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'Women Are Weak When They Are Amongst Men': Women's Participation in Rural Water Committees in South Africa

Author(s): David Hemson

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# **'Women are weak when they are amongst men': women's participation in rural water committees in South Africa**

DAVID HEMSON argues that rural women's effective participation in water projects is hindered by the rural social setting and gender dynamics

*Development experience worldwide has demonstrated that women play a fundamental role in the provision and maintenance of basic services. Women are the key to household health and have borne the burden of underdevelopment over the years... As stressed in the RDP, any policy or project which does not ensure their full and active engagement at all levels is bound to meet with failure or only partial success (Department of Water Affairs and Forestry [DWAF], 1994:28).*

In South Africa, reports on progress towards the development of a genuinely post-apartheid society invariably use the benchmarks of housing, education, health and water as indicators that the life of the impoverished black majority is improving. No other issue has the same resonance as water delivery to rural communities. In statements of Cabinet reviews,<sup>2</sup> speeches to Parliament, and in the evaluation of delivery, water stands out as the prime indicator of official concern for the poorest of the poor. The South African government has received international attention for its policy of providing a minimum consumption of 6kl per family per month free. From a variety of perspectives, the provision of water stands at the centre of the politics of delivery - water is identified as access to life. It probably has the highest public profile in terms of service implementation and is identified by the rural poor as their greatest need.

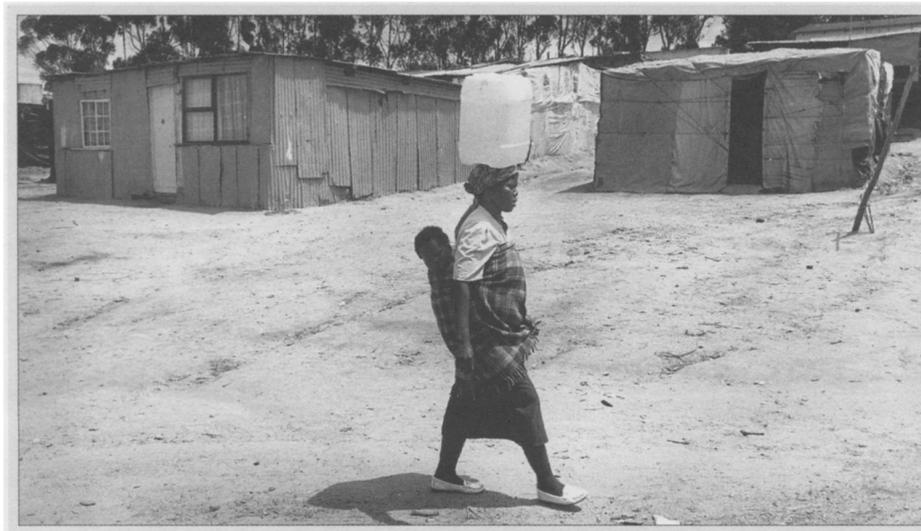
The provision of water and sanitation to the rural poor, which is closely tied up with public health, is one of the core questions for debate in the South African build-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In discussions leading up to the Summit the question of sustainable development has been

taken beyond the natural environment to focus on issues of social justice, social development and equity - not least of which is the role of women in building a sustainable social environment. The purpose of this article is to examine the gender aspects of water delivery and in particular the participation of women in managing water supplies in South Africa. It is argued that social reform and infrastructural development in rural areas is closely linked to the emancipation of women.

The article first assesses whether a greater level of participation by women would secure more success in rural water schemes. Secondly, it examines the participation of women in the public management of water projects, and the reasons for the deficiencies in this regard. Finally it recommends policies and practices that would encourage greater involvement of women.

## **Does women's participation make a difference?**

Despite a drive to provide water and sanitation to rural communities, there are reports of project failure. There is vigorous debate about the nature and extent of these problems, but the issue raised by researchers in explanation is poor Institutional and Social Development (ISD). The focus of community communication and development is on the establishment and functioning of water committees representative of the people in terms of 'people-centred' development advocated in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (African National Congress [ANC], 1994). During the planning, design and construction of schemes these are termed Project Steering Committees and



PAUL GRENDRON / SOUTH PHOTOGRAPHS

Women bear the burdensome task of water collection

they discuss and negotiate with the engineers and communicate back to the communities. The members are elected at mass meetings and DWAF provides funds for their training and empowerment.

