

Women and Decentralised Water Governance: Issues, Challenges and the Way Forward

SEEMA KULKARNI

Based on a study of water rights and women's rights in decentralised water governance in Maharashtra and Gujarat, this paper argues that decentralisation will fail to meet its desired objectives unless the value systems, culture and the nature of institutions, including the family, change. While the policy initiative of introducing quotas for women in public bodies is welcome and necessary, it is certainly not sufficient for the success of decentralisation in a society ridden with discrimination based on class, caste and patriarchy, and where the culture of political patronage is dominant. The presence of vibrant social and political movements that propose alternative cultural, social and political paradigms would be a necessary foundation for major social changes. The success of decentralised water governance is constrained by the conceptualisation of the larger reform in water at one level and the notions of the normative woman, community, public and the private domains, and institutions at another. Unless all of these are altered, decentralised processes will not be truly democratic.

This paper is based on a study entitled "Water Rights as Women's Rights: Assessing the Scope for Women's Empowerment through Decentralised Water Governance in Maharashtra and Gujarat". I acknowledge the intellectual support of Sara Ahmed, Chhaya Datar and Sneha Bhat who were part of this study. I also acknowledge the support of Navsharan Singh from IDRC for financially supporting the study.

Seema Kulkarni (seemakulkarni2@gmail.com) is with the Society for Promoting Participatory Eco-system Management.

Water is a public good and as such should be available, accessible and affordable to all the people in society. To enable this outcome the nature of governance is important. Appropriate decentralisation, giving powers to local communities to manage their resources is an important avenue for both equity and equality. However local communities are not homogeneous. In a hierarchical society driven by caste, and class discriminations, women suffer even more with the addition of patriarchal impositions. This paper briefly traces the trajectories of decentralisation and the women's movement to note how these have impinged on local women and are taking initiatives to manage water resources.

Decentralisation in India

Since the early 1990s an overwhelming number of countries have been engaged in decentralisation of policy formulation and implementation especially in many developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The World Bank has marked this as an important agenda for the 21st century as is evident from its several reports in the last decade. In its report on India (WB 2000), it mentions that most of its future bank assistance in various sectors would be done keeping in mind the existence of local governance. In different ways this discourse on decentralisation has been shaping this country's governance language. Very broadly, decentralisation can be understood as a transfer of administrative and political functions at the local level.

Decentralisation has a diverse set of advocates. On the one hand, are the free market advocates lobbying for decentralisation of a kind where the State is required to minimise its interventions. Thus a comfortable marriage emerged of local governance (initiated by the 73rd and 74th amendment to the Constitution), with the economic liberalisation unleashed in the 1990s. On the other hand, we have the anti-market and anti-globalisation advocates supporting this form mainly out of an optimism that these spaces will allow people to take charge of their local contexts. Decentralisation is seen as important because it has a potential to bring transparency, accountability and equity in governance to the people (Bardhan 2002).

Much of this initial enthusiasm which sought to cover decentralised governance to many sectors, however seems to have now waned and a time has come to ask more serious questions of whether decentralised governance has really been able to address the rising inequalities in society and if so to what extent. In India, decentralisation in the post-independence era dates back to the

early constitutional debates between Gandhi and Ambedkar in 1948 where the question of village versus individual as the primary unit was discussed. Gandhi had argued for village republics (Harijan 1942 as cited in World Bank 2000: 18) and Ambedkar had advocated individual rights over the village as an administrative unit. "What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit" (Ambedkar in the constitutional debates 1948, as cited in the World Bank 2000: 18).

Several committees were launched by post-independent Indian governments to look into the possibilities of decentralisation. The first among these was the Balwantrai Committee in 1958, followed by several others to look into different aspects of rural decentralisation. Almost all the committees spoke about a lack of political will, an interfering bureaucracy and elite capture at the local level as the key obstacles in decentralisation. However, none of the subsequent processes seem to have effectively tackled some of these constraints until 1993 when the 73rd amendment was introduced with the political idea of democratic decentralisation (WB 2000).

While there is no standard model or definition of decentralisation, many authors have tried to distinguish between types and forms of government functions which are decentralised. In terms of administrative decentralisation, Rondinelli's three-way categorisation between deconcentration, delegation and devolution is useful; wherein deconcentration refers to the transfer of certain planning, financing and management tasks to local units of central agencies, without any inherent transfer of authority. Delegation relates to the transferring of responsibility for decision-making and administration of public functions to other organisations that have semi-independent authority and though not wholly controlled by the central government are accountable to it. Devolution in contrast refers to actual transfer of authority to lower tiers, granting them autonomy in terms of their financial, administrative and political decision-making (Rondinelli et al 1989).

