

ACCESS TO SAFE WATER AND SANITATION: THE FIRST STEP IN REMOVING THE FEMALE FACE OF POVERTY

Nancy J. Haws

After earning a bachelor of fine arts degree from Colorado State University, Nancy Haws began her career as an art director for a major advertising firm headquartered in Denver. She then formed her own advertising and marketing business, and for the past twenty-four years she has designed advertising, marketing, and communication programs for companies in the oil, gas, and mining industries, as well as for the real estate industry. Although Haws's professional focus has been in the private sector, she is equally committed to serving her community. For many years she has participated as a volunteer and consultant for several nonprofit organizations, including the Piton Foundation, the Colorado Business and Professional Women's Organization, the McCormick Foundation, and Water For People.

In virtually all developing countries, finding, collecting, carrying, and managing water is a difficult and dangerous task. With very rare exception, it's considered women's work. In many areas, women and children spend up to two-thirds of their waking hours in the act of hauling water. In fact, according to the World Health Organization, each year in Africa alone more than forty billion work hours are lost to the need of obtaining drinking water (World Health Organization 2004). I have learned about the importance of water access firsthand through my volunteer work with Water For People, an international, nonprofit development organization committed to the long-term impact of increased access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation and health. During the past three years, I interviewed, photographed, and videotaped hundreds of underprivileged community members from Guatemala, Honduras, Bolivia, Malawi, and India, and I am now convinced that abject poverty in the developing world is directly related to the absence of healthy water supplies and sanitation facilities. Until these fundamental human rights are afforded to all of humanity, especially women, poverty can never be eradicated.

Nothing demonstrates this form of female bondage more clearly than an interview I conducted with Rose Ndhlovu, a member of a remote community in Engocwini, Malawi, on 21 July 2005. Her plight still haunts me. I encountered Rose one morning with my video team as we were hiking through scrub brush on a hilly trail. Several yards ahead we spotted a group of women and girls shouting and arguing with each other. Scattered around them was a motley array of corroded aluminum tubs, plastic bottles, and old antifreeze containers. As we approached we saw that the women were yelling at a young mother, with her infant strapped to her back, who was descending into a hand-dug seep pit near the roots of a tree. Apparently she was attempting to gather more water after she had slipped, lost her balance, and accidentally spilled some of the valuable water she

had collected. The other women, worried that there would not be enough water left for them when it came to their turns, were angered.

The onlookers glared at us with varying degrees of curiosity. Rose, a stocky, middle-aged woman in tattered clothes, approached me with interest. She explained how she had left her home around four in the morning, leaving her children in the care of her husband and eldest daughter until she returned on foot by midday. Since rainfall had been quite scarce in her village, water sources had become increasingly difficult to find. Rose and some friends noticed the moist leafy branches of a tree and decided to dig by hand around its roots with the hope of discovering water. After digging about eight feet down, they found small pockets of water. They waited for hours for a bucket of mud-colored liquid to percolate up slowly from the earth. As Rose and her friends waited, villagers from neighboring hamlets realized that these women had located a water source. They decided to help by looking for a large, twisted tree branch that they used as a ladder to climb down into the well. Rose described how she lines her pail with leaves to prevent even a drop of water from being lost. Unfortunately even this water is almost guaranteed to be contaminated, though still welcomed by parched throats at home. She lamented that family members and friends, primarily children, frequently suffer and die from diarrhea and other illnesses related to contaminated water sources. It became obvious that the tragedy of this situation was the reality that these women understood that the water was of poor quality but had no other options available to them for survival.

I will never forget looking into those faces filled with desperation that day. A single bucket of water may provide the only sustenance for an entire family each day. Some days, during extreme drought seasons, that single bucket of water is not even available.

The sheer backbreaking routine of finding and collecting water is only one aspect of the debilitating link between water and women in the developing world. The filled containers women carry often weigh as much as forty-five pounds, the equivalent of walking with a large airline carry-on bag on your head, for miles at a time, several times a day (International Year of Freshwater 2003). The effort regularly uses 25 percent or more of a woman's daily caloric intake; the heavy weight of the containers of water often causes long-term joint pain in the hips, knees, necks, and backs (Sass 2002). The daily strain placed by these heavy loads on a woman's hip and pelvic area can cause difficulties, especially during pregnancy. Perhaps the greatest short-term danger is the frequent contact with water that is often contaminated with bacteria, which increases women's risk of contracting one of the many waterborne diseases prevalent in the developing world.

