



Reforming Water, Adding Women

Does decentralised water governance further gender justice in India?

Issues and Recommendations

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, water sector reforms in India coupled with processes of decentralised local governance have sought to carve a new role for the state: from a supply driven provider of water services to one, which is facilitating demand and enabling community management. At the core of this process of institutional restructuring is the realization that water is no longer a free good and that decentralised management is the only way to ensure efficient, effective, equitable and sustainable water delivery. Based on principles of cost recovery from users, the new community institutions – *pani samitis* or village water committees – are meant to address management inefficiencies through participatory planning and inclusive decision-making. These include, 10 percent community contribution to capital costs and full Operations and Maintenance (O&M) costs to be borne by village *pani samitis* through the levying of water tariffs. Village level participatory planning makes it mandatory for all significant decisions to be approved in *gram sabhas* (village assemblies), rather than only *pani samiti* meetings, to build wider ownership, transparency and accountability for all

water assets. Capacity building for *pani samitis* includes technical training on monitoring of village water works and water distribution (pump operator) as well as financial management.

Women's participation has been integral to these new institutions, largely through the institutionalization of quotas, ranging from 30 to 50 percent membership on water committees. Policies that seek to promote women's participation are framed in the instrumentalist language of 'means' or better project outcomes on the one hand, and on the other, seek to look at participation as a process of transformation or 'end' in itself, providing space for the articulation of voice by women. However, given the nature of gendered relations of power at the local level (households and communities) as well as in water bureaucracies that are implementing sector reforms, the creation of institutional space is not enough in itself. More importantly, gender intersects with other social stratifiers, such as caste, class, faith and age to further deny marginalized women access to representation or voice.

Research questions and objectives

Drawing on empirical insights from demand responsive water supply projects in Gujarat and Maharashtra, this policy brief looks at the substantive context of women's participation in decentralised water management. The main goal of our research project was to understand the factors which have either facilitated or constrained rural women in the exercise of their rights and priorities as empowered water decision-makers and the implications

of such articulation for the sustainable, gender-just and equitable management of community water resources.

Here we looked at the financial, political and administrative aspects of decentralised reforms that have created space for women to participate or be excluded, which are the women who get selected and why and how do they do so. Moreover are there any opportunity costs of

participation for them. While doing so we mapped the performance of decentralisation in the domestic water sector to understand how favourable the context for women to participate was.

We chose Maharashtra and Gujarat for comparative research not only because we have been deeply embedded there as researchers and activists for more than a decade, but also because these two states, despite their high growth patterns have seen increasing

development and gender disparities both in terms of access to basic livelihood rights and human security. Our research tools included in-depth surveys of women representatives, focus group discussions with male and female representatives in community water institutions and participatory village transects to understand water allocation and distribution issues as well as speak to non-members on their perceptions of local water governance.

Drinking water and decentralisation in Gujarat: the institutional terrain

About 77.4 percent of the total drinking water requirement for Gujarat is met from groundwater sources, but these have been extensively exploited since independence by enterprising farmers encouraged by the Green Revolution strategy of intensive agriculture. In addition, saline intrusion in several low-lying, coastal regions of the state has affected the quality of drinking water, forcing women to walk longer distances to fetch water, particularly during the summer. While the provision of drinking water has traditionally been the responsibility of the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB), the Ghogha Rural Water Supply project launched in the coastal drought prone district of Bhavnagar in the mid-1990s marked the beginning of the shift towards sector reforms. Initially implemented by the GWSSB in 82 villages, with funding from the Netherlands government, the Ghogha project faced a host of technical re-engineering problems (e.g. participatory planning) till the quasi-autonomous Water and Sanitation Management Organisation (WASMO) was formed in 2002. WASMO was designed as a learning organisation to facilitate community-based water management through partnerships between NGOs and village *pani samitis*. From working with only three NGOs in the Ghogha project, WASMO is now engaged with some 30 NGOs in the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation (ERR)

project in 1,260 villages affected by the devastating Kutch earthquake of 2001.

Apart from eight villages in these two WASMO-led institutional environments our findings are also drawn from five villages where community led water management has been facilitated by NGOs and the state-wide water network, PRAVAH, under the principles of demand-responsive water management.

