Gender and Water in Mongolia

Why Consider Gender in Water Management?

Women and men have different roles and responsibilities within households and communities. This means that they interact differently with the environment and have different knowledge about water and other natural resources.

In many developing countries women and girls are responsible for collecting water from remote sources for use in the home which often leads to health problems, safety issues and a lack of time for schooling, income generation or community participation.

Globally, women are involved along with men in using water for farming, animal care or small businesses. However, despite their obvious interaction with and knowledge about water, women often lack a voice in water management discussions and decision- making.

Ultimately, research and experience from many developing regions shows that including the needs, ideas and knowledge of both women and men (rich and poor) in water management decision-making will create management plans that are more equitable and sustainable[1].

In order to effectively encourage participation from all members of society in these discussions, a general understanding of women's and men's interaction with water on a daily basis is important. This interaction varies throughout the world. Therefore, it is crucial to understand gender and water relations in the context of Mongolia (where data is lacking) in order to begin pursuing efficient water management in the country.

Purpose:

This booklet was created in order to share the results of an exploratory study on how women and men in Mongolia relate differently to water collection and water management. It is hoped that the data presented here encourages Mongolian citizens, governments and organizations to include gender issues and gender equality in water management plans.

Primary research was conducted by Roberta Hawkins (MES) with help from the National University of Mongolia, York University (Canada) and the Steppe Forward Programme. Support in publishing research results was received from the Asia Foundation. For more information please e-mail: hawkinsroberta@yahoo.ca

[1] For more information on these studies see the Gender and Water Alliance (2006) *Resource Guide* at http://www.genderandwater.org/page/2414 or see Narayan, Deepa (July 1995). The contribution of people's participation: Evidence from 121 rural water supply projects. *Environmentally Sustainable Development Series Paper #1.* World Bank.

The Mongolian Context in Brief

An issue that is considered one of Mongolia's major socio-economic and ecological problems is that it is relatively poor in water availability[2]. Although Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, water scarcity is easily felt by Mongolians as a large portion of the population relies directly on natural resources for survival, mainly as nomadic herders. Adding to the struggle to obtain enough water for herding is the fact that an increase in mining activity (important to Mongolia's economy) combined with an increase in temperature and evapo-transpiration rates attributed to climate change have led to issues of poor water quality and reduced water quantity in the country[3]. Also, only 60% of Mongolians have access to improved drinking water supplies and only 25% have access to improved sanitation facilities[4].

Research Methods

The information in this booklet is based on an exploratory analysis completed in the Fall of 2006. Fieldwork consisted of 99 urban household surveys based on families in Ulaanbaatar, and 32 rural surveys from families in the Omnogobi Aimag (Nomgon Soum Centre and the Little Gobi Strictly Protected Area A). *See Map.*

To complement this limited survey data, information from 16 key informant interviews and three Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) sessions was used.

---

[2] Gankhuyag, Uyanga (ed) (2005). *Economic and Ecological Vulnerabilities and Human Security in Mongolia*. UNDP, Ulaanbaatar.
[3] ibid
[4] Batbold Kh, Tuul Z, and Oyun B (2004). *Access to Water and Sanitation Services in Mongolia*. United Nations, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

While the research participants were largely drawn from a small random sample and do not necessarily represent the Mongolian population as a whole, the research findings point to some interesting gender and water relationships that call for more investigation of these issues throughout the country.

Gender and Water Collection

This study found that 100% of rural families and 65% of urban families collect water from sources outside of their homes. These sources were public tap stands in urban areas and hand dug bucket or pump wells in rural areas.

Those responsible for water collection face issues of poor health (due to the harsh climate and pollution at water sources). In general women are more likely to care for the sick and less likely to receive medical attention in Mongolia than men[5]. Water collectors also face a lack of time for other activities due to the time it takes to collect water, which averages (in this study) between 18 minutes for a round trip for Nomgon soum centre residents, and 40 minutes for protected area residents, due to the distance to the wells. Urban residents spend 36 minutes per round trip on average to collect water, largely because they were forced to wait in lines at tap stands.

While 61% of urban families collect water by more than one method, with the most popular being hand cart (flat wheelbarrow) and hand, 77% of rural families use more than one method and favour collecting by vehicle or by hand.

In the urban survey population men represent the majority in all forms of water collection. Those between 40 and 60 years old were largely responsible for water collection by vehicle, and males in their early twenties were responsible for water collection by hand (Figure 3).

Fieldwork also indicates that rural Mongolian men are significantly involved in water collection, compared to global data, but that when it comes to water collection by hand or hand cart, rural women share this task (Figure 2).