Not only does water collection and management create physical problems, but it also negatively impacts women's social and economic status. The enormous amount of time associated with these activities excludes women from educational and income-generating opportunities, as well as cultural and political activities. It's part of the reason why every two out of three illiterate people are women and why women make up 70 percent of the world's poor (United Nations Department of Public Information 1997).

This gender bias effectively removes women from life outside the home and family—from participation in the broader community. But it's a fate that is not inevitable.

Over the past three years, through my visits to Water For People program sites, I have learned about the value of simple, appropriate technologies coupled with basic hygiene education. These interventions often make the difference between improved health and livelihoods and a lifetime of illness and drudgery for community members, especially women.

On a recent trip to Sagar Island in West Bengal, India, I met with two industrious women from Bankimnagar Village, Laxmi Rani Pramanik and Sujata Das, who were born in this forgotten area. Tired of the high-salinity content in the drinking water and the acute health problems it causes, the women banded together to request support from a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) to build a tube well that would provide them with a source of safe water. Unwavering in their fervor, Laxmi and Sujata were able to solicit more women to join their group. As their numbers expanded so did their opportunities to spread awareness about the importance of safe water. The village women reminded one another of the advantages of standing together if they truly wanted to stop diarrhea from debilitating and, all too often, killing their children.

Although they had been wary at first, it wasn't long before the men of Bankimnagar recognized the seriousness of the women. Encouraged by the women's commitment, the men came forward and together they formed a "water committee." The committee opened a bank account in order to build up the financial resources needed to maintain the tube wells into the future. When the tube well construction material finally arrived, the women were asked to keep track of how many feet of pipe came in, how much was being used, and what was left over. This was their first lesson in record keeping. The women then asked Water For People to provide training in the basic maintenance of the water system so that not a single day or a single rupee would be wasted in finding a plumber for repair. Another local NGO maintains a bank account to facilitate buying local and affordable replacement parts. The proximity eliminates time spent crossing the river to buy the spare parts.

Laxmi and Sujata were very anxious to show me their community's newly installed water pump for which the members of Bankimnagar provided all of the labor. The two women took great pride in displaying their skill at taking the water pump apart and reassembling it. According to Sujata, "Now that we have a water pump nearby our homes we do not have to walk but a short distance to collect safe water for our needs. During menstruation, we can bathe in the privacy of our homes. We wanted to make sure that we could fix and maintain the pump ourselves because our village is so remote that we don't have access to repair services. Since most men work in the fields harvesting, our abilities to repair the system ourselves make us much more self-reliant. We now enjoy several hours of freedom to harvest more rice, sew, and use our talents at other handiwork that generates additional income besides fishing all day. We spent years hauling water from sunrise to sunset. We must take good care of the water pump because it provides a healthier and happier life for our families and community."

What was created was a simple water source. Yet this very basic bit of infrastructure, taken for granted in the developed world, now serves as a focal point to bring women together and discover themselves in their new roles as more productive human beings. The health education sessions have taught them simple ways of taking care of their own health and that of their families. Awareness of illnesses related to unsafe water sources and unhygienic practices has enabled them to quickly recognize and help reduce waterborne problems. Instead of spending money on frequent visits to the doctor, the women are now able to use the money for better nutrition and for their children's education. Women can also use some of these extra funds to engage in micro-enterprise opportunities like participating in sewing co-ops, canning vegetables, and selling their goods at local markets. Participation in micro-enterprises allows the women to contribute to family incomes and thus raises their status within the community.

Although helping people to access safe water is an integral step in the pursuit of a higher quality of life, effective public health interventions can never be achieved without the provision of hygiene education and adequate sanitation. Unhealthy hygiene practices like open defecation and the improper disposal of human waste create serious public health hazards. Lack of proper sanitation also is a primary factor in the decision of many girls to drop out of school early. Statistical data from the Women's Environment and Development Corporation (WEDO 2003) suggests that about one in ten school-age African girls do not attend school during menstruation or withdraw at puberty because of the absence of clean and private sanitation facilities in schools. Recently, when Water For People installed toilets, drinking, and hand-washing stations at Gabberia School, located on the outskirts of Kolkata, West Bengal, discussions with female students and teachers from these schools explained that access to separate latrines and hand-washing facilities increases attendance dramatically because these women can remain in school with more consistency and without fear of harassment or shame.