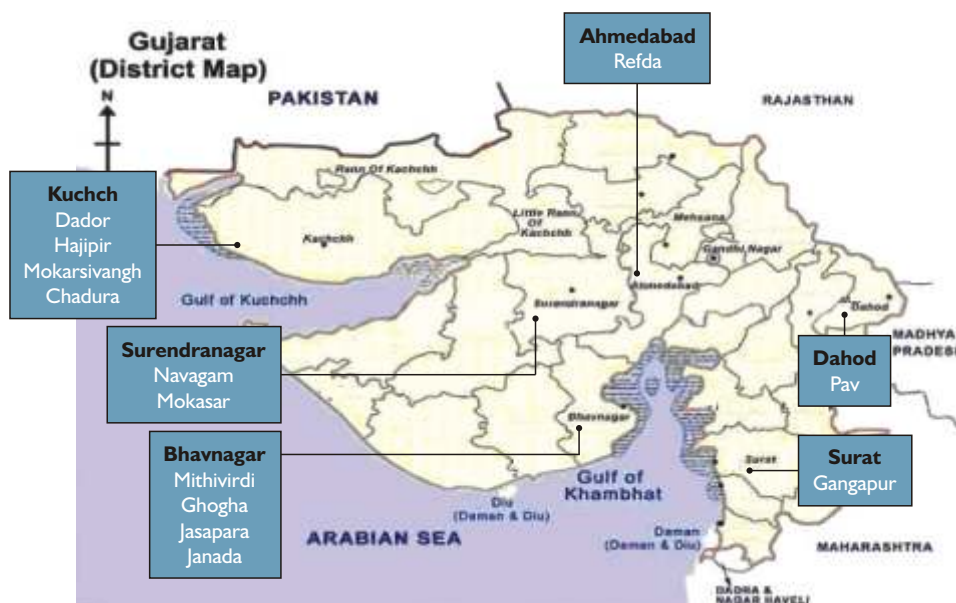
PRAVAH, which means 'flow' in Hindi, was formed in the mid-1990s to facilitate advocacy on the right to water and sanitation through campaigns, knowledge dissemination and demonstration pilots on gender-just, equitable and sustainable water alternatives.

Although women's participation was only a statutory objective for WASMO (1/3 of *pani samiti* membership), it is clear that their role in *pani samitis* has been significant. According to the WASMO Project Director, "Women have the right to ask for (safe) water at their doorstep: WASMO hopes that by 2010, 75% of the villages in Gujarat and women in these villages will have access to safe water at their doorstep." So who are the women who participate?

Our sample of 68 women members accounted for just over 53 percent of *pani samiti* membership in these 13 villages. The majority of women are married (82%), fall in the age group of 30-45 years (75%) and have not had any formal schooling (66%). Married and older women have a higher degree of mobility in the social domain and more

time as they are past their child-bearing and nurturing years; they are also not necessarily water carriers. Prior institutional experience is the most significant factor in determining which women are selected; having time and leadership skills, being articulate, willing and able to work effectively are also important determinants. In terms of their diversity, at least 40 percent of the women members come from marginalised caste and tribal categories, while some 37 percent are from households below the (income) poverty line that is, earning less than \$1-2/day.

Map 1 : District map of Gujarat showing districts and villages studied



Maharashtra: Institutional context and women's participation

Maharashtra was the first state to adopt the Balwantrai Mehta committee report on decentralisation and bring in amendments in its two acts by 1994¹. Interestingly it is also one of the first states to launch the sector reform process in the water sector.

Decentralisation in the domestic water sector in its present form is recent. It was introduced with a rationale to address the failure of the previous schemes and programmes around drinking water to meet the domestic water needs of the rural poor. A recent survey of 2005 done by the government of Maharashtra showed that almost 35,000 villages required assistance in some form or the other to meet the domestic water needs.

Jalswarjya and Aple Pani are the two key programmes in the area of domestic water closely following on the lines of the Swajaldhara, which is a central government supported scheme. The launch of these programmes is preceded by a long history of schemes and policies around drinking water starting from the dug well era of the 1970's to the later shifts to the centralized high investment regional water supply schemes of the late 80's upto the mid nineties. These were reviewed and the lessons learned were indicative of a need for decentralised village based schemes to be managed entirely by the communities.

The main objectives of this programme were two fold a) to provide improved and sustainable drinking water supply and sanitation services and b) to institutionalize decentralisation of rural water supply and sanitation service delivery to rural local governments and communities.

The outcomes expected included assured supply of 40 litres per capita per day (lpcd), reduced water borne diseases, decentralisation of power, *gramsabhas* or the village assemblies as the focal decision making bodies and women in leadership positions.

For the first time large scale funds were devolved to the village water and sanitation committees or the *pani samitis*. Separate accounts were to be maintained by the *samiti* and it had the autonomy to plan for its scheme.