There are various components of ISD including financial management, technical matters, meeting procedures, understanding of the legislative and policy framework, handling contracts, employment practices, amongst others. The curriculum for training of the Project Steering Committees includes: local-level management and organisation, basic financial management, project management and operation, maintenance and repairs (DWAF, 1994). The management of water projects is made more exacting by factors such as the absence of the most educated and talented individuals from rural areas due to migrancy, isolation from the urban centres, poor communications, expectations of free delivery, etc.

A central issue to be considered in the failure of water projects is women's participation in their design, planning, implementation and management. The provision of water and sanitation through water projects has been a male-dominated process. This is despite the fact that women are primarily responsible for family health and for ensuring a supply of water to the family and have a keen interest in being able to allocate fewer

hours daily to the burdensome task of carrying water from standpipes, rivers and springs. Such low levels of participation generally are an indicator of the likelihood of project failure as the key beneficiaries are absent from management.

The question of how the low level of women's participation affects the longer-term sustainability of water and sanitation projects is a complex one. The common sense argument advanced by development practitioners is that projects would be more sustainable if those whose lives are most affected were in control of them. The argument seems incontestable. A simple line of argument, however, encounters a whole range of associated issues relating to the rural patriarchal order and the complexities of incapacity. Unfortunately it has been difficult for researchers to link the level of participation of women with the sustainability of projects, as there are so many extraneous factors involved in project failure apart from women's participation. This issue requires revisiting as the ever-changing institutional framework becomes more settled.

The subordinate position of women in rural development projects is contested in policy. The 1994 White Paper on Water and Sanitation

**A central issue to be considered in the failure of water projects is women's participation**

which set out the vision for the post-apartheid era, argued that 30 percent of the positions on the water committees should be occupied by women, in order to ensure successful and sustainable development, and to give substance to the constitutional prerequisite that women should enjoy a full and proper role in society (DWAF, 1994:28).

It stated that this provision should apply at all levels of management and carried the promise that it would be closely monitored (DWAF, 1994). Subsequent policy indicates that women should now constitute half the members of water committees.

In keeping with the concern for democratic practice and greater sustainability in water projects, there have been a number of studies on women's participation in

**The participation of women in water committees is purely 'tokenism'**

water committees. These include the Mvula Trust study in 1998; research undertaken by the Rural Support Services (RSS)(1998) and research by Duncker contained in the 'South Africa Water Research Commission Report' (2001). The researchers conducting these surveys included water projects throughout the country, interviewed hundreds of respondents, and have made a fairly thorough examination of the propellants and impediments towards women's involvement in water and sanitation committees. These studies form the basis of

the discussion on women's participation in the following sections.

Although there is considerable overlap in these studies (the RSS study appears to have formed part of the overall survey undertaken by Duncker, but is included here as there is a greater range of issues canvassed) and all ultimately focus on the question of participation, there are important regional variations and different approaches which help illuminate the social processes. The study by Data Research Africa for Mvula Trust is the most comprehensive, covering 16 communities in the four poorest provinces in South Africa. It involved both quantitative and qualitative studies, drawing out significant policy recommendations. Duncker's research includes a wider ambit, in particular gender roles in

rural areas, and uncovers important psycho-sociological dimensions to gender inequality in rural areas.

### 'It is always the men who are the chairs'

It was observed in all the studies that women on the committees were not free to express their views or to participate in decision-making. The women were only there to fulfil the then quota of 30 percent expected by policy and supported by the funding agencies (Duncker, 2001). The Mvula study concludes that the participation of women in water committees is purely 'tokenism', has no effect on the decisions being made by these committees, and is not empowering (Mvula, 1998c:20). If indeed true, then one of the few measures enforced by government in support of the participation of poor women in determining the conditions of their lives, has been ineffective and an exercise in tokenism.

