

Access to water: persistence of inequalities in the life of women

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PITCH

This policy brief is aimed primarily at decision-makers at the municipal, regional and national levels, as well as at non-governmental institutions, neighborhood councils and private institutions.

As a result of the accelerated growth of the urban sprawl in recent decades, the peri-urban areas of the city of El Alto are territories where migrant women face persistent inequalities related to the unequal access to land and consequently to the unequal access to water. It has mainly impacted women's lives due to socially assigned gender roles. In the Señor de Mayo I and San Carlos neighborhoods, in district 8 of the city of El Alto, families wait 4, 5 and up to 7 years to access water through the mains. During this time, women must monitor their families' water supply. In many cases, it forces them to postpone or give up their aspirations which were the reasons they chose to migrate to the city in the first place.

ISSUES

Within the framework of the International Water Agenda, Sustainable Development Goal 6 aims

at ensuring access to water and sanitation for all, since globally "approximately three out of every ten people (2.1 billion people, equivalent to 29 % of the world's population) do not use a drinking water service that is safely managed" (WWAP UNESCO, 2019: 4). Without determining what percentage of the peripheral areas is covered, the municipal government of El Alto finds that 88,35 % of all dwellings have water from the mains (PTDI GAMEA 2016-2020). Depending on urban infrastructure deployment, it can therefore be inferred that the remaining 11,65 % without access to the water mains is located in peri-urban territories. When this fundamental human right does not materialize, women – being responsible for supplying water to their families – invest much of their time in this activity¹.

Women are not only responsible for the water supply by fetching water, harvesting rainwater or waiting for tank trucks, but they must also manage the family supply and prevent water contamination. Despite this effort, there is often not enough water, so they end up postponing their personal needs and prioritizing the use of the supply for the benefit of their children and partners².

The paradox is that, once the family accesses the mains, instead of solving this inequitable condition, there is a strengthening of the gender-based roles: women do the laundry more frequently and they cook more often during the day; eventually, the living conditions of the families improve significantly but without any impact on women's lives.

METHOD

According to the qualitative study, based on women's accounts and carried out in the Señor de Mayo I and San Carlos Mina Ch'uxlla neighborhoods of district 8 in the municipality of El Alto, until November 2018, the families living in these neighborhoods did not have piped water in their homes, which had an impact on their living conditions. Although, public water distribution service is expected to keep pace with urbanization, on average it is 5 years behind schedule.

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Key words Persistence of inequality, water, women, El Alto, peri-urban territory

Geography Bolivia

Themes Water, gender, inequalities

Find out more about this project: <https://www.afd.fr/en/carte-des-projets/inequalities-urban-water-services-la-paz-and-el-alto-bolivia>



RESULTS

In the absence of this service, this population primarily gets water from tank trucks and public taps, which leads to various issues: users face low pressure during the day when using public tap water, and irregular supply (twice a week) when getting water from tank trucks. Additionally, the quality of public tap water is better than the one provided by tank trucks. In terms of cost, tap water costs between BOB 20 and 30 per month, while water from tank trucks costs between BOB 150 and 180 per month. In both cases, the water must be stored in iron drums and end up being exposed to dust and contamination.

To cover these costs, many women generate income through informal jobs such as street vending, sewing or other home-based jobs enabling them to perform their role as water providers and caregivers.

Taking into account the lifecycles, it is possible to infer persistent gender inequality:

- in their rural territories of origin, since girls are the main water fetchers for the family;

- when they migrate to the city with their primary family nucleus, settling in peripheral territories without access to basic services, they remain responsible for supplying water to the family, either by harvesting rainwater, fetching water from public taps or receiving water from the tank truck;

- when they form their own family and they are in need of low-cost housing, their new dwelling are located far from serviced urban centers; hence, in line with their gender role, they will continue to provide water for their families by investing much of their time in fetching water, harvesting rainwater or waiting for the tank truck.

This persistent inequality, which is emphasized in the gendered-division of labor, marks an overload of tasks for women, both in managing water supply and in the household's reproductive tasks. In the community, girls fetch water from rivers, wells and other sources and take on household chores such as laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc.; when they migrate to the city, where they have access to a public tap or

tank trucks, they have additional water supply tasks such as rainwater harvesting and maintenance of water containers (drums, tanks and others). The men's role is to buy drums, install pipes to harvest rainwater and, in some cases, maintenance; although once a week they help do the household laundry. When the house is connected to the mains network, males' domestic tasks often decrease or disappear.

**Picture 1 –
Woman in Señor de Mayo 1**



Source: X. Escobar, 2018

RECOMMANDATIONS

- ▶ The Authority for the Oversight and Social Control of Drinking Water and Sanitation (AAPS) must regulate water sales from tank trucks to protect the health and economic well-being of families forced to buy water.
- ▶ Prioritize investment in infrastructure to solve water pressure problems in peri-urban neighborhoods, as well as to ensure quantity and availability of the water.
- ▶ Consolidate programs aimed at deepening women's economic agency, providing affordable and long-term loans for the construction of a productive urban dwelling that allows them to generate financial resources since they cannot go out to seek formal employment because their time is pledged.
- ▶ Include women's activities related to water supply management within institutions focused on the reduction of gender inequality. Encourage the equitable division of reproductive tasks in the household by reorganizing men and women's time.

¹ Ledo García, Carmen (2005). "Agua potable a nivel de hogares con una dimensión de género: derecho de las mujeres al agua en las ciudades de El Alto, La Paz y Cochabamba". CEPLAG, Cochabamba.

² Escobar Quispe, Ximena (2020). "Persistencia de la desigualdad en el acceso al agua. El papel de las mujeres y sus acciones en territorios periurbanos de la ciudad de El Alto". In Agua y desigualdades urbanas, Urquieta and Botton (coords.), CIDES/AFD Colección 35 años. La Paz: Plural editores.