

WATER SECURITY IN BANGLADESH: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Water plays a pivotal role in economic activities from the very beginning of human civilizations. This is a key input to agriculture and human-wellbeing. Because of the prominence of water in production (primarily irrigation) and domestic use (drinking, washing, cooking) scarcity and conflict over water have far-reaching consequences on human well-being, economic growth and social changes. So the concept water security has been an important concern especially for the woman in developing and underdeveloped countries. This paper, thus, focuses on the conceptual aspect of water security on the gender perspective. Secondly, this paper will address the actual concern of water security for the woman in Bangladesh. This paper will finally address some areas of concern for future research as leading recommendations.

1. Introduction

The global population has tripled while demand for water has increased sevenfold within hundred years. This proportion is expected to increase to 70 percent by 2025, thereby reducing the quantity and quality of water available for aquatic ecosystems.¹ This increasing number of population and consequent increasing demand of water have resulted in water crisis in every parts of the world. Since water is an essential to every aspects of life, the crisis affects everything- from health to human rights, the environment to the economy, poverty to politics, culture to conflict.² Now people, between nations or within nations, are in serious competition for allocating water use, e.g. drinking water and sanitation, energy production, irrigation, and industry use. This competition has pushed water into the precious environmental resource of life. But the development activities with the pace of globalization have resulted in significant changes in water course

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¹ S.L. Postel, G.C. Daily, and P.R. Ehrlich, "Human Appropriation of Renewable Fresh Water", *Science*, 1996, at pp. 785-788.

² J. W. Cosgrove, *Water Security and Peace: A Synthesis of Studies*, Cand, UNESCO-Green Cross International, 2003, at p. 1.

polluting it, contaminating it in different ways. The recent global change like global warming, climate changes and population growth have complicated the issue of water security significantly. A recent study by UNESCO says, climate change is the fundamental driver of change in the world's water resources and adds additional stress through its effects on other externalities.³ With all these global changes the women in developing and underdeveloped countries have been the worst victim. A study shows that most of the world's 1.2 billion poor people, two thirds of whom are women, live in water scarce countries and do not have access to safe and reliable supplies of water for productive and domestic uses. The bulk of these rural poor people are dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods and live in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, the regions which are also home to most of the world's water poor.⁴

Bangladesh as a densely populated low-income country of the South Asian region faces a plethora of environmental hazards both natural and man-made. Floods, droughts, land degradation, and air pollution are the common features in Bangladesh that lead people to be sufferer and vulnerable. But water has been the most important scare resource in Bangladesh due to the external intervention and internal incapability to manage and use it properly as demand of the people. Being geographically located in downstream position in Ganges basin Bangladesh is faced by dual problems, scarcity in the dry season due to the flow shortage from the upstream.⁵ Dying rivers, reduction of traditional way of life, salinization of water, arsenic contamination, depletion of soil fertility rate, reduction of food production, reduction of forest most particularly the Sundarban mangrove forest have been common features and widely discussed issues in Bangladesh. The

³ UNESCO-WWAP, *Climate change and water: An overview from the world water development report 3: water in a changing world*, A United Nations World Water Assessment Programme Special Report, 2009.

⁴ The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Gender and Water: Securing water for improved rural livelihoods-A multi uses system approach*, 2007, at <http://www.ifad.org/gender/thematic/water/gender_water.pdf>.

⁵ More than fifty international rivers have been flowing from outside of the border of Bangladesh and around 97 per cent of inland water is coming from outside of the boarder. The construction of Farakka Barrage has been instrument by India to control of most of the water that enter into Bangladesh through Ganges-Brahmaputra Basin. See: Arun P. Elhance, *Hydroplotics in the 3rd World : Conflict and Cooperation in International River Basins*, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., 1999, at pp. 155-190.

frequent natural disasters and recent climate change-induced effects have added new dimension with these fragile environmental resources. Studies carried out by Thomas F. Homer Dixon and Gunther Baechler show that environmental resource scarcity and social effects create condition of resource capture and ecological marginalization in every society in developing and under developed countries.⁶ In such a society the poor and women community as a whole face the vulnerability and insecurities due to their social exclusion and lack of power in decision making processes. Under this background, the basic endeavor of this paper is to draw the answer of few questions: what is the gender perspective of water security concept? What are the conditions of major areas of gender based water security in Bangladesh? What measures are urgent to improve gender based water insecurity in Bangladesh? On the basis of the 'Water Security Model' this paper will address these questions which are still unexplored in the security and development discourse.

2. Methodology

This paper is written on the basis of qualitative method. The secondary sources of information and data have been mainly used to speak to the major research questions. By analyzing secondary data on water security model, the issue of gender perspective of water security in Bangladesh has been analyzed. An effort has also been undertaken to use ethnographic data from secondary sources to embody the actual conditions experienced by the women in the rural level.

3. Water Security: Concept

In the literature of 'Environmental Security Studies' the concept of water security is a new annexation, however, it has been a nascent topic of scholarly attention due to the increasing rate of environmental destruction and its impact on world community. The population growth and reduction of the quality and quantity of fresh water have hammered the whole community to redefine the water security concept. Schult is the first scholar who has addressed the issue of water security comprehensively arguing water security as "the sustainable use and protection of water system; the protection against water related hazards

⁶ T. F. Homer Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*, Princeton University Press, Introduction Chapter, 1999, at pp. 1-27; G. Bachelier, *Why Environmental Transformation Causes Violence: A Synthesis*, Environmental Change and Security Project Report, Issue 4, 1998.