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POLICY BRIEF

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Gender and water access in South Africa:
Status, trends, and policy implications

Summary

Water is a crucial resource for all communities, playing a vital role in ensuring health, sanitation, and economic development. Despite government efforts to improve water access and ownership of water rights, South African women currently control only 10.5% of the existing lawful agricultural water uses, a concerning figure compared to the targeted Water Allocation Reform Strategy, which aimed to transfer 30% and 40% of agricultural water uses to women by 2014 and 2019, respectively.

To reduce inequalities in water access, it is essential to consider that agricultural land transfer is a prerequisite for claiming any water right. Thus, the lack of progress in granting women access to land ownership has resulted in their limited access to agricultural water.

The disparity in water access disproportionately affects women because, at the household level, numerous studies have provided well-documented evidence that women bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the provision of water for domestic use. Hence, poor access to water excessively affects women and girls, specifically in rural areas, because they have to walk long distances to access water in rivers and dams, thus exposing them to vulnerability, such as sexual harassment and young girls missing school.

This policy brief analyses the challenges faced by women in accessing water resources and proposes actionable policy recommendations to promote gender equality and enhance water access in the country. International experiences show that addressing water disparities requires strategies that implement gender-sensitive policies, community-based initiatives, enhanced participation of women in water management and water project developments, gendered data-driven approaches and capacity-building programs and awareness campaigns to empower women and girls with knowledge about water conservation and management.

Introduction

Women's access for consumptive and productive uses is crucial for achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). Access to water is critical for achieving food security, as it enables farmers to grow crops and raise livestock. Since women often engage in small-scale farming and agricultural activities, sufficient access to water for irrigation will create opportunities to generate income and contribute to their household's economic well-being. This will reduce poverty as access to water enhances women's productivity, diversifies income streams, and provides opportunities for economic empowerment.

Regarding access to consumptive water, when rural women have better access to water sources for household use, such as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene, it reduces the time and effort spent on water collection. This, in turn, enables women to engage in other productive activities or pursue education. Women can then pursue education or vocational training, leading to improved opportunities for personal development.

According to Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), nearly 780 million people in developing countries lack adequate access to safe water and sanitation. However, it is reported that out of this 780 million suffering population, women and girl children accounts for 65%. Addressing water access, sanitation and hygiene interrelated gender inequalities challenging women and young girls on a day-to-day basis must go beyond concentrating on providing infrastructure and facilities alone and paying attention to empowerment issues.

Women and access to water for productive purposes

Despite South Africa marking twenty-nine years of democracy, the apartheid regime continues to shape and determine water access as racial, class lines, and gender still mark it.

The agricultural sector continues to be the largest (61%) consumer of freshwater resources, followed by the municipalities, which accounts for 27% (Department of Water and Sanitation, 2019).

The Presidential advisory panel on land reform report in South Africa revealed that out of 61% of water consumed by agriculture, black farmers only have access to 5%. While the Water Allocation Reform Strategy targeted to transfer 30% and 40% of agricultural water uses to women by 2014 and 2019, respectively, a recent study by Tekwa and Andesina (2023) shows that women have access to 10.5% while men own 89.5% of the commercial agricultural water use licences across the nine water management agencies in South Africa.

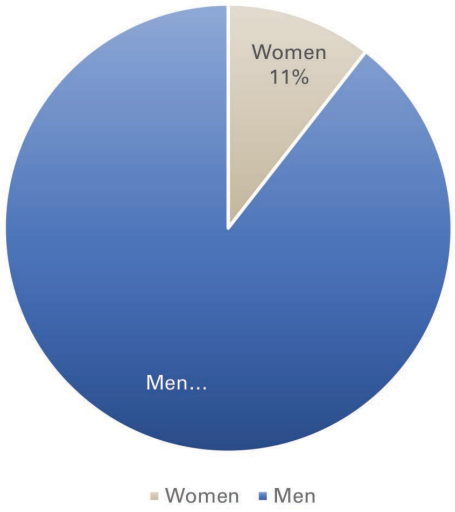

Figure1:
Gendered access to commercial agricultural water use licences across the nine water management agencies in South Africa. Source: Tekwa and Andesina (2023).

The few women that benefitted from water licences were white. Table 1 shows that Black, Asian and Coloured women only own 4.5% of individual water rights in agricultural water licence uses, while white women own the entire 95.5%.

Table1: State of Agricultural Licence ownership by Gender and race on South Africa

	White	Black	Asian	Coloured	Total
Women	95.5	1.6	0.0	2.9	100.0
Men	98.7	0.5	0.2	0.6	100.0

Source: Tekwa and Andesina (2023).

Complex relations between a gendered water access, use, knowledge and governance

According to Harris et al. (2021), women and men possess different and complex relations regarding water access. Several authors, in particular feminist scholars, have argued that water access is gendered in terms of its uses, knowledge and governance as gendered labour norms influence it in society (Buechler & Hanson, 2015).

There is well-documented evidence that women are chiefly responsible for ensuring the provision of water for domestic use such as cleaning, cooking and bathing; thus, water use is gendered in this respect (Galvin, 2011). The burden of poor access to water primarily affects women and girls. For example, if no water is available in taps, women spend significant time walking longer distances to communal pipes or rivers to collect water. This exposes women to vulnerabilities such as violence and sexual harassment, and girl's absenteeism from school (Harris et al., 2021).

Absenteeism results in attaining poor education attainments. This leads to a long-run impact where women's participation in the labour market is significantly reduced due to no education (Marieke et al., 2021). Furthermore, water unavailability affects women's self-esteem when they cannot maintain the expected social expectations concerning hygiene and beauty (Goldin, 2013). Hawkins et al. (2011) argue that gendered water access is not only linked to female and male attributes but is mainly mediated by socio-cultural expectations and work responsibilities.