One of the most compelling arguments in favour of decentralisation is that it brings governance closer home. Greater proximity to people thus makes governments more accountable to citizen pressures and more demanding of better services (Tendler 1997). Such arguments provide a fertile ground for the assumption that women would benefit from these arrangements. Given the prevailing patriarchal relations, women located in the domestic sphere are largely responsible for the care and nurture of the household (Beall 2006). They are thus less mobile physically but in terms of their material realities of what they can do or what they cannot do they also suffer from many sociocultural restrictions that go with patriarchy. Not only are they denied independent decision-making or exercising authority on spheres that are important to them but they also do not have any voice in the collective affairs of society. This paper examines the central premise of decentralisation that it would improve the outreach of services and participation in decision-making for women from diverse social groups. This is done by drawing on findings from a study supported by International

Development Research Centre (IDRC) on decentralised water governance in Maharashtra. Our own work over 15 years in the area of women and water provides us with additional insights. The main contention of this paper is that decentralisation will fail to meet its desired objectives unless the value systems, culture and the nature of institutions, including the family change. While the policy initiative of introducing quotas for women in public bodies is welcome and necessary it is certainly not sufficient for the success of decentralisation in a society ridden with discrimination based on class, caste and patriarchy and where the culture of political patronage is dominant (Mukhopadhyay 2005). The presence of vibrant social and political movements that propose alternative cultural, social and political paradigms would be a necessary foundation for major social changes. Even if well thought out institutions are built, their functioning is dependent on the culture of people. The paper begins with a brief discussion of gender and public space participation in the Indian context followed by a relevant mapping of decentralised water sector reforms in India and Maharashtra. It then discusses how and whether decentralised water governance has helped women, what are the constraints they face and finally what could be the way forward.

Gender and Public Space Participation

It will be useful here to give a brief history of how women's issues gained public notice. In the aftermath of independence, women's concerns did not get integrated with the country's development, for it was assumed that with the general development of the country, they would automatically benefit. From the 1960s to the 1970s women were at least recognised as beneficiaries of welfare. This phase was followed by concerns about poverty while fears of unbridled population growth triggered family limitation programmes where women were specially targeted. Resistance to this coercive programme eventually led to the promulgation of Emergency in the country (Vasavi and Kingfisher 2003). In the 1970s and 1980s a vibrant women's movement emerged that profiled the real state of affairs. The report "Towards Equality" (1974) was an important milestone in the history of the women's movement in India. It highlighted women's contribution to development. This period also marked several policy shifts and introduction of a series of pro-women legislations. However, the scenario changed dramatically in the 1990s when our economy was opened to market forces and international trade. Women's agency was lauded as a contributor to the growing economy but mainly as home based, non-unionised, cheap labour. From the first central initiative to establish local governments in 1957 to the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment in 1992 and 1993, the country has moved towards an effort at decentralisation. The two constitutional amendments established mandatory provisions for decentralisation to local governments in India in rural and urban areas, respectively. One of the key features of these amendments is a proportional representation of the dalits and adivasis and one-third representation of women on local bodies. This has undoubtedly opened up spaces for local participation in matters of governance. In linking governance to

economic performance, two key perspectives have directed the State's orientation to women's role. One has been to include women as key actors in the new decentralised administration process, and the second on the "efficiency" of institutions, development projects and programmes.

Decentralisation and Water Governance

Since the early 1990s the water sector is going through a crisis which is marked by increasing contestations over water, due to scarcity, pollution, inequalities in access and decision-making. Despite large investments made in the sector since the beginning of the Five-Year Plans, large numbers of people still go without the basic human right to water. Benefits from expansion of surface irrigation are not commensurate with the investments made as is evident from the large-scale displacement and uneven distribution of irrigation benefits.

