

Giving Water Workers their Due*

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It is hardly necessary to state how essential water is for our survival and quality of existence, for economic activity, and so on. Indeed, this has now become a policy issue of some import. It is not just that drinking water and sanitation are recognized to be absolutely critical areas of public intervention. There is much talk about the importance of managing water systems and ensuring sustainable patterns of use. There are concerns about over-exploitation, pollution, degradation and even destruction of water sources.

There is also greater recognition of the growing importance of the distributive politics around water: cross-border tangles over the sharing of river water; the choices to be made on industrial versus agricultural versus personal use; within personal consumption, allocation between necessary and luxury consumption of water; related concerns around the ability of local elites and other powerful players to access more water in their own particular locations; and so on. These distributive conflicts have become so prominent that several analysts have argued that remaining decades of the 21st century will be characterized by “water wars” rather than the “energy wars” we have become more familiar with.

Yet in all this heightened awareness and public discussion about water issues, there is typically a deafening silence on one key aspect: the water workers who ensure the treatment, delivery and conservation of water across societies, and the conditions that they must work in. Indeed, it would not be wrong to say that this work is effectively invisible to public policy (and indeed to the public at large). This lack of recognition of the significance of water work has huge implications not only for the workers themselves, but much more significantly for the safety and ease of access to water for people as well as for economic uses, and indeed for the sustainable use of water in different areas.

So who exactly are water workers? And what exactly do they do? Consider the requirements of all consumers of water, which include not just all human and animal and vegetative life on the planet, but also a range of economic and other activities. According to the specific use to which it will be put (for drinking, for cooking cleaning and other household use, for bathing, for sanitation, for irrigation in cultivation, for industrial use, for use in service activities) the water must be treated to ensure that it can be used in that way without causing harm. It must be distributed and delivered to the users: through irrigation channels, through pipelines, through tankers, or by humans using only the most basic technology. To ensure continued use over time, water sources must be conserved and regenerated, which also can draw on a wide variety of technologies.

This suggests that work relating to water can be divided into three broad functional categories: the work related to management of water resources (including ensuring its cleanliness and conservation); the work related to building, managing and repairing the infrastructure associated with water; and work associated with the range of water-related services, including treatment for specific use for recycling as well as delivery to final consumers.

Clearly, there is tremendous variety in the tasks associated with the provision of water. Yet most people, when asked about water workers, think only of those workers employed by large scale utility companies (public and private) that are explicitly involved in water treatment and delivery. Of course, such workers are no doubt important. Yet they constitute only the small minority of workers who are actually engaged in ensuring the provision of water to societies in general. The vast majority of such workers are not formally employed in such companies; rather they are informal, often [unpaid](#) and largely unrecognized workers who do this on a regular basis to ensure that the water necessary for their own households' survival and livelihood is made available.

Unfortunately, this is barely recognised by governments or even by experts in water management. Thus, some estimates suggest that around 80 per cent of all water workers are employed in large scale technologically advanced organization, mostly in the form of public utilities, but just under half in private companies including multinational corporations. This completely excludes the millions of people – mostly in developing countries – who are engaged in water-related work, such as fetching and carrying water, treating it (for example boiling it) to ensure that it is potable, undertaking various measures to conserve water sources, and so on.

To a large extent the proliferation of unpaid work in water reflects the absence of universal good quality provision. It is clear that such services are essential and so they must be performed by someone or the other. So where these water services are not publicly provided by governments at different levels or even by corporations (who can still exclude by pricing beyond the reach of some), the responsibility is taken on within households and communities.

This effectively amounts to a huge subsidy provided by these unpaid workers to the rest of the economy. But because it comes “for free”, as it were, policy makers and other analysts find it convenient to simply ignore it and do not regard the improvement of the conditions of such workers, or a reduction in the drudgery associated with such work, to be a matter of public concern.

This is not only unjust (in that such workers are unrewarded, unrecognized and work in often really terrible conditions) but also hugely wasteful and socially inefficient in terms of the actual outcomes. While essential, it prevents those engaged in such work from other economic activity that may be more productive or remunerative, and therefore possibly reinforces poverty. It eliminates the possibilities of economies of scale that would enable socially less expensive provision. It does not encourage use of the best technologies that would reduce both drudgery and possible contamination.

Consider just the fetching of water, a hugely time-consuming but inevitable task in large parts of the developing world, and certainly in India. It is well known that most such work is done by women and girls, across the world. For example, the ILO has estimated that about three quarters of households in sub-Saharan Africa bring water from a source located away from their home and 50 to 85 per cent of households indicated that indicate women are mainly responsible for this task. In India, the numbers are likely to be even larger: national sample survey data for rural India suggest that more than 80 per cent of women of the age group 15-59 years are involved in tasks like this and collecting fuel wood for their households. Urban women without access to piped water, as is the case in many slums as well as in

smaller towns and cities, are also hugely involved in water collection, waiting in queues with buckets and receptacles to take water from communal tube wells or other taps at defined times.

Even the time involved in just the collection of water can be a huge drain. [Time use](#) surveys have found that such tasks typically take anything between half an hour to several hours per day, depending on the distance to be travelled, the waiting time at the point of collection and the number of trips required per day. The lifting and carrying of water receptacles is typically done in ergonomically unsound ways, creating further health hazards. All these affect the person's ability to participate in other productive and socially necessary work.

The same points could be made equally forcefully for other tasks associated with water work. And there is another concern: where public provision is lacking, not only are the potential benefits of scale economies unavailable, but the control and monitoring of the quality of provision (for example in treatment of water to make it usable) are difficult if not impossible. This can generate major health problems consequent on use of untreated or inadequately treated or polluted water, along with other problems affecting production. So it is socially very expensive to underprovide these essential services through public agencies.

Most water workers across the world therefore face problems similar to other unrecognised and unpaid workers (for example those engaged in social reproduction activities within the home). Continuing this status quo is deeply undesirable not just for the workers but even more for the society as a whole. For water workers, therefore, the important tasks are: to recognise the nature and extent of their work; to formalise it as much as possible and ensure that it occurs under better conditions and with reduced drudgery; and to mobilise such workers to ensure that society has a better appreciation of their productive contribution and their rights.

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