

On The Link Between Women, Water & Sanitation

Interview with Samia G. Saad
Professor of Environmental Health
High Institute of Public Health - Alexandria University

Dr. Samia G. Saad presented a research paper at the Conference Arab Women and the Environment. She is active in the promotion of women and their conditions especially with respect to environmental issues. She was the chairperson of an International Conference on Women and the Environment at Alexandria University (December 1-3, 1992). Al-Raida interviewed her to discuss relevant issues, ideas and projects for improving women's and environmental conditions.

Q. What is your definition of the link between women and the environment?

A. Women form the half of the population on which the well-being of society depends. The woman is the one who feeds the family, who is educates the new generation and who will be the decision maker. She should know how to protect her family from diseases through food and water management, a proper environment at home, and in the area where she lives be it urban or rural.

Q. Are you saying that, basically, women are environmental managers by virtue of their domestic responsibilities?

A. Yes.

Q. How are women involved in environmental issues beyond the scope of the family?

A. The World Bank and other international development organizations funded thousands of projects in the world for water and

sanitation. Many of these projects, however, turned out to be useless because they overlooked cultural variables, and most importantly they excluded women. For example: In a village in Borgina Faso, American donor agencies installed restroom facilities, with short doors that do not reach the floor according to US specifications thus, revealing the lower half of the legs of the user. These restrooms were useless to women in a culture whose values prohibit exposure of their legs. Consequently, the children were not trained to use them and the entire project went to waste. In other sanitation projects involving the digging and installation of natural holes, the designers overlooked size specifications. Hence, the shaft was designed for adults, which eventually caused children to fall in it.

These agencies soon recognized that failing to consult women about their specific needs to give them adequate technical training were the primary cause for these shortcomings.

Q. In other words, women are not only excluded from the end product but all through the whole process!

A. Yes, women must be involved in planning, execution and evaluation of the project. In most cases funding agencies consult the leader of the community, i.e. the elder men, the priest, or the Shaykh, about details like location and design of the



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particular project. Women are not consulted although they are the one who will operate and use the facilities in question. Another common oversight is budgeting for the training of the locals in using and maintaining the donated facilities. Hence, the bulk is spend on planning and execution and gets depleted before the training phase.

For example: In another project, a water pump was installed where the men of the village performed their daily activities rather than near the homes and women who use the pump more frequently and regularly for household chores. The execution was done in accordance with information gathered from the elderly men of the community. Furthermore, the pump was designed to be used by muscular

people, i.e. men. When the pump got rusty -- a natural consequence of metal interacting with water -- women could not operate it efficiently. Eventually, the lever broke under the force and pressure needed to operate it. It became useless!

In other cases, modern equipment became obsolete because locals were not trained to use them. Even in large developing cities, modern facilities and plants for waste disposal and waste management donated and installed by industrialized governments were useless because funds had depleted before the stage of training local technicians. These cities ended up with beautiful, modern, top-of-the-line facilities they could not maintain or operate at full capacity and efficiency.

Q. What is being done about all of this?

A. Development agencies have devised a new strategy for dealing with this problem. They select representatives and community leaders, both men and women. They also call upon the skilled members of the community such as midwives and doctors, the fat women, and members of the extended family to discuss project designs. The opinions and needs of the locals, notably the women, are surveyed at when introducing the project to them. Social workers are crucial in discussing the project with local women in private to establish the validity and reliability of the project.

The role of women in water and sanitation, i.e. that of propagating proper hygiene conditions is very important. There is a big shortage in trained women who can act as leaders and educators for other women in society. This kind of training is unique because it requires technical



knowledge inherent in water and sanitation issues.

Our indigenous experiences are also very important and should not be overlooked when installing modern facilities in rural areas that are not equipped with follow-up measures. For instance, sometimes it is healthier not to install running water facilities, than to do so without providing inhabitants with proper knowledge about disposal. In the past, women collected water from the spring and carried it in buckets and containers. Thus, water use was more economical and efficient as well as hygienic. Nowadays, tap water is secured but disposal techniques are not. Women dispose of used water out in the street or simply on the ground increasing pollution by contaminating of natural springs, attracting of insects and increasing health hazards. And the entire process multiplies with the growth of the population.

Q. Do you have any training programs of this kind or are you planning one?

A. I already planned and solicited funding for one. The original plan was to implement it in all the Arab countries but unfortunately the funding agency only targeted my country, Egypt. My plan for the

other Arab countries was to corroborate with three or four other people to develop a leadership training program in the various countries, which would then be administered and disseminated independently.

Q. How many other women in your area of specialization are taking a leadership role with respect to women's needs?

A. There are very few women who devote their technical knowledge to the role of women. It is very sad.

Q. You organized an International Conference on Women and the Environment at Alexandria University last year that was very successful. Didn't it advocate communicating environmental knowledge and awareness to women?

A. It did, and the leadership training project for Arab women I spoke of earlier was the primary resolution of that conference. Arab women want someone to teach them and train them in upholding healthy environmental systems.

Dr. Samia G. Saad is Professor of Environmental Health at the High Institute of Public Health, Alexandria University, 165 El Horriya Avenue, Alexandria, Egypt.