Studies show that the promotion of simple hygiene practices like hand washing can reduce the spread of water-related illnesses by up to 35 percent (World Health Organization n.d.). Along with this highly effective public health intervention, the human potential gained through improved access to adequate sanitation is evidenced by the success of a Water For People-funded hand-washing facility and several latrines built near an elementary school in the village of Pahuit, Guatemala. A student, Claudia Letica Torna Somal shared her joy with me at being able to go to school. When I interviewed her on 2 May 2005, Claudia's smile broadened as she explained, "I always dreamed of going to school so I could learn to read and write like my brothers. Now that we have a tap stand in our village, a hand-washing station, and latrines near our classrooms, I can attend school each day instead of hauling water."

At a global level, the United Nations, governments, think tanks, global businesses, associations, and nongovernmental organizations seem to recognize the salience of efforts to expand access to safe water in the developing world. Included in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—time-bound and quantified targets to which developed countries have committed their resources—is a goal to halve the proportion of people living without access to safe water and

sanitation by 2015. Two other related MDG goals include the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger.

The United States also pledged its commitment to the provision of safe water. On 16 November 2005, President George W. Bush signed into law the "Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act of 2005." This law will make safe and affordable drinking water and sanitation a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. According to Ambassador John McDonald, chairman of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy and a leader in global drinking water issues for almost thirty years, "This bill provides the platform on which we can advance U.S. action and implementation, as well as build on the Millennium Development Goals and the UN Decade of Water adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2003" (WaterWorld Online 2005).

While policy generation and redirection on the world stage are essential, much of the action that will improve the lot of women in the developing world has to take place on the ground, close to home. In my work with Water For People I have come to realize that community organizing is the key to sustainable development, far more than water pumps and pipes. When this community organization involves the direct participation of women, the chances for success are significantly enhanced. If progress is to be achieved in improving personal health and community well-being through better access to water and sanitation, women have to be involved and, in most cases, have to lead the way. This requisite is not an ideological bias or a philosophical prejudice. It is simply a matter of experience and cultural norms. Women suffer more when it comes to water deficiencies, but they also have the problem-solving skills and the motivation, based on their role as primary caretakers for the family, to do something about it.

As a result, anything that raises the status of women within their communities, any advocacy, economic support, and direct involvement on the part of the developed world that focuses on full-scale participation by women in planning, decision making, and ongoing management related to safe water and sanitation is a positive and necessary step. Concurrently, international development organizations like Water For People, working with their in-country partners, have to make certain that the role of women in water-related projects is clearly defined, with training and education built into every program.

I used to regard exotic images of women and girls carrying pots of water on their heads and hips with awe. I marveled at the strength and grace of these bearers of liquid gold constantly visible from predawn until deep into the night, traversing rutted roads, narrow highways, and dangerous alleyways. After so many years of working with them, I still ponder the images of mysterious women carrying pots in exotic places around the world. But I am increasingly hopeful that these images are becoming part of history. Only when safe water and sanitation are available close to home, as an acknowledged human right and a practical benefit, will the dehumanizing mask of poverty be removed forever to reveal the feminine strength, dignity, potential, and resources that promise to make this world a healthier one for current and future generations.

References

International Year of Freshwater. 2003. Facts and figures: Water supply and sanitation. Available online at http://www.wateryear2003.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=4096&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

Sass, Justine. 2002. The environment is a women's issue. Women's eNews, April 17. Available online at <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/880>.

United Nations Department of Public Information. 1997. Women: At a glance. Available online at <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/women/women96.htm>.

WaterWorld Online. 2005. President signs bipartisan drinking water bill, December 5.

Women's Environment & Development Organization (WEDO). 2003. Untapped conditions:

Gender, water and poverty: Key issues, government commitments and actions for sustainable development. Available online at http://www.wedo.org/files/untapped_eng.htm.

World Health Organization (WHO). 2004. World facing "silent emergency" as billions struggle without clean water or basic sanitation, say WHO and UNICEF: New report warns that vicious cycle of ill-health and poverty could defeat human development efforts, with children the first to suffer, August 26. Available online at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2004/pr58/en/index.html>.

_____. N.d. WHO world water day report. Available online at http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/takingcharge.html.