



World Day for Water 2005

United Nations, 22 March 2005

Message from the Task Manager, Interagency Gender and Water Task Force
United Nations Division for Sustainable Development

This year, the 11th celebration of World Day for Water, coincides with the launch of the 'Water for Life' Decade. On this auspicious occasion, we invite you to remember the plight of the women in Africa, Asia and other poorer parts of the world who lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. These amenities that we take for granted are a matter of survival, personal dignity and human security for those women.

Water is increasingly becoming an important strategic resource, essential for sustaining life and development. Control over water is a source of power and economic strength, and it can be a root cause of socio-political stress. Involving both women and men in water management is at the heart of conserving our finite water resources and safeguarding health through proper sanitation and hygiene.

As women are primarily responsible for the use and management of water resources and sanitation, they have accumulated an impressive store of environmental wisdom, being the ones to find water, to educate children in hygiene matters and to understand the impact of poor sanitation and health. At the same time, women and girls are obliged to walk many hours every day fetching water, which may expose them to threats of violence and health hazards. Having access to water nearer the household reduces the time women and girls spend fetching water, allowing time for other activities, including training, childcare, growing food and income generation. Yet women often have no voice and no choice about the kind of services they receive.

Improving access to water and sanitation and changing hygiene behaviours have large benefits to society as a whole, through improvements in health, education and the economy in general. This justifies continued public sector support to communities and households. The most effective design and location of water and sanitation facilities, as well as long-term sustainability, will depend on both women and men being involved from the start of a project, and taking responsibility for management, operation and maintenance. The role for women in constructing and maintaining water and sanitation facilities should not be underestimated; it can vary from fundraising to active work on construction, preventive maintenance and repairs to paying for water with labour.

In agricultural production food security is often dependent on women's subsistence production to feed the population, which in turn may be linked to land rights. Women's accumulated knowledge is valuable for managing and protecting water sources, land, soil and watersheds. Women and indigenous groups will only have secure access when they are recognized as citizens, land holders and contributors to the development process.

In countries such as South Africa, Lesotho and Uganda affirmative action programmes have been introduced to train women for water and sanitation related careers, including science and engineering. At the local level, women have found their voices and have now been trained to locate water sources in the village, decide on the location of facilities and to repair pumps. The incidence of breakdown has decreased considerably. It is interesting to note that in these three countries, the Ministers of Water Resources are women.

Our UN Interagency Task Force on Gender and Water has been working with some of these women ministers of water to compile recommendations on ways to secure access to water and sanitation for women and men during the Water for Life Decade, which begins on 22 March 2005. It is our conviction that for the first time in history the women ministers of water and environment constitute a critical mass of people who can change the nature of the debate and policies in water resources and sanitation management.

The issue of water security for women in Africa and Asia is one of the most fundamental problems facing them. During the current session of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and throughout the 'Water for Life' Decade, the issues of water and sanitation are being moved to the top of the international agenda. We look forward to being part of the expanding network of committed individuals who can work together to find solutions to these problems during the International 'Water for Life' Decade.

Marcia Brewster
Task Manager, Interagency Gender and Water Task Force