

*Thirsty for change: Promoting a gender-responsive approach to achieve water security*

13 May 2019 15h30/17h00

Gender and water Session UNESCO

“Dear colleagues,

I am honoured to conclude this very interesting session. Women and water are topics very close to my heart.

You have heard that in many countries women are responsible for fetching water for their household. Therefore, women have a lot of knowledge and experience about water and that is hardly recognised when it comes to designing and implementing water projects and programmes. Therefore, Women for Water Partnership, positions women as agents of change, leaders, professionals, experts and partners on equal footing with men in water and sustainable development programmes to achieve equitable access to water for all for all uses (sanitation included). This is important in all stages of a programme or projects: use the knowledge and experience of women in the design of a project, allocate special funding to involve women, pay attention to the special needs of women during the implementation, and so on.

The human rights to water and sanitation can support positioning women as experts, leaders and partners to gain access - if indeed the differences between women and girls, and men and boys in access to water are being analysed. It might help effective programme design. Vice Minister Ms Emanuela Del Re – (from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation) did not only talk about the principles behind the human right for water and sanitation. Principles such as participation, accountability, non-discrimination and transparency. She also focused on the sanitation aspect and related health issues and cause of child- mortality, like diarrhea linked to water quality. Already back in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) underlined that discrimination against women ‘is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries’. And that is 40 years ago!

The principles mentioned are very important aspects of governance. There is little research on the inclusion of women in the decision-making processes related to water governance. Although, together with the OECD, Women for Water Partnership is preparing a research on the impact of women being included in water governance. And now UNESCO is developing gender-responsive indicators and a call for action on gender and groundwater governance.

But we are still lagging behind compared to some companies in the private sector. Mc Kinsey monitored the implementation of their diversity policy and conclude that diversity of leadership-style matters, that leadership styles most frequently used by women are considered to be the most effective in addressing the global challenges of the future and that women are as ambitious as men, but need a supportive environment to feel confident to succeed.

In the water sector there is too little scientific evidence to measure the impact of equal participation of women and men in water programmes as we discussed during the session. However, there are many stories and case studies about the positive effects of inclusion of women, as a sort of anecdotal evidence. More scientific evidence might convince policy makers to set proper conditions to implement their policies, because currently the gap between preaching and practicing is huge. With proper scientific research on how changes have been implemented and monitored might encourage people to put the policies into practice.

Scientific research is also hampered by lack of sex-disaggregated data, there are only a few examples of countries or organisations collecting and analyzing them. We all know how important it is to shed some light on differences between the sexes, this data can enable a change in the design or approach of a programme to allow it to become “all-inclusive” - suitable for women and girls. And of course, we should not forget the work on gender-responsive indicators and the great Toolkit on sex-disaggregated water data produced by UNESCO WWAP.

But scientific evidence is not enough to overcome the barriers for equal participation of women and girls. These barriers are no longer due to lack of education, because girls are closing the gap in academic education. The gap is down to 5% worldwide. And slowly but surely, an increasing number of girls is even entering in the more technical disciplines. This is good news!

Pregnancy is no longer a reason for unequal participation, the values and beliefs about the role of women, stereotyping and lack of female role models are the main reasons. For example, women are perceived to be unsuitable for fieldwork or participate in a traditionally male dominated sector, also, very practical, due to lack of proper sanitation facilities. This prevents the women and girls from having a career in the water sector.

Therefore, I really liked the story of Ms Euphrasie Kouassi Yao, Advisor to the President of Cote d’Ivoire on Gender and Holder of the UNESCO Chair on ‘Water, Women and Decision-making’, about the good practices from Cote d’Ivoire to empower women in decision-making positions related to water management.

On another note, evidence shows that growing climatic variability has impacts on water availability and quality, which in turn jeopardizes social stability and jobs for the younger generations, especially women and girls. This is particularly true in arid and semi-arid regions, where often migration is the result. For example; in the MENA region water scarcity is acute. : Mr Almotaz Abadi - Managing Director of the Environment and Water Division, Union for the Mediterranean Secretariat (UFM), has shed light on the interdependency between water scarcity - (lack of) employment - and migration, through a gendered lens and he showed us that this specific region is planning to address this nexus and its complexity.

Then I would like to add the role of finance. We know that finance is not easily available for women and therefore we strongly advocate for women’s access to financial investments and instruments. Inclusion of women does not go automatically and often special budgets to involve women are lacking: budgets for capacity building, vocational training, operation and

maintenance, monitoring and evaluation at all levels for women and their organisations. Without adequate budget allocation, nothing will change!

To conclude, being “thirsty for change” is significant, and a “gender-responsive approach to achieve water security” is a necessity, but this is all easier said than done. Stereotypes persist, sex-disaggregated data is lacking and finance for women is seemingly unavailable. Nevertheless, what we need to do is clear and it is worthwhile to continue our mission”.