

Title: No Plot of One's Own - How Large Dams Reinforce Gender Inequalities

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No Plot of One's Own

By:

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How Large Dams Reinforce Gender Inequalities

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Large dams have enormous consequences for people's lives and livelihoods. Their far-reaching consequences can affect women and men quite differently. Large dams lead to massive shifts in the ways in which men and women access and control resources across a river basin. In some cases, women might gain access to markets and urban



The Narmada struggle in India empowered rural women to stand up to big dams that threaten their communities. (Karen Robinson)

facilities that were not available to them prior to resettlement, thus enhancing their set of economic choices and activities. Positive gender impacts can result from an increased or improved supply of water or electricity that can result from a large dam. However, having access to resources might not mean that women might have control over them. For example, enhanced irrigation possibilities might not lead to women having more control over water if men control water pumps and irrigation channels.

Largely, the spread of pains and gains has not been equal between men and women. To some extent, this is because of existing gender and male biases. Societies even in pre-dam contexts are often marked by high levels of inequality in terms of access to and control over resources. But based on almost two decades of research on gender, displacement and dams, I can safely say that new dams tend to aggravate existing inequalities and increase rather than close gender gaps. An engineer might argue that these problems have very little to do with the physical structure of the dam on the river, but instead with existing gender imbalances and patriarchal structures.

However, technology is neither gender-neutral nor apolitical. The findings of the [World Commission on Dams](#) (WCD) and other studies reveal that planners rarely have the interests of the project-affected, the poor or the marginalized up front while planning and building dams.

Saying goodbye to home

One of the most tragic consequences of large dams is displacement. It is usually forced on vulnerable populations (often indigenous communities) living in remote but resource-rich areas. Resettlement is a traumatic experience for both men and women, re-ordering gender relations across a wide spectrum. However, planned resettlement processes are too often based on flawed understandings of gender roles and how they are affected by displacement. Typically, both the family and the community earmarked for either compensation or benefits are viewed as homogenous, with male members usually being targeted as the main recipients. These assumptions often serve to worsen existing inequalities.

Since 1991, I have been following the lives of several families who used to live in tribal and multi-caste villages on the banks of the River Narmada in India. After the construction of the [Sardar Sarovar Dam](#) started, they were resettled to several resettlement sites all over Gujarat state. Almost 20 years on, they still have not forgotten their old homes. Due to the widespread practice across South Asia that women cannot own property, women were not made co-owners of the land. Even some widowed women were denied access to land and those who had received land were vulnerable to land grabs from their own men. This led to several unanticipated consequences for the overall family's well-being and health. As Baliben, a mother of four young children from the Vasava tribe, told me a few years after her family was forced to move: "The state has done absolutely nothing for us women. How are we to survive here in this hostile environment? Money is always short. The land is stony and unproductive. We can't cook properly because we no longer have logs from the forest. Our babies are dying due to the absence of good nutrition from the forest and due to the terrible water. Our menfolk did not pay any attention to things like fuelwood, water and common land, usually considered to be women's responsibility. As a result the whole family is suffering."

In some cases, resettlement can lead to more egalitarian gender relations (for example, at a resettlement scheme in Zimbabwe women reported they were less constrained by past kinship patterns and had better relations with their husbands). My research in India revealed that resettlement for some tribal women gave them greater leisure time. However, their economic activities were severely curtailed due to the loss of forests and other common property resources. Compensation was not provided for non-monetized resources (such as women's use rights over forest and common property resources). Says Baliben, "I lost my independent income and am totally dependent on my husband for money. He sometimes taunts me and says, 'this is my money and my land. Don't ask me for anything.'"

In many communities around the world, women are less mobile than men. Displacement can have severe implications for the already restricted mobility of women. Often women are vulnerable to sexual and physical violence. In a number of relocation schemes I have studied, the increased availability of alcohol has led to a marked increase of domestic violence. As the men face

powerlessness, women become handy scapegoats. Additionally, displacement is often accompanied by the covert or overt use of force. In India there have been cases where women protesting forced evictions have been subject to sexual molestation as a means of intimidation by the state.

Leading the charge

It would be misleading to only portray women as the victims of male-dominated policies and programs in the context of large dams. In reality, women have often been at the forefront of movements to overcome forced displacement and the other dark sides of large dams. One excellent example is the [Narmada Bachao Andolan](#) (Save the Narmada Movement, or NBA), one of India's leading social movements. Dynamic women have held key leadership positions. Women have courted arrest, participated in rallies and challenged judicial and police authority in confrontational encounters. For many rural women, their participation in the movement has been a liberating experience, endowing them with a new sense of agency to challenge authorities.

NBA activist Chittaroopa Palit (Silvy) highlights the "imagination" of displaced women to anticipate, perhaps more than men, the adverse impacts of displacement.

Medha Patkar, recipient of the Right Livelihood Award, the [Goldman Environmental Prize](#), and former WCD commissioner, says that since women's rights and lives are often more rooted in natural resources than in marketable commodities, they tend to appreciate the non-quantifiable value of resources more than men. Thus, when cash compensation is rejected by groups confronted by displacement, it is usually women who are at the forefront.

Dam-based development is a gendered process with profound impacts on social and gender relations, identities and the ways in which resources are distributed between men and women. Because planners have largely ignored women's interests, gender inequalities have been worsened by the construction of large dams. Gendered protest against dams has highlighted the need for equity and questioned conventional notions of costs, benefits and loss. Indeed, dynamic protest, often led by women, has helped challenge the conventional logic of displacement and large dam benefits by presenting alternative notions of accounting, budgeting, loss, resources, and development planning. Protest has also asked critical questions concerning who benefits and loses from dam-based development and what constitutes the "common good." Even though large dams continue to be planned and built, struggles all over the world are causing them to be executed with significant time and cost overruns. Indeed, it is only through struggle that some of the social and gender-based injustices caused by large dams can be reversed.