For the first time women's empowerment received attention with both introduction of 50% quotas on the *pani samiti* and allocation of a separate fund for women's empowerment. This fund was mainly geared to set up Self Help Groups (SHGs) and promote economic empowerment of women.

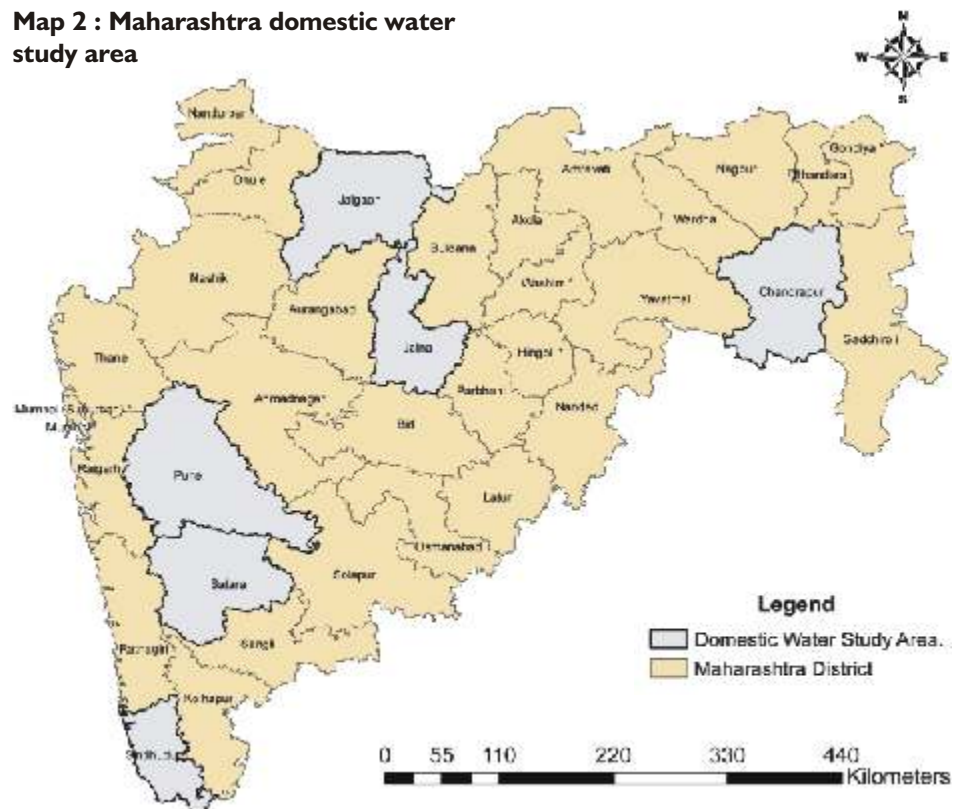
The overall thrust of the sector reform programmes was to build a sense of ownership of the infrastructure in the community and this it hoped to achieve through decentralised governance on the one hand, invoking the community and more specifically women's participation and raising of partial capital costs and full operation and maintenance costs in a decentralised manner.

In Maharashtra, we selected 17 villages across six districts representing diverse agro-climatic regions, socio-economic contexts and stages in project cycle.

We interviewed 114 women committee members belonging to diverse social groups, government officials at various levels and had group discussions with key functionaries of the water committees, non members belonging to different class and caste groups.



Map 2 : Maharashtra domestic water study area



1. Bombay Village Panchayat Act, 1958 and the Maharashtra ZilhaPanchayats and Panchayat Samitis Act 1961

As far as women's representation goes quotas across diverse social groups have been filled. Our sample is a mix of landless, dalit and upper caste women. The euphoria of women in the public sphere cannot be denied as we see women in these meetings in good numbers. However, the progress in equity ends here as we see that all the key posts of presidents or secretaries of *pani samitis* in our sample are women belonging to upper castes. Presence in meetings and articulation also is absent among dalit and poor women.

Engendering water governance: implications for policy and practice

Decentralisation, like democracy, is a process and not a destination. Building 'technical' capacity to develop, manage and maintain village water supply is not the same as building the capacity of *pani samitis* to constructively engage in the process of decentralisation as citizen and subjects rather than 'objects' of participatory water planning. **Political articulation** – the degree to which communities of water users, women and men from diverse socio-economic groups, represented through *pani samitis* can influence water policy – is determined by

Women's empowerment is reduced to economic empowerment through setting up of SHGs to disburse the small allocation for income generating activities. Although an attempt is made to include women on all the sub committees for monitoring and supervision of the scheme, the tight time frames make this process highly undemocratic.

the institutional architecture which facilitates articulation between civil society, the state (polity and bureaucracy) and citizens in a wider democratic context. The impact of water sector reforms and the space for rural women to participate in decentralised institutions, as well as their empowerment, has to be looked at within this larger framework, namely is decentralisation contributing to more efficient, effective, equitable and sustainable water management and governance?