Decentralisation policies in the early 1990s coupled with water sector reforms from the latter half of the decade have sought to change the role of the state from *provider* of water services to one facilitating demand for water through increased community participation. Commodification of scarce water is thus at the core of the new water policy reform process and the solutions propose a process of institutional and economic restructuring. Water is no longer seen as a free good and decentralised management is considered the only way to ensure sustainable, equitable and efficient water delivery. The Ninth Five-Year Plan (FY 1997-2002) re-articulates the global shift from perceiving water as a social good to be provided free by the government to acknowledging that it is a scarce economic resource, which should be provided according to the standard of service that users are willing to maintain, operate and finance. Thus, the rural water users are expected to contribute towards capital costs of water infrastructure to the tune of about 10% at present and gradually move towards a policy of full cost recovery. Apart from this they are also expected to be fully responsible for the Operation and Maintenance (O and M) through panchayats and the village water and sanitation committees (VWSC) generally referred to as *pani samitis* (water committees). For the first time in the domestic water sector people's participation is called for at all stages of project implementation right from the selection of technological options to implementation and maintenance. In the irrigation sector however we do not see a similar strategy unfolding. Based on principles of cost recovery from users, the new institutions – *pani samitis* for domestic water consumption and water user associations (WUAs) in the case of irrigation management transfer – are meant to address management inefficiencies through participatory planning and inclusive decision-making. Although women's relationship with domestic water is seen as important, neither the Ninth Five-Year Plan nor the National Water Policy (2002) make any specific mention of gender differentiated water needs or women's role in water management.

In Maharashtra, Jalswarjya¹ and Aple Pani² are the two flagship programmes of the state government to meet the drinking water needs of the people. Both are based on the principle of people's participation, capital contribution towards infrastructure

and user fees to meet the O and M costs. Along with these the government has also introduced a number of schemes to address the drinking water needs of its people.

For irrigation, Maharashtra has recently introduced what is called as the Maharashtra water sector improvement programme supported again by a \$325 million loan from the World Bank. This project aims to improve the irrigation sector through farmer participation (read as capital contribution). Improved canal systems of irrigation projects will then be handed over to the WUA which are water institutions formed at the lowest level of an irrigation project. Membership to WUAs is restricted to landholders and owners lying in the command/service area of the irrigation project (Joy and Kulkarni 2007; WB 2005).

Women's participation is seen as integral to these new institutions, partly because of the international discourse on rights based approaches shaping global policy agendas but largely because women are seen as best suited to manage the scarce water resource which they collect and use for the welfare of the household. Increasingly the agricultural crisis has forced the men to migrate leaving the largely fallow and unproductive lands for the women to manage in the absence of any clear land titles and resources like water.

In the *pani samitis* there have to be 50% women and WUAs need to have only three women on their committees on a body comprising 9 or 12 members. Representation of women in the water committees in the domestic water sector is largely justified because they are seen to be directly involved in work related to collection and utilisation of water. In the irrigation sector however their representation is very marginal and is not as sought after as one sees in the domestic sector (Kulkarni 2005). In both cases however women are seen as instruments to meet the desired goals of the water sector. Such an instrumentalist view to participation is largely apolitical in nature assuming women to be naturally privileged water managers, and not as active citizens capable of exercising their rights and articulating their concerns.

Quotas: Necessary But Not Sufficient

The *pani samitis* that were studied showed representation of women across caste groups as per the quotas. In most of the places the scheme was in the process of being implemented so there was an overwhelming response of women especially when it came to attending meetings. Although women from the dalit castes were represented on the *pani samitis* as per the quota they were largely silent and attended meetings on very few occasions. In WUAs the scenario was quite the opposite and despite the quota, women did not attend meetings and were unaware of their membership to the committee and their role in it.

The Politics of Selection

Women on WUAs and also *pani samitis* were not entirely aware of how they have been selected and why they were on the committees. Their names were usually suggested by the village elders. In the WUAs it was the men who were being selected and women were only the proxies. In fact this has been true of panchayat elections as well where nominations are usually controlled by the

local power centres but this is particularly true when it comes to selection of women who have the benefit of reservations. In that sense the local vested groups act as gatekeepers to selection of women on committees (Sharma 1998). However some of the women had a good self-image and exuded confidence by saying that they were selected because the villagers thought they were articulate and capable. This is indeed a changing self perception among women.

Nature of Participation

Participation is seen as a key to the process of decentralisation. Most of the literature has been dichotomised into “means” and “ends” (Oakley et al 1991) with the former seeing participation as an efficient tool or means for achieving better project outcomes and the latter arguing that the process of participation is in itself an empowering one (Cleaver 1999). Participatory approaches in the pani samitis and the WUAs included a number of activities like planning of local water resources, location of the stand posts, tariff decisions, contributing towards the capital and O and M costs. However these strategies only masked the failure of the public sector. All of these were largely geared towards an understanding that participation is a means to an end. However the women’s empowerment fund, in the Jalswarajya programme was geared towards the empowerment of women albeit only in the economic sense. To participate effectively in all of these different activities requires a large number of things to fall in place together. However we see a different picture on the ground.

