

Double interview with Alice Bouman-Dentener and Lesha Witmer, Women for Water Partnership

The Women for Water Partnership (WfWP) is a unique international network of women's organizations with subsidiaries all over the world. The Partnership is active in the areas of sustainable development, water & sanitation, poverty and gender. The European Water Partnership had the pleasure to interview Alice Bouman-Dentener, President of WfWP, and Lesha Witmer, Steering Committee Member of WfWP, about women, gender and water.



Alice Bouman-Dentener (AB) is currently President of the Steering Committee of WfWP and the Secretary General of the Netherlands Council of Women, the umbrella of 46 national organizations and networks in the Netherlands. She represented the women of the Netherlands in the UN General Assembly and during the World Summit on Sustainable Development and chaired for many years the Advisory Committee for Environment and Sustainable Development of the City of The Hague.

She was appointed advisor to the National Convention for Political Reform in the Netherlands and member of the Advisory Board of Gender Concerns International.



Lesha Witmer (LW) is currently Steering Committee member of the WfWP. She is chair of the Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development and of the taskforce "Women for Water" of Business & Professional Women International. Ms. Witmer is a member of the steering group for the EWP Water Stewardship and Aquawareness program. In addition to that, she is one of the NGO delegates in the European Union Water Initiative Coordinating Committee. She is a

former women's delegate in the Dutch government delegation to the Commission on Sustainable Development (DSD) during DSD 12, 13 and 17.

EWP: The focus of WfWP is sustainable development through integrated water resource management. Why is water the key for sustainable development?

AB: Sustainable development means looking at all aspects of development in an integrated manner. It is a forward looking strategy whereby consequences of our current actions for the future are taken into account. Water is cross-cutting in this for obvious reasons. On the other hand, recent events in Pakistan and neighbouring countries illustrate the central role of water in our lives and the disastrous consequences if we fail to manage this vital resource properly or change the course

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of nature too much. Water is life bringing, life bearing and life destroying. Look at all the proverbs and sayings in different languages and all cultures, back to ancient history that are testimony to the central role of water for life.

LW: I could start with saying that "water is life" – that is an undeniable truth and not just a phrase. Water is also well-being. Looking at all the crises we are facing in the world (food, climate change, economically, equity), water is the key to unlocking the door to solutions. Water is also something that appeals to all people – everybody can relate to some kind of water related problem and we all use it every day, regardless where you are and in what quantities. The term "sustainable development" sounds very abstract, does not mean much for a lot of people and is more and more frequently misused. But in fact, sustainability is a "logic" follow-up and consequence of starting to talk about "water".

EWP: What are the main challenges in Europe to reach this aim?

AB: Europe is not uniform. As in other parts of the world, Europe faces water scarcity in some parts and abundance in other. So the challenges for individual countries will differ. As a whole, however, Europe being highly industrialised and densely populated in many parts, pollution is a common challenge. Down-stream countries face the consequences of upstream actions. So cooperation is key and is already practised through river basin management. Pollution prevention is also something that individual people can influence. We can apply the principles of sustainable development, including sustainable water management to our personal and professional life. Individual actions are like the many drops that eventually fill up the ocean.

LW: The general public is not sufficiently aware that water is an issue. Hence, the stakeholder involvement from outside the sector is very low. We seem to be talking to the already "convinced". Water is seen as a separate issue – an issue for experts, not for NGO's or CSO's because Europe still treats water as a technical issue and not as a social, (urban) planning, economic and environmental issue as well. Although we have the Water Framework Directive (WFD), water is still very much a national issue and responsibility - instead of focusing a river-basin-based approach. Moreover, the managing structures still work in separate compartments: drinking water and sanitation. Water & Sanitation still do not have "a/ one home" in most countries – so how can there be an integrated approach? Water resource management is often done by a small group of experts and not connected to other issues like land planning. There is also the fact that legislation on sanitation is outdated. Additionally, waste water management is still an orphan and companies are hardly involved and do not see the need for getting involved yet.

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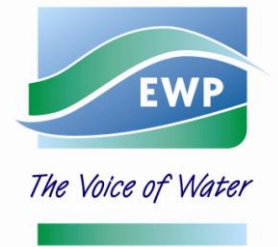
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EWP: In your opinion, what would be the ideal scenario for joint action on integrated water resource management in Europe?

AB: Different groups in society have different roles to play in Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). The ideal scenario would include a joint action plan of the different actors.

LW: I think the water vision is a good start. It gives a common goal across borders and involves all. The water dialogues - involving local authorities, business, NGO's - that we have been planning together with EWP should get off the ground - leading to more involvement of more stakeholders at regional and local level. Our joint effort to get water higher on the European political agenda is another important aspect to reach integrated water resource management in Europe.

EWP: Which are the key actors to realize this scenario and what are the main obstacles to achieve it?

LW: Local authorities, chambers of commerce, women's organisations and other NGOs, local water management and policy makers need to be involved. The main obstacle are the resources: women-power and money. We have to convince people (inhabitants, companies, government) to invest in water and water related discussions. Thus, it is crucial to get more attention also of the media.

EWP: Why do women play a decisive role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water?

AB: WfWP is concerned with the role of women as an organized segment of society. Women have a large diversity of social networks that range from local to international (for instance Business & Professional Women with local clubs, national organizations and an international federation BPW-international). Furthermore, at national level, the different women's organizations join forces in national umbrella organizations that are again part of European and international networks (for instance Netherlands Council of Women with 46 different organizations and member of the European Women's Council and the International Council of Women). In short, women's networks span the globe and are an excellent vehicle to address multi-sectoral, interdisciplinary and cross-boundary issues such as IWRM and sustainable development in general.