Efficiency, effectiveness and equity in access to water

In terms of efficiency (benefits vis-à-vis costs), developing demand responsive community water works has required tremendous financial and human resources as well as time in re-building collective solidarities around water. It is clear that without the involvement of NGOs in Gujarat and Support Organisations in Maharashtra, decentralisation would not have been able to meet its intended goals. Local panchayats and *pani samitis* lack managerial and technical capacity or information on appropriate technological innovations – for example, solar panels which can generate power to pump water were introduced by Sahjeevan, an NGO in Kutch or Nari Samata Manch introduced the roof water harvesting system in Pune district. Other alternatives include small-scale, reverse osmosis plants that can be used in coastal villages where saline intrusion has affected the quality of drinking water.

these villages were dropped from the scheme or the process delayed.

Inequitable access to water, though not stated was evident through practice. Private connections, particularly in Maharashtra, have found tacit support through policy guidelines arguing that this eases the collection of water tariffs. Pipeline connections were often not designed keeping equity in mind and outlying areas where dalits and adivasis reside received erratic water supply. Caste conflicts in some villages persist – for example, in Surendranagar district in Gujarat, dalit communities argued that the location of their Cluster Water Storage tanks was determined by the powerful upper castes and the facilitating NGO could do little despite its attempts at bridging differences through multi-stakeholder dialogues.

“We do not have money to eat, how are we going to pay for water”
(villager in Koye village, Pune district which is likely to be affected by Special Economic Zone in the area)

Problems in the delivery of water (timing), in access (costs), availability and quality persist in many villages raising questions about the effectiveness of sector reforms. While most rural water users in the villages we surveyed, even diverse women representatives on *pani samitis*, had internalised the dominant discourse on 'valuing' water, i.e. that all users should pay, there were concerns about the ability of the very poor to pay. In some villages, *pani samitis* had decided – and villagers had agreed – that there should be flexibility in payments of water tariffs and very poor households, typically the landless or those dependent on daily casual labour, should be excluded. However, in some villages people had opposed water charges altogether and



“We thought Jalswarajya would bring in Gandhiji's idea of gramswaraj, but here we are continuously ridiculed and rebuked. The elite in the village and the district level officials are hand in glove with each other so the poor and the SOs fighting for them suffer as a result”
(SO worker in Sindhudurg district, Maharashtra)

Accountability and transparency

Accountability and transparency while important in framing the normative principles underlying good water governance are difficult to measure. Accountability channels operate at many levels – between the state water bureaucracy and villages, between *pani samitis* and water users and between NGOs or SOs (Support Organisations) and the state on the one hand, and community institutions, including *pani samitis*, as well as the larger polity, on the other. While there are plenty of channels for upward reporting on progress, accounts and impacts, there are few mechanisms for downward accountability from the state to the people, or even to partner NGOs and SOs.

In villages where water supply works had been completed, e.g. the Ghogha project, *pani samiti* meetings are not held regularly and there is little information sharing between members and non-members, beyond mandatory decision-making in *gram sabhas*. And even these are not always well attended, particularly by women and marginalised groups. While there are rules on water use, e.g. no direct pumping of water from pipelines or

storage tanks, no washing of clothes, utensils or livestock at drinking water sources – these are often difficult to enforce and fines are limited.

More importantly however, although village water works are designed to meet the government rural water supply norms of 40 litres per person per day, given the irregularity of water delivery none of the villages had any rules on how much water a person or household were entitled to. While informal norms about sharing or taking only as much water as you need could work when water is available, water scarcity can again lead to the kind of conflicts that women had to contend with in the past.

The score card on transparency in accounting procedures was positive. *Pani samiti* accounts were well maintained and usually the records were available at the village level for scrutiny. Project costs were displayed on village walls with clear activity-wise break-up. There was an overall awareness about the schemes and their financial aspects in most villages.