Lack of Resources and Knowledge

People often lack the required resources to make informed choices around planning of their resources. A large number of women on our pani samitis and the few that were there on the WUAs said they wanted to participate, but did not have the technical knowledge to do so. For example, some of the women were keen to ensure quality of material purchased for setting up water infrastructure. Most of them complained that they were never trained to understand that. Here the presence of the “outsider” can be seen as crucial by bringing in information and skills and a space for disadvantaged groups to articulate their concerns. Increasingly, however the state sees this “outsider” role as disruptive and is now advocating bypassing the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other civil society supports. Glorifying the community and encouraging the formation of community-based organisations (CBOs) and an unmediated relationship of the State with these CBOs seems like a more favoured option now. This leaves little space for the disadvantaged sections within the community which is often looking for the “outsider” to create a space for subaltern politics.

The Undifferentiated Community

Central to these participatory approaches is the notion that the community is a desirable, undifferentiated social entity with all the appropriate qualities for good governance. Such a conceptualisation of communities overlooks the discrimination within

communities based on class, caste, gender and other social minorities. It also conceptualises communities as storehouses of local knowledge, seen as most suited for local governance. While recognising the value of traditional and local knowledge, we cannot ignore that this knowledge is undifferentiated and inadequate to meet current challenges. In our study women and men across different class and caste groups differed in their views in almost all the activities listed above. Women from the dalit communities did not respond to most of our questions on participation, simply because they did not have a voice. Meetings were largely dominated by the upper caste women in the pani samitis and by men only in the WUAs.

A Natural Affinity

There is an unquestioned assumption that women are natural conservers and managers of water. O’Reilly (2008)

Women’s groups must first and foremost serve the purpose of making the water supply system sustainable in the long run, i.e., women must be mobilised to take responsibility for the water management of their village. The health and hygiene education objective and the empowerment and self-help objective are important but should be subordinate to this overriding goal (“Project Social Side” report cited in O’Reilly 2008).

In the Jalswarajya project, wall posters which were an integral part of the water campaign glorified women’s virtues in management of water. Such a portrayal of women’s participation (facilitators of village water management) puts additional pressure on women’s unpaid reproductive work. Moreover these assumptions of women as naturally inclined to such work reinforce the gender stereotypes and continue to keep women in the domestic terrain without understanding the underlying power structures of agency.

Degrees of Participation

Bina Agarwal (2001) outlines six different forms or levels typifying varying degrees of participation in a hierarchical “ladder” moving upwards towards more effective and empowering participation. Locating women from our pani samitis and WUAs on this participatory ladder reveals the entire politics of participation rooted in discriminations in society. With the introduction of quotas, as we saw earlier, women are very well represented in the committees particularly so in the pani samitis. WUAs do not have a caste quota among women and there we see only upper caste landowning women as representatives. Pani samitis clearly have a visible presence of women, particularly in areas where women have been mobilised by NGOs or other civil society groups. In some of the places some women’s visible presence is seen to translate into favourable outcomes for them – for example better locations for stand posts. But women from other castes or class have not necessarily benefited from such a presence thus highlighting the differing needs of differentiated communities.

In a comparative analysis between pani samitis and WUAs we see greater numbers of women attending meetings and speaking up in these meetings in the domestic rather than the irrigation sector. This is not surprising considering that the sectors are

being seen as the female and male sectors respectively. Domestic is seen as the welfare sector and irrigation is a commodity sector and public expectations about women do not allow them this transition so easily. The degree of participation depended greatly on whether there were strong "outsider" partners, the cultural context of the region and the information that the women had, the class and caste they came from, etc. In our study, women from the upper castes in the coastal area of Konkan were far more active than their counterparts in the remote adivasi jungles of Chandrapur. Historically, Konkan has seen strong women managing their households because of heavy outmigration of the men from the area.

Participatory Exclusions

Another concept of participatory exclusions (Agarwal 2001) becomes very relevant for our findings. These exclusions take different forms both for women as victims of patriarchy and for women from diverse social and economic backgrounds. These can be overt like in the case of WUAs where membership rules exclude non-landowning women or subtle, located in local cultural and social practices which implicitly prevent women from speaking out at public meetings or in front of male elders as was the case with most of our pani samiti and WUA women who refused to speak in the presence of men or in the best instances corroborated what the men spoke (ibid).