Similar to global data, as technological requirements for collecting water increase, men in urban and rural Mongolia are more often involved in water collection. This is likely due to the use of motorcycles and animals being considered a male responsibility. However, men's involvement in water collection by hand and hand cart may be unique to the Mongolian context.

[5] ibid

Figure 1: Gender Division of Labour Across Urban Water Collection Methods[6]
n= the number of families using each collection method

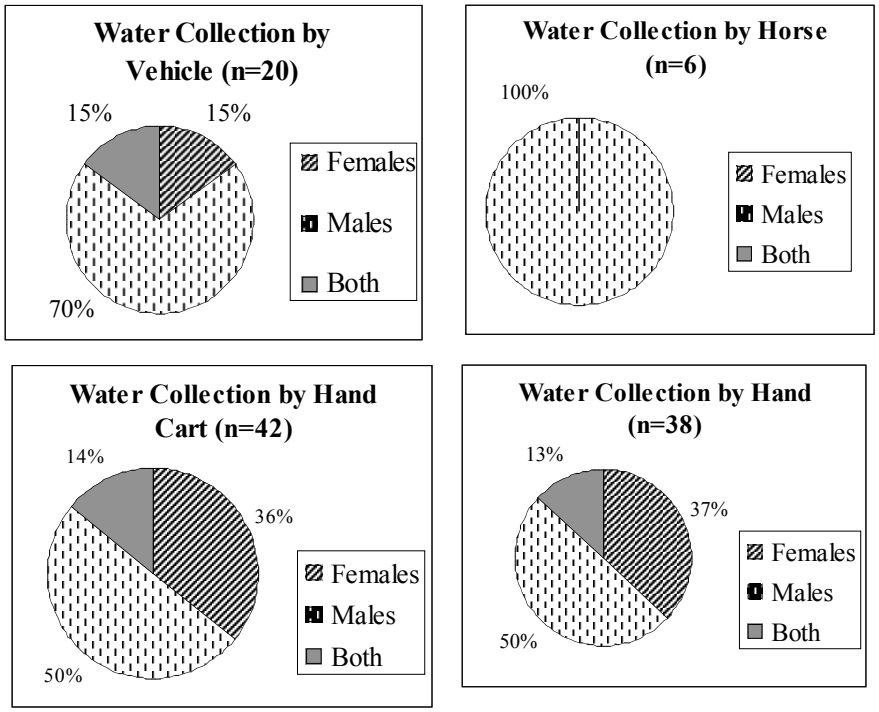
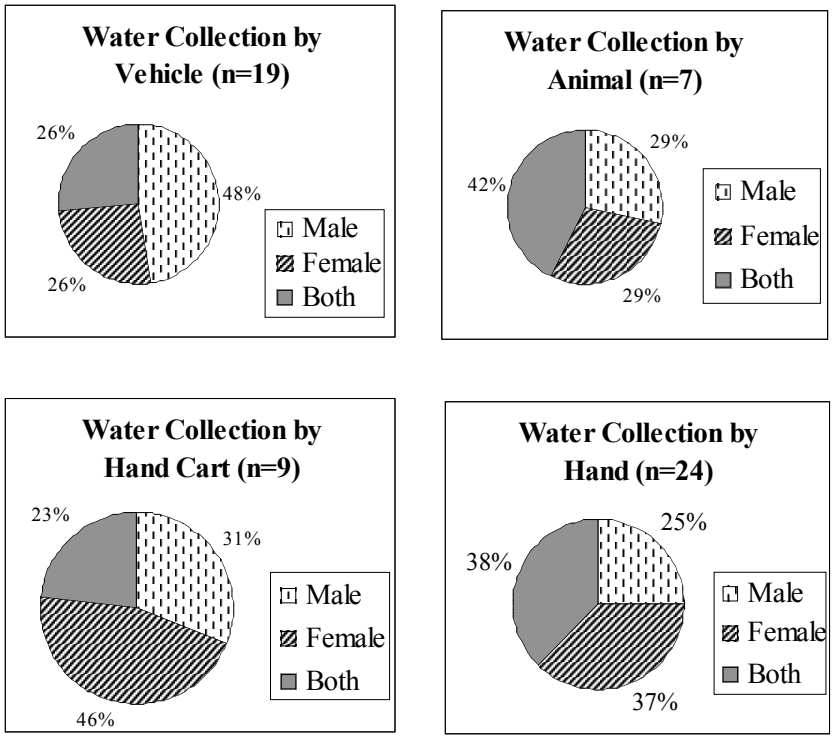


Figure 2: Gender Division of Labour Across Rural Water Collection Methods[7]
n = the number of families who use each method



6 Hawkins Fieldwork, 2006
7 ibid

Discussion on Gender and Water Collection

Mongolian men's involvement in water collection may be due to the idea (as stressed in interviews) that whoever is free within a family when tap stands are open or water is needed is expected to collect water. It could be the case (especially in urban areas) that men are free at these times while women are busy with other household tasks such as cooking.