LW: Women where ever you go - consciously or unconsciously - are the biggest water users: in households, as workers in the health care, food industry and agriculture. From a point of managing water scarcity their behaviour is crucial! Women in general tend to have a more long term view on safeguarding the

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environment and water in particular. They “weigh” things differently and add another quality to the decision-making process. There are lots of statistics showing that when it comes to nature protection, involving all kinds of people in the process of making choices, women are the majority doing so. Also they are more inclined to look at socio-economic solutions and not just technical ones.

EWP: Do you think that women are aware of this responsibility? And are European women more aware than women from other continents?

AB: Building awareness is a never ending process. New generations come up and people tend to forget things that do not directly and visibly impact on their lives. In the provision of basic needs, there is a tendency to stress the responsibility of the government (which of course they have) and to forget about one’s personal responsibility in the process. Although it is well known that women in their traditional gender role deal more with direct water use than men do. I strongly believe it is a joint responsibility for all.

LW: It depends very much on the region. In general, in Western Europe women are not enough aware as water management has become an abstract “thing” away from their day-to-day tasks. The enormous influence they could and should have in deciding priorities, design and management is “an untapped” resource. I would say that women in Eastern and (really) Southern Europe are generally more aware and involved than women in Western Europe. In general, I would say that women in Africa and Asia are more aware and involved especially at local level because there they are still the day-to-day water managers. We should assist them to “modernize” their roles and not hand it over to only men because technology gets to be an issue!

EWP: WfWP positions women and their organizations as active contributors to development. Are there still unrecognized issues concerning women and water?

AB: The acknowledgement is there at policy level. This does not mean, however, that women are automatically involved in everyday life.

LW: Although women are mentioned more and more as stakeholders, women’s involvement in this field is still seen from the “victims” perspective instead of acknowledging their role as actors and agents of change. Sanitation and safe and appropriate facilities for women and girls is still an underestimated issue in Europe. From a business perspective, the fact that most women who have completed relevant high level studies do not work in the sector or leave again after a short while is very worrisome. Capacity is lost and this fact will lead – taking also the demographic development in consideration - to great shortages in people-power and not enough attention to socio-economic angles of water management.

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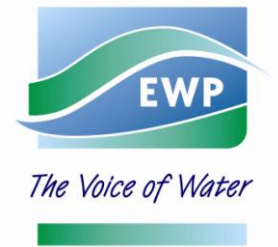
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EWP: What is the most urgent issue that needs to be addressed?

LW: First of all, land and water planning should go hand-in-hand. Furthermore, women's voices have to be taken seriously when taking decisions on future water management. It is also very important that water and sanitation get higher on the European political agenda and subsequently more financing availability for the process side (not just technology) is needed. In addition, women in Europe have to become more aware that "water" is a serious and important issue where they can and should contribute as well.

EWP: How are you improving women's active participation?

LW: We do everything we can to inform women and help them to define their needs and the roles they can play. We make it a conscience thing that they can contribute to. Of course we do this through our member organizations mainly. We mention women's involvement everywhere and "broker" between governments, NGOs and business to get acquainted and get women involved. We support our member organizations to set up local projects and organize regional working conferences – lately in Bulgaria – to get all stakeholders together and involve them in joined hands on activities.

EWP: Since February 2009 WfWP is a strategic partner of the EWP and recently you became a member of the EWP Board of Advice. What is the added value for you when cooperating with the EWP?

AB: As new member of the EWP Board of Advice we are looking forward to enrich EWP's work with the experiences and knowledge of our Major Group. This will hopefully help bridging the gap between principles and practice in IWRM. For instance, to include the socio-cultural implications of a specific solution to complement technological approaches and to ensure that policy development roots in the reality of everyday life.

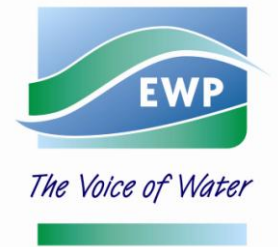
LW: For us it is a real two-way street: through EWP we have easier access and gained a big network also with companies in the sector; through EWP our participatory approaches and getting women ('s organizations) involved from the word "go" get wider spread and, I think, it was a learning experience for EWP to get another type of stakeholders involvement. Our joint effort in the Aquawareness program is a great example of multi stakeholder involvement and processes leading to more awareness and adjustment of policies throughout Europe. For me the "Water Vision" is a great positive tool and we were happy to contribute to that.

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EWP: To conclude, what would you highlight as main achievements of WfWP in Europe?

AB: The pioneering of our member organizations AWHHE, Black Sea Women's Club, Earth Forever, Mama86, Medium & Sanitas, Mehriban, WisDOM and of course the clubs of BWPI and SI/EU in the respective countries on demand driven, small-scale, sustainable WATSAN solutions and the up scaling and replication that has been going on despite the restricted resources. Imagine what could be achieved with more adequate resource allocation.

LW: Results and successes are always a joint effort. For Europe the founding of national platforms in Moldova and the Ukraine is a great success because in this way women's organizations are directly involved in the implementation of the Water & Health protocol. Additionally, our member organizations participate in expert groups of the Water & Health protocol and WfWP is running very successful pilots on eco-sanitation – mainly schools related - throughout the EECCA region.

EWP: Thank you for the interview.

For more information about Women for Water Partnership, please click [here](#).

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