Inclusion and participation in sector reforms process is critical from the point of view of ensuring that the hitherto excluded sections like women, dalits and the poor participate and benefit from water use planning. The influence that these sections can exert over decision-making processes seems to be limited in our study areas. Although the effort is to include women, there are several non-programmatic aspects of human life that have already created unequal terms of participation. The ability to participate across caste, class and gender in the domestic water sector, was constrained due to their inability to negotiate and articulate on equal terms as a result of historical conditions of structured inequalities. The State's interpretation of decentralisation is the undifferentiated community and hence it takes a position that once the scheme is handed over to the community, it will not be involved in the micro-management of the scheme especially regarding "which people" or "which women" participate and why. These questions are best left at the mercy of local moralities and how the vested interests deal with it.

Costs of Participation

In a number of cases participation has placed an extra burden on women's time or reinforced gender stereotypes without commensurate economic or social benefits in terms of income or status gains (Baden 1993). New water programmes are full of committees mainly formed to pacify different political interests and constituencies. In domestic water, especially we see three to four committees/subcommittees apart from the pani samiti itself – the social audit or the women's empowerment committees for example. Women on the committees have spent considerable time attending meetings without the anticipated benefits in

terms of meeting either their practical needs or their strategic needs.³ It was interesting to see that in the first phase of the programme women did not see this as a burden and were enjoying this space to enter the public sphere; however delays in completion of projects often led the women to see this as a burdensome activity claiming their time and energy. The question of opportunity costs is often difficult to assess as women rarely find an opportunity to go beyond the realm of household work. So opportunity costs and work burdens can be understood differently by women located differently in the social status ladder. For many of these women this was the first opportunity to participate in public matters and hence they did not really see this as a burden or an additional cost. The opportunity of participation was also seen as one converting into a real opportunity of time saving due to the water scheme.

The most obvious question that follows from here is: Who then shares work at the household level? Since there is some amount of social consent for women to participate, women obviously did have to negotiate sharing of their housework as well. We heard a large number of women saying that often these work burdens were transferred to other women members in the family, usually the co-sister or daughter-in-law or daughter. In one of the villages where the woman village head was also the president of the pani samiti, she admitted that she would not have been able to perform these roles if her co-sister had not taken on these responsibilities.

In WUAs women's participation does not even aim to address the larger question of women's rights. Access to water is linked to landownership in command areas of irrigation projects, thereby excluding all those who fall outside the "command". So most women and other landless households or farmers who fall outside the command area (typically these are dalits or other less disadvantaged castes in Maharashtra) cannot claim right to water by design.

Constraining and Facilitating Factors

Some of the key constraining or facilitating factors cited by women are related to the design of the programmes, the rules for membership, support from the household, the social expectations of the society that define women's roles and behaviour, women's own perceptions of their skills and capacities to perform, their personal attributes and interests, the nature of organisations and the culture of the meetings. For example our pani samitis and WUAs had elderly women some of whom had been on committees earlier and therefore more confident of participation. Lack of household supports was of course cited as one of the most constraining factors for participation. Usually burdens were shared by other women of the household in very supportive families, but none of the women said that household work was being shared by the men and nor is it likely to be so for the next several years to come. Division of work has been a long-standing demand of the feminist movement which slowly lost its steam with sectoral approaches to women's development. Women's participation in public sphere is increasingly being understood as independent of the burdens that they take on in the reproductive sphere.

The assumption that governance close to home would bring large numbers of women in the public space does not really hold true and especially not in irrigation which is a male-dominated sector. Although governance was closer home, women were diffident to speaking up in front of the male elders whom they have known for so many years. Being a part of the same patriarchal and caste-ridden society is often a major constraining factor for women to come out and challenge the prevailing order. They also lack the informal networks that have long been in place and which determine the process of decision-making. Goetz (1997) argues that local government is always hierarchical and more embedded in local social and power structures compared to national government and so it is difficult for women to penetrate as independent political actors, or for them to raise controversial gender issues. Often, the role and influence of traditional authorities gets mapped on to the new form of formal local government structures introduced by decentralisation.

Numerical strength or rather the lack of it was cited as a major constraining factor by women. "If there were more women we would have spoken our minds. It's difficult to speak out in a room full of men with only two-three other women around. More numbers would have led to better articulation of our concerns" (women committee members from a WUA). The idea of critical mass leading to positive outcomes has been discussed widely (Agarwal 2001) and in our study we do see the pani samitis which have a 50% representation on committees far more vocal and confident than the WUAs where the membership is not always 33% as the committee size varies from nine to 12 but the number of women always remains at three. The reasons in the case of irrigation of course extend beyond numbers to the nature and culture of the sector as well.