Gender and participation

For most women, attending *pani samiti* meetings is seen as their primary responsibility, but many are not able to do so because of the timing and location of meetings, or their workload. Others exercise agency by not attending, as they find meetings a waste of time with little opportunity or support for them to speak, given prevailing socio-cultural norms of 'appropriate female behaviour'. In villages where there has been a past history of women's mobilisation, women use other strategies for articulating their concerns – sometimes key issues are discussed in women-only spaces (e.g. Self Help Groups) and a 'representative', typically an older, experienced woman is appointed to speak on their behalf. Upper caste women are often prevented from attending meetings by their husbands because of the stronger norms regarding female seclusion which govern their mobility in the public domain.

Although it is difficult to find concrete examples that link women's participation in *pani samitis* to declining corruption or malpractices, perceptions of women's honesty abound: "If one-third of the members on the water committee are women, it automatically brings the corruption down by 1/3rd so it is essential to provide reservations to ensure that women are able to come up in public spheres," (Hansaben, *pani samiti* member, Navagam village, Surendranagar district, Gujarat).

Apart from meetings, women are responsible for monitoring the construction of village water works, ensuring that the area around water infrastructure is kept clean, resolving conflicts over citing of community water distribution points and collecting financial contributions. Interestingly, these roles are seen to extend women's

unpaid work to the household arena as well as privilege them as natural environmental caretakers accustomed to doing voluntary work and generally more honest, than men.

"People have started respecting me more now. My extended family members ask me for suggestions for all decisions. Now I can speak up, when required. I can go out for meetings/ trainings. First time I went out alone to Botad for buying material for the project. Now I have an independent identity as "Shivuben", rather than just a relative of a male family member," (Shivuben, Janada village, Bhavnagar district, Gujarat).

While participation in *pani samitis* has been an empowering process for some women, changes in women's lives, their access to decision-making both at the household and community level cannot be attributed to these new institutions alone. Much has to do with the role of strong, gender sensitive NGOs who have been able to link women's participation to larger questions of gender and water rights, e.g. access to safe water and sanitation not only has implications for health and education (particularly for girls), but is equally important in addressing women's security in conflict and disaster prone environments. Effective participation is long-term process and cannot be achieved in 18 months time frames. For women to break the structural barriers and participate effectively would require a much longer and informed engagement of not only them, but of the larger community as well.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

While decentralisation is largely concerned with the public arena of water management questions of women's participation cannot be divorced from gender inequalities within the household whether in terms of the division of water work, decision-making or access to resources – none of which have changed substantively in favour of women's rights. Given our findings, decentralisation in the domestic water sector can only be effective under the following conditions:

1. Better linkages with other water resource development scheme at the village level to avoid piecemeal efforts and ensure sustainable and safe water supply. This would also entail looking beyond the micro-level and planning holistically for villages that fall in the same watershed or river-basin and which may share the same water source.
2. Emphasis on decentralised planning and implementation rather than decentralisation of fund raising towards partial capital costs and O&M. Overemphasis on resource-raising can eliminate villages or social groups from access to a basic public service such as water.
3. Terms of participation are equal: these terms are determined by policy spaces and also by the socio-cultural contexts in which people live. Patriarchy, caste and class become barriers in participation in a myriad ways. Lack of information, skills and capacities to be able to raise resources, plan and implement programmes is far more evident in women, dalits, adivasis and the poor. These set the terms of participation and often silence out those who are historically unequal. This cannot change with bringing in of quotas alone and

needs far more long-term processes to be in place. Here we recommend efforts at bringing these groups out to participate through:

- Awareness campaigns on the different dimensions of gender and water inequities and inequalities through culturally appropriate media such as folk songs and street theatre which can engage village communities in active discussions.
 - Capacity building programmes for socially excluded groups on empowering skills, e.g. technical training on handpump maintenance or leadership and communication skills for women
 - Separate spaces and platforms for women to voice their priorities and make decisions which can then be shared and 'heard' at the larger common decision making platforms, such as *gram sabhas*. In Maharashtra, the *Mahila Gram sabhas* (village assemblies only for women) have shown positive results in bringing women together, but they need to become more effective tools for planning.
4. The role of civil society needs to move beyond NGOs, SOs, CBOs acting largely as implementing or facilitating agencies, but also involve grassroots groups, networks and social movements in a more critical engagement with water policy.
 5. The creation of a gender-balanced, shared learning platform, which would include representatives from the water bureaucracy, civil society, academic and research institutes as well as village communities, would be useful to facilitate dialogue and experiential sharing between diverse stakeholders.

Water Rights as Women's Rights? Assessing the Scope for Women's Empowerment through Decentralised Water Governance in Maharashtra and Gujarat. A two-year study (2006-2008) jointly done by SOPPECOM, Utthan and TISS and supported by the IDRC, Canada

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