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CG : Archive : March 2007

Water is a woman's right

by Maude Barlow

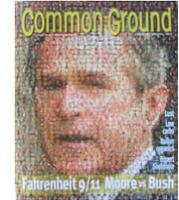


The world is running out of fresh water. Humanity is polluting, diverting and depleting the wellspring of life at a startling rate. Over one billion people currently lack access to a basic water supply and every eight

seconds, somewhere in the world, a child dies of water-borne disease. If current trends continue, two thirds of the people on the planet will not have adequate access to clean water by the year 2025, and women and children are most affected.

Despite water's critical importance to our survival, access to fresh water is far from equal or guaranteed. Global water corporations, international financial institutions, trade agreements and even some governments have been promoting privatization and commodification of water as the solution to this crisis. But the evidence clearly shows that privatization leads to rising water rates, unclean water and soaring corporate profits.

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Water should be safe, affordable and accessible to everyone, not just those who can afford to pay. That is why around the world civil society movements are collectively pushing to have the right to water recognized through a binding international treaty. Clean water for drinking, hygiene, sanitation and agriculture is a precondition for the achievement of other rights and of many globally-set development goals targeting both men and women.

Women and water

"I have witnessed the conversion of my land from a water-abundant country to a water-stressed country. I saw the last perennial stream in my valley run dry in 1982 because of the mining of aquifers in catchments. I have seen tanks and streams dry up on the Deccan plateau as eucalyptus monocultures spread. I have struggled with communities in water-rich regions as pollution poisoned their water sources," says Vandana Shiva, the famous water activist from India.

Around the world, women and girls bear the prime responsibility for collecting water for washing, cooking, drinking and sanitation. In rural areas, up to one-third of a woman's time can be spent fetching water and traversing rough terrain. On average, girls will walk approximately six kilometres a day to fetch water. Women may carry up to 20 kg of water on their heads on each excursion. Not only does the responsibility of collecting water represent an important expenditure of energy, it also places important demands on women and girls' time, time that could be spent in school or on income-producing activities. In Africa, up to 10 percent of girls drop out of school once they begin menstruating, due to the lack of appropriate sanitation facilities. In this way, the time spent collecting water, and lack of sanitation facilities increases women's inequality by continuing the cycle of illiteracy and poverty. As well, women and young girls may be attacked when walking to and from water sources through isolated areas.

Women protest in Plachimada, India

Every day, 85 trucks leave the plant exporting local water. Within a year after the plant opened, local water sources started to dry up, putting hundreds of farm families out of business. All 260 wells have gone dry. For almost two years, the local women staged a daily sit-in directly across from the bottling plant. All day, every day, rain or shine, old women, young women and babies occupied a low-set, straw shelter in protest. Eventually, the Kerala state government ordered the plant be shut down.

Not only are women most affected by the water crisis, around the world women are often leaders in the struggle to protect the water in their communities. Women also ensure the good hygiene habits of their families and children, helping to prevent disease. Women care for the children who fall ill from water-borne illnesses including malaria and cholera. And women collect the water to tend to crops that sustain their families.

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Securing women's rights

Water justice is an issue that cuts across many sectors. It engages organizations focused on trade, environment, finance, social justice and human rights. It touches people on an emotional and spiritual level. The right to water entitles every individual to have access to adequate water and it is the state's obligation to do everything possible to realize this right for everybody, without discrimination, and on a not-for-profit basis. Where states fail to carry out this duty, the human rights perspective makes it possible to hold them accountable.

Concerned citizens in both south and north have formed a global resistance movement against the privatization of their water and are leading the way to a water-secure world. Securing a convention on the right to water would provide another tool to help women secure their rights and provide for their families. Clearly, the right to water is an idea whose time has come.

Adapted from the article featured at (www.blueplanetproject.net).

Maude Barlow is the national chairperson of the Council of Canadians and co-founder of the Blue Planet Project (www.blueplanetproject.net), an organization committed to supporting global grassroots struggles in the fight for water justice. The project works with many international organizations and activists and is affiliated with international networks including Friends of the Earth International, Red VIDA (Inter-American Network of Vigilance for the Defense and Right to Water) and the People's Health Movement.

