



Updating
ancient
traditions

Gender issues in the Water Sector

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Egypt is a traditional country. And nowhere is this truer than when it comes to men's and women's roles. Yet tradition has not kept pace with Egypt's new reality-namely that women are being asked to fulfil roles previously thought to be men-only.

One place this is happening is in the farm sector, where necessity, opportunity or other circumstances are giving increasingly more women primary responsibility for the crops and livestock. Some estimate that 30 to 40 percent of Egypt's farms are worked by women. And since water is an integral part of farming life, this reversal of traditional gender roles has been a subject of great interest to the Egyptian-Dutch Advisory Panel Project on Water Management.

Addressing the entire population

It's a mistake to think of gender issues as referring only to women, cautions Dr. Samia El-Guindy, director of the APP Central Office. 'When it comes to water issues, gender concerns the performance of men and women together', she says. 'It is not just women. It's important to address both, and previously this was not done. If you look to the society you find that women represent 50% of the society. Women are responsible for the household. Many women are also responsible for fieldwork. And if you talk about water quality protection, or water management or introducing new technology-irrigation systems, and so on- you cannot neglect 50% of the population. If you do that your initiatives will fail. Or at least you will miss a large portion of the workers.'

The Panel recognised this truth years ago, and in 1996 it began formally to consider and incorporate gender issues into its activities.

Raising Panel awareness

El-Guindy says that a priority was to raise sensitivity to gender as this impacts water issues. The APP staff began with high-level officials associated with the Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation (MWRI), which is closely linked to the Panel. 'Our first step was to raise awareness, first among the Panel members, both Egyptian and Dutch, and among the decision-makers in the Ministry. We wanted them to understand what gender is. So we had a workshop. Then we started to make some assessment studies to incorporate gender within the policy of the Ministry. This occurred at two levels: the institutional level and mainly at the grassroots or field level. The idea-not only in our Ministry but in many agencies-was always that women were involved in a high percentage of agricultural processes.

But in irrigation the question was how was she involved?'

Dutch experience leads the way

As in many Panel initiatives, Dutch experience provided guidelines for raising awareness of the issue. El-Guindy says it actually wasn't too difficult to educate the Panel on gender sensitivity. 'The Dutch have a very good understanding of this issue. With some of the Egyptians it may have been a little trickier because in the beginning they had the idea that irrigation work was too difficult for women. Now we are working to extend that understanding so that this issue can be incorporated in the policy of the Ministry.

'Based on information we received from assessment studies, the Panel tried to draft a policy for gender. The idea was to incorporate this policy in the Ministry's policy in the short- and long-terms. We are now in this process. With the assistance of local and Dutch consultants we are currently making more assessments to develop an issue paper to help in drafting the policy in the Ministry. We want them to take into consideration that women are exactly like men. There's no difference in this process and they should be included in the whole decision-making process and in the advisory processes and so on.'

Tradition vs. reality

Some members of the Panel, and many men and women in the field, had trouble buying this concept. Traditional male and female roles are simply too established in Egypt. An interview with an Egyptian farmer draws this distinction very clearly. On a video commissioned by MWRI, which explores gender issues as these relate to irrigation, the farmer says: 'a woman here can only do certain tasks. She can mow but she can't irrigate. We're

bound by certain traditions here. When a man irrigates he can undress and work in his underclothes. A woman could never do that. Another thing, we irrigate at night. By day the demand for water is high. The flow is minimal because we're at the end of the watercourse. So, a woman can't irrigate at night or during the day either. She may need to gird up her dress but our tradition doesn't permit that.'

This is a typical sentiment, says El-Guindy. But reality is a different matter. 'Through our assessment studies we discovered that women are fully involved in irrigation', she says.

A changing Egypt

Many recent events have literally changed the face of Egypt's farmers. An expanding population and industrial development mean it's harder to make a living solely by farming. Many husbands, therefore, opt for jobs in nearby cities or abroad, leaving their wives to take care of the farm. It's much less expensive for her to do the work herself than to hire a labourer. Here's a typical story from the video: 'Ten years ago, my husband went abroad to Jordan and Saudi Arabia', says the woman in the video. 'I did all the work at home and in the field. I'd irrigate and tend the flow of water, water the corn and thin it out. Also the cotton. I did all the fieldwork. I'd tend the livestock; take care of my kids. I carried the responsibility for 10 years. He'd go abroad to work and I'd work here.'

