

NetWwater– A Local Level Initiative for Promoting Gender and Good Governance

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In view of the global attention on the threat to freshwater resources, the development of an IWRM approach based on the Dublin-Rio Principles through involvement of all stakeholders is of critical importance. As traditionally the role of women in the water sector in many countries was unrecognised , especially so in Asia, it followed without saying that the involvement of women was very low in decisionmaking related to water resources from local to global level in spite of recognition in the Dublin-Rio Principles. The felt need for inclusion of women' voice in promoting participation in good governance in IWRM, led to the creation of NetWwater, the Network of Women Water Professionals in Sri Lanka in 1999.

In Sri Lanka an initial low level of women's participation in the World Water Vision Exercise in 1999 (2%) spurred on a group of women water professionals to come together in a network which would provide a forum for peer interaction, a medium for information exchange as well as a means of linking up with the mainly male decisionmakers. Initial sponsorship for an inaugural meeting at national level was sought from the Asian Development Bank in July 1999 to bring women professionals in all branches of the water sector .

The meeting forged an agenda for grappling with the gender specific problems encountered by women professionals while identifying the especial contribution that could be made by them to improve governance As a direct result of the establishment of NetWwater the participation of women in the Framework for Action exercise in Sri Lanka rose to 33%.

The three point action program suggested by the participants is now being translated into micro local level actions by NetWwater through its *Women Water and Wisdom* agenda as follows

- Management skills training for women water professionals
- youth water awareness programs
- the creation of an interface between women water professionals and communities for forging knowledge linkages

The target of NetWwater activities is a slow experimentation with sustainable micro initiatives which have an catalytic impact in communities. In a very limited but significantly successful way, NetWwater has created a forum for Sri Lankan women water professionals from all sectors and disciplines to interact which also lends gender balance water sector decision making thereby promoting more inclusion and democratization() in governance; it has enabled a linkage with communities through the outreach program and networking.

As an Asian initiative, the NetWwater experience holds lessons for promoting other such initiatives in countries which face similar conditions. A strategic link up can lead to an extended network building bridges between women water professionals in both developing and developed countries.