To get an understanding of this phenomena, the positions of women on the water committees needs to be examined. The Duncker and Mvula surveys provide the following figures:

#### DISTRIBUTION OF PORTFOLIOS IN WATER COMMITTEES

POSITION	MALE		FEMALE	
	Duncker	Mvula Trust	Duncker	Mvula Trust
Chairperson	87	90	13	10
Vice Chair	38	91	62	9
Secretary	16	60	84	40
Vice Sec	27	56	73	44
Treasurer	31	67	69	33
Bookkeeper	43	50	57	50
Ordinary	41	51	59	49

Sources: Duncker (2001) and Mvula (1998a)

The statistics show conclusively that women occupy less powerful positions in committees, as the primary leadership positions are committee signatories (chairperson, secretary and treasurer). Although not completely confirmed by the surveys, as one woman said: 'It's always the men who are the chairs' (RSS, 1998).

Women tend to take secondary and supportive positions, as auxiliaries to the main positions as 'vices' (the large number of these positions being characteristic of South African civic practice), or in a servicing role typical of the position of secretary.

Despite this, committees do have significant representation of women - in the Mvula Trust survey 38 percent of the total membership, and in Duncker's review a surprising 58 percent - both in excess of the then minimum requirement of 30 percent. At this level, the affirmative action imposed by the DWAF certainly appears to have had an effect. In Duncker's study more women are in the position of secretary, treasurer, and bookkeeper: 84 percent, 69 percent, and 57 percent respectively. Whether this represents a regional variance peculiar to the provinces from which much of the sample was taken is not clear. In the author's view there could also be a 'common sense' explanation. Within the patriarchal view of rural men (and the absorption of these views by women), there is folk wisdom that in matters of finance and records women tend to be better 'housekeepers' of public funds. When interviewing people in rural areas, their responses indicated a high level of corruption of various kinds (the use of public funds for private work; the allocation of funds to contractors who are closely connected to leading committee members; acceptance of extortionate quotations, and other irregular activities).<sup>3</sup> Women would be less likely to have the authority to undertake such actions and act as better guardians of public funds, a view which is evidenced among some respondents (Mvula, 1998c:8).

Even when women occupy positions of some authority, their participation and decision-making appears to be subordinate to male authority in practice. All surveys show women have a low level of verbal participation in committees, that women defer to men on major issues, and that they encourage men to deal with external agencies. A fundamental explanation for this is the socio-economic and traditional gender relations in rural areas.

## Gender inequality

The proportion of women receiving education is now taken as one of the primary indicators of human development. The practice in many developing countries has been to sacrifice the educational opportunities of daughters for those of sons, although this is now changing. But in the most traditional sectors of South African society there is still less attention given to women's educational advancement. Certainly the educational standard of women participating in water committees is generally lower than the men, with a high proportion having less than Standard 6 (8 years schooling) and only 37 percent continuing further (Mvula, 1998a). These figures indicate fairly severe educational disadvantage, which certainly would inhibit women from having a more active role. In addition, most women participants were housewives or unemployed, with less than half of the participation of men in paid employment or self-employment.

**Women have a low level of verbal participation in committees**

The lower educational qualifications of the women committee members are also linked to the age of participants: below 40 years of age there are considerably more men, between 40-49 about the same number of men and women, and over 50 years many more women (Mvula, 1998a:3.3). One can assume from these statistics that women on the committees make up for their lower levels of education with greater experience and the respect accorded in traditional society to older people.

Unfortunately adult basic education and training has had a poor record in the urban centres and an even poorer one in rural areas, yet the women participants in all-women committees and water committees urgently need such educational support. This would ensure women's greater self-confidence in meetings where presently men dominate.