Rules that define women's roles at the household and in the community foreclosed options for them to come out and participate in the meetings. In the WUAs, women were so burdened with domestic work and agricultural work that they barely had the time to know what was happening outside of that domain. Irrigated agriculture is also demanding in terms of their time and energy for women. Sexual division of labour is not questioned within the framework of the sectoral reforms which are resource focused rather than being people centred.

Culture, place and time of the meeting are also seen as constraining factors. Panchayat halls or credit cooperative society offices were the typical sites for the meetings. These are very public and "male" in nature and barely are women seen in these spaces. Given the roles and expectations of women, rarely could women challenge these to enter these spaces. Women are also aware of the rowdy nature of these meetings, where they would hardly find an environment to speak up. All the WUA women members said that they would be happier to attend meetings if they were held in anganwadi halls or school premises for example. These seem like spaces where women will be accepted as the community is attuned to seeing women in these spaces regarding their children's education. Usually meetings are held in the day time when women are at work in the field or if it is earlier when they are busy with domestic work. The question is whether

women really have a time suitable for meetings? The answer often is no – not unless division of labour is seriously brought on to public agendas for a debate.

Has Decentralisation Created any Counterfactuals?

It was assumed that proximity would make water governance more inclusive and participatory for women and people and therefore also beneficial to them. In the earlier sections we have looked at the nature of participation and also the constraints that women face in participating in local water governance. The question then is whether things have really changed for women or not and whether decentralisation is a desirable demand to pursue in the context of women and water.

Presence in Public Space

One of the important counterfactuals created is related to women's presence increasing gradually in the public sphere. Despite the various constraints women face there is a shift from complete absence to gradual presence in decision-making related to water. The presence is more prominent in the domestic water sector which is closer to women because of the social norm that says this is women's work and hence has a special relationship to it. There is also a longer history of NGOs and civil society groups working with women in this sub-sector of water and shaping public acceptance of women's participation. Irrigation in that sense is still seen as a male domain despite the bulk of irrigated agricultural labour that is being put in by women. Productive water has a greater value attached to it in terms of the market and this value creates its own culture which in a way defines the rules of participation.

Equity in Access to Water

Equity as we understand in the water sector is a matter of minimum assurance to all for water required for livelihood needs irrespective of their ownership of assets, especially those who depend on land and water for livelihood needs including the landless.

For a rural woman who has little space to move out of her current role of a nurturer, access to domestic water closer to home is crucial. The meanings of equity get complex when it comes to women and productive water. The first barrier is the social one where women from diverse social groups would have different requirements and also diverse understandings around access.

Gender and equity in drinking water and sanitation is about basic human rights – the right to water and sanitation has been well stated and women, like men, are adequately covered in principle at least. Where they lose out though is the disproportionate share of the work that they shoulder around domestic water and the marginal space they have to articulate their concerns in the committees.

In irrigation or productive water on the other hand, gender equity gets tied to the household, caste or other social groups that women belong to. Does independent access to water for women like independent land titles form a significant and viable alternative? Currently water access is linked to landownership which is largely unfavourable to women, landless and

dalits or adivasis who may depend on productive water for other needs. So the equity question in irrigation and water for livelihoods begins not with participation, though it is important, but with the de-linking of access to water from landownership. From the women's point of view though the discourse around access gets complex.⁴

Equity in Voice

In the pani samitis women were present for the meetings and their presence did make a difference to them and towards the overall outcomes of the programme in some of the villages. But largely their voice was to reiterate what the majority male decisions were, at least in the formal spaces of the meetings that we were able to assess.

In the WUAs women were either completely absent or their needs on the timing and place of the meetings too were not considered. The overall culture of the sector determined the presence or absence of certain kinds of people.

The comparison between domestic water and irrigation or productive water is worthy of attention. Whereas women are actively sought in the domestic water sector the productive water sector is seen as a male domain. This is reflected not only in the rules that have been crafted but also in the way programmes are designed. Jalswarjya or Aple Pani supported women's participation (albeit through a limited understanding) through several incentive structures like the women's empowerment fund or 50% women on pani samitis, etc. In contrast WUAs only introduced a quota for landholding women in command areas and provided no incentives for even the few women (precisely three) on every committee of nine or 12 members. Women on WUAs therefore had little gains in terms of either access to water or decision-making around water.

