



10-10-2017

The Role of Communication in Building Repetitive Discourse and the Iconic Representation of Women in Water Management

Céline Hervé-Bazin
University of Paris Sorbonne

The Role of Communication in Building Repetitive Discourse and the Iconic Representation of Women in Water Management

Keywords

Women, water management, communication

The Role of Communication in Building Repetitive Discourse and the Iconic Representation of Women in Water Management

Céline Hervé-Bazin¹

Introduction

The crucial role played by women in water management was not mentioned in the international arena until 1992. That year the International Conference on Water and the Environment declared the Dublin Principles—four fundamental guidelines for better water management at the international scale¹. The third Principle identifies the crucial role played by women in water management, making Dublin the first major international conference to recognize the role of women in water management. Women and children are the primary gatherers of water, with women often tasked with household management, subsistence farming and caretaking of family health. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UNIFEM) reports that women can spend up to 5 hours daily and walk from 5 to 15 km per day collecting water.

Since the Dublin principles were declared, organizations have been using a number of communication tools to promote women's roles in water management issues, including gender mainstreaming, integrated water resources management, governance, and right to water. Communication tools include awareness campaigns, education tools and lobby actions. Despite efforts put forth by the United Nations organizations and others, however, empowering women is a slow process. Understanding the impacts of communication tools highlights the need for discourse analysis.

The aim of this publication is to provide an analysis of communication brochures through the examination of rhetoric and images employed globally when promoting the role of women in water management. From this analysis, we identify a standard of communication on "water and women" when referring to the traditional role of women in water management. This standard of communication is defined as a "*topoi*".

The word *topoi* comes from its singular form, *topos*, the Greek word for "place". From a literary perspective, the term *topos* has been interchangeably interpreted as "topic" or "line of argument". *Topoi*, in classic rhetoric, are thus "places" from where various sources of information are obtained to construct a set of arguments, or relationships, to convince the spectator on a subject. This rhetoric construction builds standards, and through time, they come to be considered as common knowledge. The archetypal hero would be one such example (Campbell 1949). He is known by his fearlessness, strength, and nobility – attributes that are associated with heroes repeatedly throughout modern and historical imagery – and thus, it is by these *topoi* that a hero would be identified.

The study of *topoi* calls for the examination of recurring topics, figures, and words constructing the identification of argumentation and standards. The Edwin Hoffman *TOPOI model* of intercultural communication suggests five characteristics, or axioms, to identify the communication process: (1) universality, (2) interaction, (3) circularity, (4) reflectivity and (5) framing (Hoffman 1999). These five steps of the model highlight the process of building a standardized communication process throughout cultures. According to Hoffman, the *TOPOI model* helps us to understand how rhetoric, the use of similar universal images and meanings, will establish one way to frame an issue (Hoffman 1999 and 2002). The model will be discussed in more detail at a later stage of the paper.

Methodology

This paper examines the elements that contribute to the shaping of the global representations of water and women. A total of 91 communication items were reviewed in conjunction with a literature study and quantitative analysis of the words and topics from the text of 30 official declarations, spanning from the First Earth Summit in 1972 to Rio+20 in 2012. Also included were an analysis of brochures, flyers, and websites produced from 2002 to 2012 by major international organizations working on water and women issues, such as the UN, UN-Water, UN-Women, UN-Habitat, UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO, and the FAO². Materials cover a range of 48 documents and 13 websites specific to gender and water. The materials were chosen to represent various UN organizations throughout different periods of time, and selected based on their consistency in providing guidance or theory approach on the role played by women in water management. This study uses case studies conducted between 2008 and 2012 in several African countries including Morocco, Congo, and Kenya, as well as interviews with professionals from francophone Africa. Through a comparison of text and images, the construction of a similar iconic representation of women in the context of water management emerged: women are seen at the well.

Women and water, a role for equality

While women were identified as important players in water management in 1992, links between women and the environment had previously been discussed at major global events, as

¹ The Dublin Statement on water and sustainable development (1992) <http://www.wmo.int/pages/prog/hwrrp/documents/english/icwedece.html>

² UN-Water: United Nations coordination mechanism for all water-related issues; UN-Women: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women; UNDP: United Nations Development Program; UNEP: United Nations Environment Program; UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization.

far back as the third United Nations Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. The conference highlighted associations between sustainable development, women's empowerment and gender equity. In 1992, Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration included a gender approach to sustainable development for the first time as seen in Chapter 18 of Agenda 21, "Global action for women towards sustainable development". Chapter 18 tackled integrated water resources management and included the full participation of the public, including "women, young people, indigenous populations and local utilities" (Agenda 21, Chapter 18, Objective 18.9.c).