An explanation often given by women for their low levels of participation is that traditional culture does not permit their greater involvement. In the rural

context the weight of the past bears heavily on the present, particularly on the need to observe customary practices, both as valuable in themselves and to avoid conflict with the local political order. This conservative context establishes and re-establishes the sense of a patriarchal order as the reference point for all practices. The research into water committees reveals that although many women want to be part of decision-making on key services that would relieve them of hard labour, they also generally agree with the patriarchal notions of women's inferiority to men and the traditional status quo. Surprisingly, there appears little difference in the viewpoint of uneducated and educated women. A woman with tertiary education made the following statement:

*Women are inferior to men, there should be gender education. Men are still heads, but women now are active. There are special roles for women like cooking (RSS, 1998:15).*

**Processes of decision-making are severely impacted by gender relations**

Whether this is an empirical or normative statement is not clear (it does seem to allow for reform of gender relations), but most women who were interviewed in the rural areas offer similar views (RSS, 1998). In a review presented by Duncker (2001) women make statements that reinforce the idea that they are inferior to men and that men are still the heads of households,

even if men are absent. A composite view from a number of respondents reads as follows: *Women must agree with what men do; men are to be respected; men still feel superior, though they do consider women's views; women can give suggestions, but may not make major decisions; men should have the last word (Duncker, 2001:39).*

These views internally reinforce what is stated externally and inhibit the full participation of women in matters affecting them, their households, and society generally. Such incapacitation has a profound effect on communication and social action. While it is reported in some communities that men do not allow their wives to communicate with strangers (including other women), and sons speak on behalf of their mothers,

it is also reported that women 'push men to the fore' when dealing with outsiders and retreat.<sup>4</sup>

Processes of decision-making are severely impacted by gender relations, having a crucial effect on women's lives and ability to take leadership. The processes are illuminated in Duncker's survey of decision-making in rural communities (2001). In family matters involving the social status, roles and responsibilities of family members, two-thirds of respondents stated that men are the decision-makers. Young women and girls had no say in these matters and, although women were listened to and their views incorporated, the final decision was taken by the man/husband. Similarly, in matters affecting land use, men are regarded as the 'owners' of the land while women have the responsibility of working in the fields. In financial matters involving a range of issues from the payment of school fees to the sale of produce from fields, there was an almost even distribution in making of the final decision between men and women. In rural communities it is common for the economically active to migrate to the urban centres and remit money for their families. Women's greater equality is attributed to the absence of migrant men from the communities, which necessitates their making decisions for the household.

In relation to the issues of modernisation the picture is more complex. Decision-making in relation to development in rural areas generally, is regarded by rural people as involving both men and women of all ages, with women aged 21-60 in a somewhat greater position of authority than men of the same age, (Duncker, 2001). But crucially, in the specific matter of water projects, 60 per cent of the respondents regard men as the decision-makers. It is only in relation to sanitation that the responsibility of decision-making is attributed to women, by just less than two-thirds of the respondents, although even here the investment decisions still rest with the men.

The link between responsibility for water and sanitation, family health and well-being, nutrition and education, and public authority and the power to change is yet to be established in the practice of public management

in the rural areas. As Duncker (2001:49) concludes: *Even though the men were migrant workers and away in the cities most of the time, and the women have to make certain decisions regarding the household and the community, the women always kept in mind what their men would have wanted, instead of what the women themselves wanted.*

In this sense women cannot escape the social and cultural environment in which they live, and tend to postpone decisions in their own and their families' interests in a form of 'deferred participation'. In these circumstances women, who are acting as the heads of households and have to make key decisions about household matters, psychologically defer to the absent male rather than making decisions in their own right. In line with this, women in mixed gender committees tend not to voice a distinct view (Mvula, 1998c)

The social processes involved in participation in the project management of water delivery can be summed up in the table below.

**DECISION-MAKING IN WATER COMMITTEES**

	MEN	WOMEN
Participation	Decision Making	Consultation
Positions	Leading	Supportive

