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Transforming Women's Water Burdens into Opportunities

Abstract

In rural Uganda, dawn approaches as a mother and daughter gather their empty jericans (3- to 5-gallon water containers), dirty pots and soiled clothing and begin their daily chores. A local vendor sells clean water, but at 25 cents per jerrican it's too costly to buy the amount they need: the family makes less than \$1 a day. So they go in search of another source, a task which can sometimes take all day. The water weighs nearly 8 pounds per gallon, and they are unable to carry enough water home to accomplish their chores so they carry out their activities at the single water source. The women spend hours washing and drying the clothes, pots and dishes, and bathing themselves, the children and sometimes even the animals, and then they begin the long journey home on foot. This time, in addition to the clean laundry and pots, they are carrying 5 gallons of water -- nearly 44 pounds and often contaminated (WHO 2008). Five gallons of water may be enough to cook and provide drinking water for their family for maybe a few days. With jericans atop their heads, shoulders and backs, they strain to keep the delicate balance, careful not to lose a single drop on the rough road home.

Keywords

Water, women, Uganda, opportunities

Transforming Women's Water Burdens into Opportunities

Gemma Bulos¹

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The Water and Sanitation Challenges that Women Face

Around the globe, the containers, the clothes and the scenery may be different, but the experience is similar. Women carry the weight of water on their backs, literally and figuratively, cultivating a gender divide that ripples into deeper socio-economic inequities. If women have the tools and technologies in their hands, the strategies to harness and transform their knowledge into livelihoods, and the willingness to challenge gender stereotypes they have the ability to change this scenario. They can thrive -- and then so can families, their health, the community and the economy.

Worldwide, it is estimated that on a single day women spend over 200 million collective hours fetching water (WHO, UNICEF 2010). One in 10 girls drops out of school or miss one week per month when they start menstruating because of the lack of toilets (World Health Organization 2008). And the fact that women are responsible for the health of the household means added financial stress when a family member falls ill. Women may also miss out on income-generating opportunities not to mention having to buy medicines or pay for health services (World Health Organization 2008).

It's difficult to imagine that, similar to rural Uganda, the amount of water that some families have available on a daily basis is less water than two of our Western toilet flushes. In the time it takes a rural Ugandan woman to fetch water, a Western woman can fix breakfast and lunch, take the children to school, work a full time job and

go to the bathroom numerous times. Can you imagine the opportunities lost for women and girls when their day is spent fetching water, doing water related chores, and drinking and serving contaminated water (World Health Organization 2008).

Excluding Women from Decision-Making

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) stated, "The exclusion of women from the planning of water supply and sanitation schemes is a major cause of their high rate of failure" (FAO n.d.). Women have a deeper relationship with water mainly because they are often in charge of procuring the essential resource for their families and communities. Yet in many places around the world, their knowledge and hard work is ignored when it comes to decision-making by the community around the provision of clean water and sanitation strategies. Women often know the locations of the available and seasonable water sources as well as which water sources are safe. Also, since women are integral to water procurement, ensuring they are informed about proper hygiene practices and know how to implement them, is crucial for family health. If a mother is cooking, cleaning and providing drinking water, but not practicing good hygiene, then the whole family is at risk.

Women who challenge traditional stereotypes by utilizing water and sanitation technologies may face even more adversity in their communities from their husbands and male leaders. Also, one could argue that quality control can be an issue due to women's lack of background in construction. However, with training and support, women have an opportunity to provide a much-needed service to their communities by introducing locally built technologies and simple health strategies, that could lead to an invitation to the decision making table as in the case of Catherine Wanjohi in Naivasha, Kenya. After being trained in WASH education and construction of a simple water treatment technology that she installed in a local prison, she was selected and elected as the Board Chair of the local water board. Catherine is a graduate of a training coordinated by the Global Women's Water Initiative (GWWI) of which I am the Director.

