Another problem is that many women in poor neighborhoods do not have the resources to obtain clean drinking water. The cost of living on Burundi is very high, and more so for the poor.

WOMEN AND WATER MANAGEMENT

Our sources indicate that based on the available data, the percentage of the population with access to clean drinking water is very low. During the recent African Water Week held in Tunis, it was noted that only a small percentage of the population have access to clean drinking water and that countries have to intensify efforts by increasing drilling for clean water. Governments have been asked to meet new targets in the 2020-2025 period.

Kayitesi calls on citizens to maintain water point, noting that the population still does not take enough responsibility in protecting what already exists in the interests of sustainability.

Solange Habonimana, former chairperson of CAFOB (Collectif des Associations et ONG féminines du Burundi), agrees that Burundian women have inadequate access to water. In cases where women have access, they have no control or decision-making power. If women had decisive control over the resource, she would be better placed to manage its use, especially in agriculture, which is the principal economic activity in Burundi, and is controlled by women.

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