It seems that the traditional social setting intrudes into the post-apartheid modern institution within the rural areas, eroding the advances made through policy that affirms women's position within the committees. The question of 'deferred participation' is an issue that does not affect water committees alone and appears to encompass the whole range of modern institutions in the rural areas. A recent review of gender policy in relation to land reform concludes that women's participation in this sphere has also been limited to voiceless 'interested observers' (Walker, 2001). The evidence from the surveys is that representation of women in itself has not brought about the anticipated change, in bringing decision-making more in line with

the majority of users, or in greater democratic practice. In all-women committees it appears that women overcome their sense of inferiority because they do not have to perform in front of men. They are reported to feel comfortable when surrounded by women and able to express themselves without fear of reprisal or embarrassment. The difficulties arise in the presence of men, which leads to a dramatic inhibition of women's confidence and participation. The Mvula synthesis report, which brings together the qualitative and quantitative research, sums up the position as follows: *Women do not feel comfortable on the water committees because they receive poor support from both male and female community members. They feel they have neither the community's respect nor support for their involvement in the water committee. This partly explains their reluctance to assume full responsibility for projects and why they prefer to be delegated tasks than to delegate tasks* (Mvula, 1998c:10).

**Women cannot escape the social and cultural environment in which they live**

Duncker concludes that the biggest obstacle to women becoming empowered is their own attitude and lack of confidence in their abilities, but it appears that these feelings of insecurity are strongly accentuated in situations where men lead. This appears to be the nub of the problem, and both Duncker and the Mvula researchers conclude that there should be empowerment training both for women to be more confident, and for men to be more supportive of women's participation in these settings.

On water committees there is evidence of an autocratic style of leadership in contradiction with the notions of participatory democracy. In many committees the chair or technical administrator, who are mainly men, lead all discussions, which may effectively minimise the involvement of other committee members. This may represent the incapacity and lack of initiative of other committee members, but at times it is clearly the intention of 'dynamic individuals' to control outcomes (Mvula, 1998b:8). The lack of a pervasive democratic culture, which is still a feature of many institutions in

South Africa, is an obvious additional inhibitor of women's empowerment.

The water committees are central to the efficient operation of projects, and, as importantly, they are often also seen as an incipient form of local government in these areas. In addition to the function of managing water supplies, the water committees also carry the promise of participation in training programmes, paid employment, engagement with external agencies, the gaining of expertise and the exercise of public authority. These factors have led to the water committees being 'captured' by men, despite policy provisions to reinforce the participation of women.

**The attitude of men towards women's empowerment is an important factor**

These are clearly prominent functions involving the exercise of power, and water provision has become a public and political issue within the micro-political field of rural areas. This has produced a marked divergence between domestic responsibilities and the public administration of water. While women have responsibility for family health and access to water, both menial and domestic issues, water projects are prestigious and public; this has led to the domination by men who feel most capable in this sphere. Thus women remain responsible for domestic water supply but without the power to ensure that delivery is effective and continuous. This has led to the proposal that water should be redefined as a domestic issue; to emphasise that women know more about water than men, to permit women to take the lead, and for men to withdraw (Mvula, 1998c:23). All-women committees have also been proposed. However, this could lead to a lack of cooperation between water committees and the other community organisations dominated by men, and continued feelings of incapacity by rural women. The problem is that men control domestic finances and could withdraw any financial support to ambitious all-women committees.

**Some progress**

Despite these very evident problems there have been a number of important advances. There are, for example,

committees headed by and composed of women, and others in which women are gaining experience and confidence. General democratic advancement in the country, in which the goal of a non-sexist society is often spelt out by the political leadership, has led to a positive change in attitude towards women. Women feel they gain new knowledge and insights and are empowered by attending meetings; men accept their involvement and participation in committees and they have the opportunity to learn new skills, leadership and self-confidence. Women are also extremely positive about the personal improvement arising from participation. They feel that their relationships with other women and women's groups are better and that their standing within their family is reinforced (Mvula, 1998a:27). This is a critical mark of successful empowerment. Many women also participate in other committees and there is a transfer of skills and abilities from the water committees to leadership in other fields.

Women also feel empowered by certain forms of external intervention. Women facilitators from external agencies are readily accepted by men as they do not pose a threat to the position of men in the community, nor interfere with gender status as 'outsiders'. Rural women also view them positively as they reinforce the notion of capable leadership by women, and stimulate women's participation.