Between 1992 and 2012, international conferences slowly altered the language used to discuss gender and water issues from "traditional role played by women", "competence", and "participation", to "right", "decision-making", "empowerment", "representativeness", and finally, "equality". The slow evolution of statements is "strikingly strong" and offers "some of the strongest, most robust language on gender issues of all the Declarations under study" (Mount and Bielak 2011, 22). The authors found similar trends when analysing four decades of UN Declarations from 1972 to 2010 and observed both "the deepening and shallowing of certain keywords". Additionally they showed the inconsistency in defining women's role in water management; a role limited to a rather unclear concept of "participation" where women are included as a minority group. The consistency of literature addressing women's role in water management is aligned with its depiction in visual communication. Women are water managers for a wide range of cultural and religious practices including maternity, marriage, social life, health, gardening, social values, purity and rituals. Over the last 20 years, the woman at a water pump has been a predominant image in communication campaigns from the UN. Due to the symbolic heritage of a woman retrieving water from a well, the visual repetition has linked water and women irrevocably. Since representations tend to be ubiquitous and static, this image has become the iconic face of the women and water rights movement.

In Morocco, for example, the water services provider launched a program to bring tap water to shantytowns of Casablanca. It started in 2005 after a key discourse from King Mohammed VI targeted goals such as eradicating poverty, and urging all cities to develop access to essential services, i.e. water, sanitation, electricity, health, housing and transportation. Lydec, the electricity, water and sanitation services provider in Casablanca, decided to create a specific entity to cope with this challenge and created the program "INMAE" which means development in Arabic. In this program, several key components were put together: engineering, construction, accounting and social work. The social workers consisted of a team of 20 people whose goal was to connect with illegal communities living in the shantytowns of Casablanca. Throughout their daily work with dwellers, representatives of this program determined a natural link between "water and women".



Photo credit: UN Water

INMAE workers observed how women saw themselves as "water carriers" and how men admitted that women's relationship to water was about "carrying life". For the program managers, it became obvious that women were their first mediators in order to establish a dialogue and trust with the community. Women became their first targets for communication campaigns and focus groups. Social workers did not specify their work as gender-centered and never referred to gender specific tools developed by international funding agencies primarily because they did not wish to disrupt women's social role and influence in decision-making which played an important part throughout the entirety of the water access development process (Herve-Bazin 2012).

Images: local reality, global perception

When reconciling the results from local actions with communication at a global scale, similar inconsistencies are found between reality and depicted images. The imagery used seeks to encourage changing the reality at the ground level by showing the existing gender inequality to the viewer to elicit emotion and increase action and funding. But this image does not embody the strides that have been made to advance gender equality in water management. Thus, the gap between framing the situation and illustrating the reality exacerbates the difficult process of addressing the gender gap. For instance, in Togo, Suzanne Aho-Assouman, Deputy Mayor of the city of Lome, launched programs to educate the public on gender issues. When she visited schools in rural areas, she discovered that only girls were in charge of water chores, and therefore not attending classes. She discussed this with the teachers who failed to apply the lessons in gender equality they were teaching the class.

"When I asked to boys why they were not going to get the water, they replied "because girls should do it". When I asked to girls why they were going to fetch the water "because they had to do it". When I told them that boys should help them, they replied that boys shouldn't go and get the water! You can come and teach what gender means, you need to change mentality and practices! So what did we do? We settled couples of boy and girl who had to go fetch the water together so boys can understand what it is and girls, that they should be helped!"

This example is part of a series of interviews with professionals dealing with water issues published in 2012 (Herve-Bazin 2012). Several women from West Africa cited similar examples during these interviews which highlighted the gap between the concept of gender equality and the reality. This gap underlines the paradox and challenge of utilizing the image of women at the pump in depictions. The paradox emphasizes the problem of how to illustrate such a change. While the woman at the well imagery raises awareness at the global level, it also serves to reinforce the stereotype of the traditional ways of managing water resources. The challenge for communication and program managers is to be able to raise awareness while simultaneously encouraging change without confusing the message. But when women have been seen as traditional and passive for decades, it is difficult to frame the situation another way both in image and discourse.