Women as Entrepreneurs

Not only are women an essential link to the life-sustaining resource of water, they have also shown initiative and resolve in carrying out the innovations necessary to improve their communities. From protests in Kenya resulting in the release of political prisoners to peace-making activities in civil war torn Liberia, women have led the way toward using non-traditional

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methods to organize communities for social causes. Also, statistics show women outnumber male entrepreneurs in developing economies because they face higher barriers to entry in the formal labour market and have to resort to entrepreneurship as a more viable income source (Jean Halladay Coughlin 2002). According to multiple international micro-finance institutions, women are also more likely to pay off their loans (Guerin 2010). According to field research by GWWI and GWWI partner Katosi Women's Development Trust (KWDT), building the capacity of women to lead and implement viable water and sanitation solutions through technology construction and business development can provide just the opportunity for women to become self-reliant and uplift themselves from poverty (Katosi Women Development Trust 2013). Awarded the Best Performing WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) Organization in Uganda and just recently the 3rd Kyoto World Water Prize, KWDT women's collectives challenge gender stereotypes (Katosi Women Development Trust 2013). KWDT provides community education on proper hygiene practices as well as income-generating projects that build household rainwater harvesting tanks, composting toilets, and water filters. KWDT women are joining the labor ranks by professionalizing the services traditionally offered by men and expanding into areas outside of their own villages. KWDT also offers micro-loans to women customers to be able to purchase a technology and pay it off over time.

The Global Women's Water Initiative provides training for grassroots women and groups to implement water-related strategies so they can improve their communities' health, self-reliance, and resilience in the face of climate change. GWWI is building a cadre of women trainers versed in a holistic set of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) skills, capable of building various technology solutions as well as influencing community decisions and policies. The majority of the women attending GWWI trainings often have never used a shovel before. Women learn to build appropriate household level technologies like rainwater harvesting systems, innovative tank construction using interlocking bricks, modified slow-sand water filters that remove nearly up to 99% of the biological pathogens that cause illness, toilets using local materials, as well as solar cookers made simply out of cardboard and reflective materials as a means to pasteurize and purify water with the sun. GWWI offers hands-on construction training sessions using technology are coupled with workshops in leadership skill-building, entrepreneurship, WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) Education and water testing to support the women as full service WASH facilitators and designers of local water and health solutions.

As a result of the GWWI trainings, graduates have helped provide clean water and sanitation to over 20,000 people in Sub-Saharan Africa. A few GWWI women graduates have even won local and national awards and gained government, NGO and community contracts to build water systems and offer WASH Education and technology construction trainings. Catherine, who had 'never had any other experience with water other than washing, drinking,

cooking and other household chores' before she attended a GWWI training, was selected through a highly competitive process to be a member of the local water board. Impressively, she went on to become the Board Chair and the Board will be managing nearly \$200,000 US in local water project funding in the next few years. She believes that her role as the Chair enables her to raise awareness as to how water impacts women and find workable solutions.

The United Nations Development Programme estimates that for every \$1 invested in water and sanitation solutions, there is a return of up to \$4 in increased productivity (UNDP 2006). Also, in order to reach the Millennium Goals, the World Bank concludes that 'self-supply' solutions such as rainwater harvesting, household water treatments and other "appropriate" technologies should be included in planning and considered a sustainable option in different physical and socio-economic environments such as peri-urban and rural areas (Sutton 2009). "Appropriate" technologies meet the following criteria: durable, affordable, made out of local resources, can be repaired and maintained by locals and are accepted by the community (The Appropriate Technology Collaborative 2013).

Conclusion

Water, sanitation and hygiene education must be institutionalized to reduce/prevent water related disease long term. Proper hygiene practices, using toilets and employing water protection and treatment methods must become second nature. GWWI believes that the women, and especially mothers who have the most interaction with water, can ensure that these practices are enforced and become a core part of the social fabric. In a world plagued with social inequities and environmental degradation, it is crucial that we seek guidance and leadership from our traditional caretakers: women. When women have the support and resources to implement simple solutions to address adverse environmental restrictions, they will contribute to improving gender equity. It will be then, that women who have the power to build sustainable healthy practices will transform their burdens into opportunities.

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