Other women farmers have been widowed or have lost their husband through immigration. An early Panel study was to document these changes. Field studies and interviews soon showed that women farmers were very common in most of Egypt and that women had found a way to overcome the challenges of restrictive clothing, hard labour and

traditional attitudes. Women are particularly active in the Delta and Upper Egypt where gender issue pilot programmes are in place.

Women on the water boards

One area that has started to include women is the water board initiatives. These organisations provide farmers with local representation on water issues.

'The Water Board Project is already helping raise awareness about the role women can play in this arena', says El-Guindy. 'Of course the Dutch government plays a role in that-in the Dutch embassy in Cairo, for example, we have gender specialists, experts who support us on this issue.'

Some female farmers have already been elected to these boards. Here, too, however, some traditional farmers insist that women respond inappropriately to



water challenges. 'Women don't have sufficient knowledge of irrigation problems', says one opponent on the video. 'Supposing the husband is abroad and there's no water in the irrigation canal. She asks the neighbours to provide her with water from the drainage canal or a groundwater pump. She depends on her neighbours.'

As the video shows, some resistance comes from farmers who believe that it is unseemly for women to serve on a water board. As one of the farmers in the video puts it: 'regarding the participation of women in the union, women who have land are few. A woman usually has someone to represent her: her husband, son or anyone with power of attorney-a worker she trusts. So women are not elected to the committee. The number of women who irrigate is low. They can never do the work a man does. Besides, we have our traditions and customs. It's

not possible for a woman to attend a meeting except for a few rare cases. She can't take on a man's role.'

Slow acceptance of women representatives

And yet experience is putting the lie to these ideas. Farhana Habib is a case in point. She owns her own farm, supervises the land herself and is a member of the local water union.

'We do have female farmers on these boards', confirms El-Guindy. They represent the farmers in these associations. In some cases the women are well respected although in some areas, such as Upper Egypt, it is still an issue because people there are very traditional. There it is not easy. But we are working on that.

'There are women representatives on the water boards in Upper Egypt but they are representing households rather than representing farms. We are looking forward to the time when women will also represent farms. '

Expanding gender sensitivity to all water areas

The Panel hopes to extend acceptance of women farmers throughout the water sector, and indeed throughout the nation. 'We think that the issue of gender will spread to all areas of the irrigation policy', says El-Guindy. 'Of course awareness is very, very important in this process. This is true not only at the Ministry level but also at the national level. We have planned to organise a big national workshop. It will be held at the end of 2003 or the beginning of 2004 after we have solid results to disseminate. This information will raise awareness among all the national organisations. We would also like to publish a newsletter and coordinate with other ministries, especially the Ministry of Agriculture.





These kinds of activities are currently being implemented.'

There is already support for these initiatives at the national level, where consideration of women's issues, in general, is a national policy. Egypt now has a National Women Council. The MWRI has close ties to this council and El-Guindy sees such support as evidence that awareness about gender issues has been gradually growing.

Establishing a Gender Focal Point

The Panel recently suggested that the MWRI formalise and coordinate its position on gender issues. Consultants advised establishment of a gender unit or focal point in the Ministry. MWRI has already implemented this Gender Focal Point as part of the Irrigation Advisory

Services Directorate, which has the most direct link with the field and with farmers. 'We put the focal point in this directorate to strengthen the advisory services to female farmers' says El-Guindy. 'In the past, these female farmers had always been neglected when it came to the decision-making process.'

The Gender Focal Point consists of one female engineer and one male engineer who acts as her assistant. They are currently involved in a very intensive planning programme designed to coordinate among various Ministry projects involving gender activities. They are also organising the national workshops to raise awareness.

Increasing the number of female engineers in the Irrigation Advisory Service

El-Guindy says giving women better role models and leadership is equally essential in promoting gender equality. 'We are looking at how to increase the number of female engineers who are working in the Irrigation Advisory Service', she says. 'This will help provide an easy link with female farmers since these engineers work closely with those in the field.'

Women engineers are not completely new to this sector, and these field workers are often best equipped to describe the reality of women in farming. Says one 18-year veteran at the local office of the irrigation department: 'I see women coming with their problems just like men do. A woman's role in agriculture is equal to a man's. In her husband's absence she manages everything. She comes to the office with any problems and we solve them for her. Women engineers are as numerous as the men and most of our employees are women. There are women in all the agricultural cooperatives. There's no difference between men and women.'

Or as one (male) proponent of gender equality on the farm succinctly puts it in the video: 'They used to say 'a man's a man and a woman's a woman. Today, a man's a man and a woman's a man too!'

At least where irrigation and other water issues are concerned.