In terms of water knowledge, scholars argue that women and men possess differentiated water use knowledge, which is influenced by water use and labour practices in the society. Due to historical apartheid, which excluded women from attaining formal higher education, men are still regarded as more knowledgeable on water governance and thus water knowledge expertise is often codified as masculine (Zwarteveen & Liebrand, 2015). For example, Barnes (2013) argue that men possess more knowledge in terms of irrigation water due to their dominance in participation in governance and institutional management of water resources.

Studies have shown that women are often marginalised when it comes to decision marking in the governance and management of water user associations groups in the irrigation schemes (Sinyolo et al., 2018). This unequal participation in decision making in water management and governance issues, especially in rural areas is deep rooted in the patriarchal norms influenced by culture and society expectations.

Women's rights to water access have been impaired because the South African government has focused more on improving consumptive water access and has overlooked women's rights to agricultural water access to uplift them out of poverty since agricultural production is the primary livelihood strategy for improving food security. In the literature, there are vast debates on how women suffer at a household level as they are responsible for providing domestic water use. This perspective needs to be broadened so that the societal perspective of associating women with household water provision will change.

It is time for inclusive land and water reforms to empower women to thrive economically (Tekwa & Adesina, 2023). Thus, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the issues of access, ownership, water rights, and land access from a gender perspective, as these aspects are currently overlooked in the political discussions on the Property Clause in South Africa (Tekwa & Adesina, 2023). According to Tekwa and Adesina (2023:91), it is essential to recognize that the "Land Question" cannot be tackled in isolation from the "Water Question." Both land and water access are influenced by social relations and institutions, with gender playing a significant role. Expanding the focus of land and water concerns to include gender considerations holds significant potential for fostering sustainable socio-economic transformation.

Drivers of gendered access to water

Some key drivers of gendered access to water include; gender roles and norms and patriarchal systems, which are well documented in the literature. Moreover, gender disparities in access to education and economic resources negatively impact women's ability to access improved water sources and technologies. Geographic location is a crucial driver, particularly in rural areas where water sources are distant from homes, leading to a disproportionate burden on women and girls for water collection. The lack of appropriate water infrastructure and technologies disproportionately affects women, making water collection and management tasks more difficult. The legal and institutional barriers impede women's access to water rights and resources, particularly in regions where water rights are tied to land ownership.

Furthermore, gender-blind policies in the management of water resources are also a primary driver because policies that do not consider gender-specific needs and roles may inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities in water access. Water scarcity, exacerbated by climate change, increases the workload for women in water collection and management.

Tekwa and Adesina (2023) further argue that the land reform program in South Africa fails because the government has been purchasing dry land without access to water for the beneficiaries, thus limiting women's productive capacities. Thus, the outcomes of an intersectionality analysis of gender, race, and class showed that poor Black African women are at an acute disadvantage. Tekwa and Adesina (2023) argue that to effectively deal with inequalities in water access, the land-water and gender nexus should be dealt with simultaneously because, if addressed separately, it will continue to result in reforms that will not benefit women in the water sector. Cullis & Van Koppen (2007) also pointed out that as a result of apartheid, it is required that inequality of access to water should be translated to inequality of land because access to water is often related to land resources.

Addressing gender gaps in water access

Addressing gender disparities in water access is critical to promoting gender equality and sustainable development. Several countries have taken measures to reduce these gaps. For example, Peru has implemented water policies and projects that are sensitive to gender issues, considering the specific needs and roles of women in water management. They have also worked on increasing women's access to decision-making positions in water governance and ensuring their participation in planning and implementation processes.

In Rwanda, efforts have been made to establish water points closer to households, which eases the burden of water collection, a task that often disproportionately falls on women. Bangladesh has made significant strides in enhancing water access for women through community-based initiatives. In India, women's expertise in water infrastructure projects is recognised, leading to their active involvement in designing and implementing initiatives that cater to community needs. Countries like India, Canada, and the United Nations have placed emphasis on collecting gender-disaggregated data on water access and usage. This approach helps policymakers identify specific gender disparities and allocate resources accordingly to address the identified gaps.

Moreover, Canada has undertaken capacity-building programs and awareness campaigns to empower women and girls with water conservation and management knowledge. These programs aim to enhance women's participation and decision-making in water-related activities.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Access to water is a human right for all. Due to the apartheid history in South Africa, there is still high-water inequality which primarily affects women and young girls. The government water reforms have yet to consider the nexus between land, water and the gendered perspective toward accessing these rights. In South Africa, few women have benefitted from land reform, thus directly impacting their ability to own water rights.

Therefore, the government and the Constitution's policies need to embed the land, water and gender questions simultaneously so that the policies can effectively reduce gender inequalities in terms of water rights and access. Moreover, in the agricultural space, there is a need for promoting gender-inclusive water governance. Women must be empowered and supported to actively participate in managing water resources and in decision-making. Educating society to promote awareness of gender equality is also crucial, particularly to challenge society's norms deeply rooted in patriarchal systems.

Furthermore, incorporating water, sanitation, and hygiene education into school curriculums will empower future generations with knowledge about sustainable water practices. In South Africa, where corruption is regarded as the main cause of deteriorating infrastructure, the government must implement stronger institutions to deal with corruption.

Infrastructure development and investing in appropriate technologies and solutions that alleviate the physical burden of water collection, benefiting women and girls, is crucial, especially in areas of high gender disparities. There is also a need to improve data collection methods capturing gender-disaggregated water access and usage information to inform evidence-based policies.

To achieve all of these and ensure the inclusive development of women in the economy, policymakers, NGOs, the private sector, and local communities must collaborate in allocating water resources through various initiatives.

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