Water and Women: A Standardized Discourse for Development Programs

The rhetoric about water and women reveals how people tend to perceive water management by women: women are water carriers. Some characteristics accompanying this universal image of women fetching water are identified below.

Poverty: dwelling or unhealthy livelihoods

In depictions of the conditions of the community, women are usually poorly dressed, pictured in a simple and spare environment with modest housing, natural trails, and a dirty environment. These images tend to symbolize the vulnerability of the women. It shows that women are a minority and do not have access to economic revenue.

Tradition: low-revenue economic activities

Women are pictured working in the field, tending to crops, aquaculture, or fisheries, or selling crafts and other hand-made products. Their activities usually bring in small revenues, allow-

ing women an income to purchase vital goods for their family. Pictures convey a vision of active women continuing tasks based on their traditional gender roles.

Universality: the diversity of faces and cultures

The legitimacy of the discourse is based on its globalism and universality, the presence of a common bond and applicability of the situation across cultures. The discourse seeks to address two essential challenges: “water”, a resource for life, and “women” specifically through the goal of protecting women in their daily lives regarding water chores and water access. The rhetoric for this goal is established on this unifying cause and the visual communication aims to free women from the burden of fetching water and dealing with issues of insufficient and unsafe water access.

Pictures emphasize diversity among concerned persons, an area where women play a major role. The choice made by the editors of these publications is to picture the daily life of women through these images. Conversely, the language of the communication materials usually employs rhetoric that seeks to effect change and bring a radical change to gender roles. There is thus a distinction between the imagery and the discourse, yet the universality of the image and message conveyed remains constant.

Women and Water: *Topoi* for Communication Purposes

Organizations have produced *topoi*—promoting a fixed image based on tradition, symbolism, and a reality that is difficult to change. Many NGOs, public entities, and private companies have a pre-conceived notion of how to communicate issues relating to “water and women” that are built on a perception of a viewer’s expectations to see women in traditional roles. Thierry Guilbert (2008), a specialist in analyzing discourse, explains that humans tend to distill cultural diversity into images depicting “one” human being achieving “one” task; in this case, the woman, fetching water at the well. This image corresponds to *topoi* on the subject, the common and shared discourse that people will share in consensus.

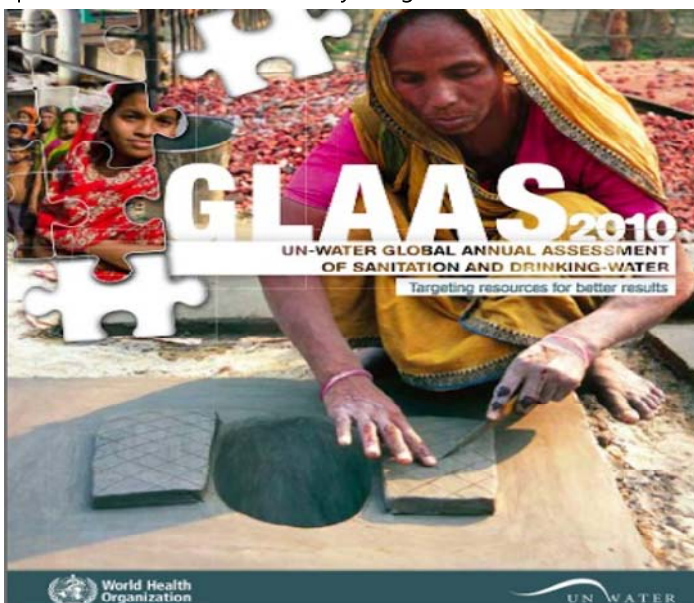


Photo credit: UN Water



Photo credit: UN Water

Regarding communication sciences, various tools and discourses from the UN organizations built one simplified way of talking about women in water management. They reduced “water and women” to one communicative chore and made the woman at the pump the symbol. This process has eased its potential for dissemination across the world by creating cultural and political adaptation through one similar visual demonstration and the acceptance of the construction of rhetoric on the subject. In intercultural communication, Edwin Hoffman (1999 and 2002) defined *topoi* as a process characterized by five characteristics. Hoffman named this process a TOPOI model, basing his work on the theories of Paul Watzlawick about conflict resolution (Watzlawick 1974). Hoffman applied this model to the construction of rhetoric and discourse. When applied to the discourse about women in water management, we find an interesting model to explain the communication process:

