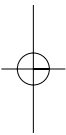


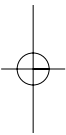


**WATER AND GENDER:
THE UNEXPECTED CONNECTION
THAT REALLY MATTERS**

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Since the mid-1990s, worldwide focus on water scarcity has exploded. Attention has moved beyond the technical dimensions of water provision to the political and social contexts in which water management occurs. In many places, especially where water is scarce, control over water confers power. The political analysis of water is then an analysis of power relations. As social scientists have entered the water world, and more and more case studies are carried out in Latin America, Africa and Asia, another facet of the politics of water that has been brought to light is gender differentiation in water usage and water management. In our 2005 book, *Opposing Currents: The Politics of Water and Gender in Latin America*, we provided a framework for understanding the connection between water and gender and a review of the development of global water policy and gender policy since the early 1990s, using case studies from six Latin American countries to highlight the role of women in water management. We found that substantial change is still needed to overcome pernicious gender bias and imbalances that distort water management and lead to ineffective planning in the water sector.



The distortions that we depicted in the book are the legacy of the past century during which the water world was structured as a masculine domain: the domain of engineers, ditch diggers, ditch riders and farmers in the countryside and urban planners in the cities. Changing the conceptualization of water in practice is an exceedingly slow process. Thus, the world depicted in our book remains the reality three years later. The urgent need to address the gender dimensions of water management is evidenced by the decision of the United Nations to name the decade of 2005 to 2015 as The International Decade for Action: Water for Life. The description of the decade includes the following statement in its introduction:

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As women play a central role in water provision and management, a special emphasis will be placed on ensuring the participation and involvement of women in these development efforts... Among the themes that are central for the “Water for Life” Decade are: scarcity... water and gender...¹

When Secretary General Kofi Annan launched the decade on 22 March 2005, he ended his speech by saying, “This is an urgent matter of human development and human dignity.”² This essay provides a framework for understanding the connection between water and gender with examples from Latin America that illuminate the urgency of these issues.

The UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which was signed in 1966, established the right to water as a human right in Articles 11 and 12. This led to the conceptualization of water as a collective good, laying the grounds for future international accords on water. The Dublin Conference on Water and the Environment in 1999 was a watershed event in the world of water policy because of the adoption of the four Dublin Principles that have guided decision-making ever since. The principles state:

1. Fresh water is a finite and vulnerable resource, essential to sustain life, development and the environment.
2. Water development and management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners and policy makers at all levels.
3. Women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water.
4. Water has an economic value in all its competing uses and should be recognized as an economic good.

After the Dublin Conference, most multinational sectoral gatherings (e.g., on housing, health care, natural resources, women, etc.) included water on their agendas and endorsed what are known today as the Dublin-Rio Principles.⁴ As a result, there have been tangible changes stemming from principles one, two and four. The first principle has focused worldwide attention on the importance of sustainable development, the second on mainstreaming a participatory approach in water development projects and the fourth has led to a conceptual shift from water as a basic right to water as a commodity. These three principles have shaped a revolution in water policy over the past fifteen years. What about the third principle? It is a concept that should have been as revolutionary for water policy as the concepts embodied in the other three principles. However, despite variations on its theme