Gender Relations at Home and Community

It might be too early and presumptuous to make a statement on whether participation in pani samitis or WUAs have changed gender relations in the household and the community. Many of them from the pani samitis said that they had earned respect in the community. They had demonstrated their ability to participate in public meetings and to speak there. This has of course varied across the different social groups where both overt and covert restrictions act as constraining factors. While earning respect in the community can be seen as an indicator of such a change the underlying instrumentalist view cannot be ignored. In one of the villages in Jalgaon district, the village head was proud of his "all women pani samiti" which had received a lot of government attention for being the only one in the district and thus brought in new schemes to the village. These and other examples also highlight the limitations of incentive structures that are couched within an instrumentalist viewpoint.

Addressing patriarchy through the water sector becomes an even more contentious issue and the State does not see a role for itself there. Most democratic institutions including the pani samitis and WUAs are of a public kind and do not really engage with, affect or attempt to influence domestic and familial life. However if gender relations are understood as part of a larger understanding

of social relations of production, and water is seen as a means of production and a source of life then the State cannot evade its responsibility of addressing inequities in the relations of reproduction. In the water sector it means not only including women, landless, tribals and dalits in improving access and participation in decision-making, but also addressing the public-private divide and women's roles (gender division of work) that traverse across these two domains.

Valuing Water: A Significant Counterfactual

Both the programmes in our study indicate that the water sector reform process is dominated largely by the management transfer view where responsibilities of management are delegated or transferred to the users without a commensurate transfer of power to design schemes or allocate water. The overriding concern of the programmes has been to improve participation through capital contribution. Valuing water or pricing water was thus seen as crucial reform to the success of the programme.

This was evident in the language and the discourse used to elicit participation of the community. Most had internalised this discourse very well. Most of the women we spoke to tended to agree that pricing was necessary for good functioning of water schemes and that people should pay the 10% contribution towards the infrastructure. The idea of "sense of ownership" linked to payment of capital contribution was accepted unconditionally. Thus the State was accepted in the role of a facilitator. It was only on further probing that women raised concerns over the rising costs of drinking water. This is a significant shift brought about by the State in the way people think. In this kind of an environment raising the demand for right to minimum water at affordable costs becomes increasingly difficult.

Decentralisation the Only Solution?

In a similar vein decentralised governance has also earned acceptability with the community. Interestingly, different stakeholders (men, women, dalits, adivasis) tend to agree on the need for improving water resources through such reforms and most would even agree that decentralisation is the best form to achieve this.

For the hitherto excluded groups, decentralisation raises hopes to redress their historical exclusion from accessing water and

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making decisions around it. Claims for representation in the decision-making process therefore becomes critical for these groups. For local vested interests this often holds a promise for strengthening their political base.⁵ For multilateral agencies (e.g., the World Bank in Maharashtra) and often the government as well, it holds meaning in terms of reducing State expenditure on both management as well as infrastructure and for private parties it opens up spaces for making economic profits in the event of clear entitlements getting institutionalised.⁶

Given these diverse set of interests, which often appear like a win-win situation, it is not surprising that there is little struggle or debate over the new reforms in the sector. The State which is proactively supporting the neo-liberal agenda is also forced to attend to its political constituency.

Conclusions

The effects of these reforms can unfold only gradually when the State is pushed to the corner by private interests or multilateral agencies. What is important to understand is that decentralisation cannot be wished away as a donor-driven discourse as we see how historical inequities are used to occupy the spaces created by decentralisation, thereby defeating the very purpose for which decentralisation was introduced.

For most stakeholders, particularly the socially excluded, therefore the question is not as simple as whether to oppose or engage with the State; rather, a combination of the two may be necessary if the restructuring idea has to gain currency over the transfer viewpoint.

Notions of representation and participation in the public sphere has served women who did not otherwise possess a public voice and identity to demand that their points of view be heard. The right vested through public participation allows them a space to demand for change. Panchayati raj institutions are a good example of how despite the debates around male proxies women have come out and utilised that space to their advantage, overcoming structural constraints. The idea of women as a significant constituency when politicians or bureaucrats make plans does empower women. Such new ideas do contribute to changed perceptions about one self even in the wake of added responsibilities. This is evident through the discussions we had with over 150 women in Maharashtra. It is a slow process and also highly differentiated across caste, tribe and class lines and change may come through gradually if the systems are strengthened in different ways. It assumes of course that the commitment to decentralisation is not abandoned with the completion of the scheme.

The process of empowerment of women gets a push wherever there is a strong initiative from either the civil society, local NGOs, or in some cases even an active and committed bureaucracy. As mentioned earlier we see empowerment and participation as a process and to that extent the domestic water sector does hold some hope.⁷

The irrigation sector has completely missed out on the agenda of women and this largely comes from its acceptance of the dominant narrative of the normative woman who can go far enough to participate in welfare/health and hygiene oriented

sectors of sanitation and drinking water but no further. This image dominates and is reflected in the lethargy of the government to provide any active policy or programmatic incentives for women to participate.