The attitude of men towards women's empowerment is an important factor in women being able to consolidate the advances made. Men overwhelmingly support the idea of women's participation and empowerment within the new political climate. They acknowledge that 'Men cannot decide for women anymore, they also have opinions which should be considered', and pragmatically, 'Women should be involved in decision-making, otherwise they might reject those decisions made and the process must start over again', but also insist on the male prerogative: 'We live by our customs' (RSS, 1998: 22). There is evidence of an acceptance of change by men. But there is also evidence that men do not encourage women's participation (particularly by their wives), nor combat

the notions of inferiority felt by women in mixed groupings. Despite agreement with the idea of change, when women are actively engaged in decision-making processes, men are reported to react negatively and to feel uncomfortable in sharing power and responsibility with women. Yet they invariably accept that in the management of projects the policies of external agencies apply.

### Conclusions and recommendations

This article has argued that both the rural social setting and gender dynamics tend to undermine policy initiatives to strengthen women's participation in public management. The departmental prescription that women take half of the seats on water committees has been widely accepted and implemented, but formal participation has not been followed by real engagement. The water committees are possibly the only committees (apart from possibly land committees) in the rural areas in which both men and women are involved; change within these institutions would have a decided effect on rural communities if women's participation were enhanced. The participation of women in water committees has undoubtedly brought some advance in rural areas.

What measures could reinforce and expand this participation? The successful operation of water projects in the rural areas is closely related to the support and participation of the people managing them. These projects are often situated in isolated communities at a considerable distance from external support and difficulties have to be resolved at the local level. This demands close cooperation of residents, men and women, in resolving problems and ensuring clean water on a sustained basis. The following recommendations are put forward:

1. Provision of adult basic education for women in rural areas. Women identify their relative subordination as being confirmed by the gap between their educational level and that of men. Since there seem to be such problems engaging NGOs in fulfilling the task of education and empowerment in rural areas, it may be

better to draw on teachers in the rural areas who have the facilities and the training.

2. Gender sensitivity training for members of the water committees. Some of the negative gender dynamics could be overcome with training in which women could gain experience in assertiveness and men in sharing responsibility.

3. Increased access for women to technical training and engagement in operations and maintenance. Women should be given an equal opportunity to gain confidence in technical matters and to access what employment could become available.

4. Conquering social isolation. Broader women's and rural organisations are needed to mobilise support for participation in rural development. Women's hopes need to be lifted beyond the homestead and village broader initiatives. This should empower women through experience to deal confidently with 'outsiders' such as development agencies, etc.

5. The planning and design stage of water projects should specify that women's needs be met as users and participants in the management of the project. This would allow to women more influence by requiring their feedback on the working of projects.

There are a number of reasons why participation of women in water projects should be taken seriously. Moser (1993:101) argues women have the right to participate in projects that profoundly affect their lives, that their participation can make the difference between project success or failure, and that participation gives confidence to marginalised groups previously voiceless in the community. In addition, in South Africa it can be argued that the participation of women in public affairs in the rural areas is a necessary step towards the realisation of their citizenship and to overcoming the customary barriers inhibiting their development. It is not without significance that this would also assist in building civil society and entrenching a democratic order in rural areas.

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**The participation of women in water committees has undoubtedly brought some advance in rural areas**

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### Notes

1. The quotation is from a woman in the Eastern Cape, reported in Rural Support Services (1998).
2. The Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, recently responded to criticism of the lack of change in the post-apartheid era, particularly in jobs provision, by spelling out the facts of delivery in the water sector, and the projected provision of clean water for all South Africans as the most concrete evidence of social progress, SAfm, July 27, 2001.
3. These were views expressed by a number of local officials in a study of Zwelibomvu, in relation to unfinished football grounds, over-expenditure on a community hall, and on other projects. These officials felt this was common practice in the region. Rural communities are, of course, not unique in this regard as the recent investigation into practices in the Cape Town Metro is revealing.
4. An observation by a graduate student conducting interviews in Ndwedwe, some 50km north of Durban.
5. Mvula led in the argument for upgrading the '30 percent rule' to 50 percent and that a woman should be either chairperson or treasurer (1998b:26;1998c:24-25). The first proposal was accepted as departmental policy but not the latter.

**David Hemson is a research director at the Human Sciences Research Council**