The communal environment created by living in one room gers may also contribute to an awareness of all work that must be done for the survival of a family and therefore an acceptable fluidity in gender roles to accomplish these tasks. This awareness of the importance of each household task was displayed in PRA sessions where groups of women and groups of men created very similar lists prioritizing water uses (such as watering herds and making tea) indicating that tasks assigned to females and males are considered equal in value to the household. In general women are considered responsible for household related water use and men for herding or small business water uses, whereas in reality women are also involved in these productive uses of water.

Finally, the involvement of Mongolian men in water collection may point to more gender equality in the country than in other developing regions where it is often seen as shameful for men to participate in this task.[8] Adding to this idea of gender equality are study findings indicating that women are most often charged with deciding when to collect more water (due to their proximity to domestic water use) and are therefore responsible for directing other family members, including males, to collect water.

Importantly though, this gender equality in water collection and women's responsibility of household water management do not appear to translate into opportunities for women to participate in local or regional water management plans or decision-making. Investigating why this apparent household gender equality does not expand to other realms of water management is a crucial step in understanding how best to improve water management schemes in Mongolia.

Gender and Regional Water Management:

Despite Mongolian women's roles in household water management, their voices appear to diminish as one moves away from the domestic realm. Women are not represented at higher levels of water management, particularly in Mongolian governments where many water management decisions are made. Women are not well represented in higher levels of government and are not likely to be involved in science and technological fields, both of which are considered important in water management[9].

---

[8] Such as India (see Joshi, Deepa and Fawcette, Ben (2005). Water in an Unequal Social Order in India. In Coles, Anne and Wallace, Tina (Eds)*Gender, Water and Development)* and Africa (see Hans, Asha (2001). Locating Women's Rights in the Blue Revolution *Futures* v 33 (8/9) p 753).

[9] Robinson, B and Solongo, A. (2000). The Gender Dimension of Economic Transition in Mongolia. In Nixon, F. Svud, B. Luvsndorj P, Walters B (eds). *The Mongolian Economy: A Manual of Applied Economics for a Country in Transition.* Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd. P 231-255

This lack of women's representation in these decision-making positions is not due to a lack of education or illiteracy as found in other countries, since Mongolian women make up 68% of university students[10]. Women's poor representation in positions of power therefore is more likely due to cultural beliefs that women are poor decision makers[11]. This indicates a need for education campaigns addressing women's equality in the community and nation. Interestingly, this study found that rural men also feel disempowered when it comes to their voice within government, highlighting a need to take specific actions to include the rural population in water management discussions.

Involving community groups in water management is an up and coming issue in Mongolia where the *Law on Water* of 2004 encourages the creation of River Basin Councils to manage community water resources. Previous studies in Mongolia, however, have found that women are often unable to participate in community management meetings due to time constraints because of household responsibilities, which means that a conscientious effort to include the needs and ideas of women in these meetings must be made[12].

Steps to Including Gender in Water Management in Mongolia[13]:

1. Gather data on how women and men relate to and interact with water differently in all areas of the country.
2. Identify barriers to participating in community management decision-making for women, rural men and other disadvantaged groups.
3. Educate Mongolians on gender equality and the benefits of including the needs and knowledge of all Mongolians in environmental management plans.
4. Encourage participation of women and men in all levels of a management plan or project, from community work to policy creation.

Conclusion:
Mongolia has some interesting, perhaps unique, water and gender relationships that may influence the outcome of water management decisions. In places where water management planning is taking place, it would be beneficial to include a greater understanding of this dynamic to adequately capture and integrate the Mongolian context. Encouraging both women and men to participate and share their experiences and knowledge in local and regional water management is an important step towards creating sustainable water management plans.

---

[10] ibid
[11] Interview with Tsetsejargal of Gender Studies Centre and Erdenechimeg of Mongolian Women's Federation among others.
[12] Ykhanbai et al (2006). Herder Women Speak Out: Toward More equitable co-management of grasslands and other natural resources of Mongolia. In Vernooy, Ronnie (ed). *Social and Gender Analysis in Natural Resource Management: Learning Studies and Lessons from Asia.* Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.
[13] Recommendations based on conclusions by the author from this study and information from the Gender and Water Alliance: www.genderandwater.org