- **Universality:** the image of water and women is universal, conveying the value of life. The language of communication materials usually employs rhetoric that seeks to effect change and brings a radical change to gender roles. There is this distinction between the imagery and the discourse. Nonetheless, there is universality in the image and the message conveyed by that image.
- **Interaction:** the process focuses on interaction rather than culture. The various water management tools promote training, education, and participation, and avoid cultural disputes.
- **Circularity:** the communication is based on a link between funding agencies and the UN (international scale) with funded programs and women (local scale). The process is based on a top/down communication that suggests dialogues and interaction between international organizations, regional entities and local communities. The exchanges build a circulation of communication and feedback between each group.
- **Reflectivity:** the process is built on feedback and shared opinions adapting to the political will, societal change or economic context inflecting discourses and images to adapt to the public sphere.
- **Framing:** The framing of the discourse on women and water issues is frustratingly stagnant and portrays stereotypical imagery based on the vulnerability of women. However, this framing does promote faith in humanity and a modest optimism in its overall discourse.

The process of communicating on the role of women in water management thus constitutes the unique challenge of *involving* women in water management. The discourse aims to simplify, grow and mainstream advocacy efforts suggesting profound social changes. Additionally, the discourse categorizes women in one role type and classifies their participation to a passive role. As such, it fails to integrate concrete needs to better women’s access to water resources.



Photo Credit: UN Water

Conclusion

This article provides an overview and analysis of the historic growth of key discourses and communications on water and women. It brings an examination of the construction of the role of women in water management over time. The role of women has been reduced both in depictions and in many ways, reality, to her traditional task of fetching water by foot in order to expose the public sphere, international experts, and national governments to this issue. The *topoi* of the woman at the well shows a traditional vision rather than modern standards of female capacity, skill and the need for empowerment. While these *topoi* facilitated the process of communicating the role of women on a global scale, it has limited its concrete application at the local scale by providing a distorted global understanding of the role of women rather than a concrete approach to local context. The role of women in water management is a unique illustration of communication processes at a universal scale targeting a key global challenge: equity.

Works Cited

- Benería L. and S. Bisnath, S. (2001) *Gender and development: theoretical, empirical and practical approaches*. Northampton, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Inc.
- Boserup E. (1970) *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London, UK: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Campbell, Joseph. (1949). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 1st edition, Bollingen Foundation, 1949. 2nd edition, Princeton University Press. 3rd edition, New World Library, 2008
- Green C. and S. Baden (1995) "Integrated water resources management: a gender perspective" in *IDS Bulletin*, 26 (1).
- Guilbert T. (2008) *Le discours idéologique. Ou la force de l'évidence*. Paris, France : Editions L'Harmattan.
- Herve-Bazin C. (2012) *Eau, Femme et Développement Durable*. Paris, France : Editions Universitaires Européennes.
- Hoffman E. (1999). "Cultures don't meet, people do: A system theoretical approach of intercultural communication". In K. Knapp, B. Kappel, K. Eurbel-Kasper, & L. Salo-Lee (Eds.), *Meeting the intercultural challenge: Effective approaches in research, education, training & business*. Berlin, Germany: Verlag Wissenschaft & Praxis, pp. 464–475.
- Hoffman E. (2002) *Interculturele gespreksvoering. Theorie en Praktijk van het TOPOI-model*. Houten, the Netherlands: Bohn Stafleu Van Loghum. *In English: The TOPOI-model: a pluralistic systems-theoretical approach of intercultural communication*.
- Khosla P., and C. Van Wijk, J. Verhagen, V. James (2004) "Gender and Water: Thematic Overview Paper". Delft, the Netherlands: IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre.



Mount D.C. and A. T. Bielak (2011) *Deep Words, Shallow Words: An Initial Analysis of Water Discourse in Four Decades of UN Declarations*. Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: UNU-INWEH.

Watzlawick P. and J. Weakland, R. Fisch (1974) *Change: Principals of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. New York, USA: W. W. Norton.