Women's incentive for water management – underlying their agency – is not just related to their resource dependence, but also to social and institutional structures, which do not allow them the same access to resource rights, economic opportunities or decision-making as it does for men. Engendering governance is not merely a technical exercise – increasing the number of women in organisations or political spaces, such as water committees, but about redefining the nature of public space and acknowledging that the private domain – where much gendered socialisation takes place – cannot be seen as distinct or separate. However, there is little recognition of the implications of the public-private divide or the terrain of households and to a lesser extent within communities, and the intra- and inter-dynamics of power that characterise institutional sites and that set the boundaries for participation by women and men. Not only are institutions assumed to be neutral, the public-private divide that determines women's exclusion from the public domain is used to reinforce gendered power relations in "organisations" at all levels (public, private and civil society).⁸

Men who see women's roles as confined to the home find it difficult to accept their participation in the public sphere on the assumption that women lack mental and educational skills to make decisions while organisational cultures tend to assign typically "female tasks" to women staff or keep them at desk jobs rather than field-oriented positions.

Our analysis shows that the success of decentralised water governance is constrained by the conceptualisation of the larger reform in water at one level and the conceptualisations of the normative woman, communities, public and the private domains and institutions at another. Unless all of these are altered decentralised processes will not be truly democratic.

Categorical thinking about domestic water and irrigation and men and women is commonplace now and affects among several things how policies and programmes are shaped. Spaces are divided on what is masculine and what is feminine – the home and the outside world. Men's identities, therefore, are linked to the public sphere, money and power while women's identities revolve around the home, nurture and subsistence. These identities transmit in exactly the same manner in the water sector and the sectoral divide is evidence to this. It can be argued, that such categorical, dual thinking has worked to the advantage of women, insofar as it has given them space to participate in decision-making in domestic water. However, we cannot overlook the fact that these very advantages in fact can be counterproductive and distance women from entering other spheres of work. Alternatives lie in re-conceptualising the normative rules for men and women and water.

Finally we would argue that decentralisation provides (or at least, appears to do so) legitimate space and a framework for women's participation in water governance at the community level. Decentralisation has the potential for reshaping the institutional infrastructure of water management and of facilitating

equitable community representation and inclusion (Ribot 2003). However, the decentralisation of roles and responsibilities without the concomitant devolution of real power and resources means that decentralisation as a political objective has little meaning for women's representation or participation given the inherent gender biases which prevent women from exercising voice, accessing resources or institutions (Mukhopadhyay 2005).

Decentralisation is a process, which needs to be negotiated, and the hard reality is that for poor and marginalised women negotiation is being contested in an economic environment where policies of privatisation, pricing and centralised, technocentric delivery systems (large dams, pipelines and the Indian state's river linking project) dominate the political discourse on water management.

NOTES

- 1 Literally meaning water freedom, this ambitious programme supported by the World bank through a 268 million loan was started with a few pilot districts in 2003 and expanded to include 26 districts in its second phase which would be ending in 2012.
- 2 Aple Pani meaning "Our water" is funded by the German bank the KfW and it covered three districts in Maharashtra. It runs on similar principles as the Jalswarjya.
- 3 Caroline Moser's work is considered as foundational in the context of practical and strategic gender needs. While the practical relate to meeting women's day to day needs which for example in the water context would be to have water at the doorstep, strategic needs on the other hand imply a change in the position of women – are they able to decide, do the own property, etc.
- 4 SOPPECOM has been working on this issue and one of the alternatives proposed in this regard is the carving out of water entitlements for women where they are able to decide on its use.
- 5 Shelawe Budruk in Jalgaon district of Maharashtra is a classic example of how the local leader climbed the political leader by bringing in the Jalswarjya scheme in an otherwise not water scarce village.
- 6 The push towards going in for private connections over public stand posts is clearly a move towards facilitating cash collections. Similarly, in irrigation we see that clauses for both creating individual entitlements as well as tradability of water rights have been introduced.
- 7 This is evident from our discussions with both the government officials as well as with the women themselves.
- 8 It is important to clarify the distinction between institutions as "rules of the game" and organisations as the "players" – see Kabeer's work on the institutional framework (Kabeer and Subramani-an 1999) and Goetz (1995) who builds on the above in the context of gender and organisations.

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