What is good for women is good for all

Introduction and scope

The third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) is "to promote gender equality and to empower women". The indicators are the ratios of boys to girls in education, of literate females to males, and the number of women in non-agricultural waged employment and in national parliaments. However, all the MDGs are strongly interdependent and each would have an effect on gender equality if it were to be achieved. The purpose of this briefing note is to provide evidence for these links.

MDG seven "to ensure environmental sustainability" aims to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and sanitation by 2015. So what does this have to do with women's empowerment? It is estimated that women and girls in low-income countries spend 40 billion hours each year fetching water, which can mean eight hours a day carrying up to 40kg on their head or their hips. From this, it is easy to see why a woman would be empowered by having a nearby pump that supplies enough safe water for her family.

Also, if women are consulted about how and where water sources and latrines should be provided, these are more likely to be usable and the needs of vulnerable groups are more likely to be met. What is good for women is good for the whole community.

Headline lessons

The benefits of making women central to water supply, sanitation and hygiene improvements are:

- Involving women in planning and management, administration of funds, operation and maintenance and awareness-raising of safe hygiene practice leads to improved levels of service and better health outcomes.
- There is better health for all, due to women's knowledge of local practice and involvement in group initiatives to bring about behaviour change in the community.
- Women have greater privacy and therefore dignity associated with menstruation, personal hygiene and safety.
- Women enjoy better health and well-being through safer childbirth, less risk of injury from carrying heavy loads and attempting to reach dangerous water sources.
- Disabled people experience improvements in their personal hygiene, health and independence.
- Girls' school attendance increases and as a consequence female literacy levels improve.
- The status of women is raised as they develop skills and knowledge that present opportunities for employment and participation in more public roles.
- Greater possibilities for income generation mean that women can contribute more effectively to the household budget or can be financially independent.

Better Services for All

As women have the main responsibility for household water supply, the home and childcare, it is they who are most likely to know what services are required and where they should be located. Getting these important details right means better services and quality of life for households and communities.

The planning stage

The results of involving women at the design and planning stages include reduced corruption, increased transparency, better financial management and empowering women by example.

- In Kraaipan, South Africa, Jacobeth Mabeo and the female sanitation committee have responsibility for the village sanitation project, which covers planning, construction, health and hygiene training, awareness raising and financial management. The committee has extended the service to more households than the original funding allowed, by building the toilets more cheaply and using an external subsidy. Health and hygiene training is now extended to other villages.

- The Rakin Women's Society, Jordan, aims to improve the social, economic, cultural and health conditions of local rural women. Women have implemented a project with the technical assistance of the Watershed Management Project to install water cisterns and water harvesting, funded under a 66% grant repayment system. There have been many benefits: securing sustainable clean water supplies for irrigation resulting in increased food security; reducing costs of buying water from tankers, while still increasing consumption rates; empowering women to make a greater contribution to household resources; and developing their capacity for financial management. The involvement of women was judged to directly enhance the project's effectiveness.

Funding

Women have successfully taken responsibility for generating and administering funds for water and sanitation improvements.

- In Banda Golra, Pakistan, Nasim Bibi formed a community-based women's organization in 2002 to be eligible for credit. The women installed seven village hand pumps, with a community contribution of 20% and the NGO funding the balance. Households contributed Rs. 1000 (US$ 16) plus food and accommodation for the labourers. The sanitation and health situation has thus been improved, decision-making power at the household level has increased for most women involved in the schemes, and their participation in public activities is increasingly recognized.

Operation and maintenance

Women have taken a key role in the smooth running of water supply and sanitation schemes, including an active role in maintenance and ongoing repairs.

- As part of the KWAHO (Kenya Water for Health Organisation) supported WaterCan-Watsan project in Kibera, Nairobi, community VIP latrines and water points were provided. Two of the community water points are managed by Daranjani Women's group of 20 women and five men. They have been trained in hygiene promotion and O&M of the water storage tanks that are connected to the main municipal supply.

Awareness raising

A key component of any project is to raise awareness about safe hygienic practices. Women play a vital role in awareness-raising about these issues.

- The Pro-Poor Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Nepal works in poor communities that can demonstrate demand for improved water and sanitation. As women have responsibility for water, they are encouraged to take a lead role in community decisions through the Water User Committee and to use their knowledge to inform the design. Hygiene and Sanitation Education supports female facilitators to educate the community on water-borne diseases and their prevention.

Better Health for All

The incidence of water-related diseases, including scabies, diarrhoea, bilharzia and yaws, was seen to decrease in WaterAid's studies of water provision in Ethiopia, Ghana, India and Tanzania. Together with improvements in hygiene practice, this leads to better general health for the whole community. For example, households with a 10 per cent increase in water use for cleaning purposes enjoy a 1.3% decrease in diarrhoea. Having convenient amenities and plenty of water on tap also enables women to maintain more hygienic standards of childcare, with access to a yard tap doubling the odds of a mother washing her hands after cleaning a child's anus, and washing soiled linen immediately.

Women have the best local knowledge about common habits and problems and are central to educating their families and the community about the benefits of using safe water, adequate sanitation and practising good hygiene.

- Gladis Maribel Dias is a beneficiary of the Clearwater Project in Gualcinse, Honduras, providing piped water and the "pila" (outdoor wash basin). She wanted to have water in her home because it guarantees her family a better life. Each household is provided with a latrine and a bath, to strengthen aspects of hygiene, personal cleanliness and basic sanitation.

- Winnie Miyando Cheolo and Febby Temb Mwachingwala are in a women's group in Mwachingwala village, Zambia, spearheading sanitation and hygiene issues. They have been involved in latrine building and now every household has one. Other hygiene initiatives are dish racks, rubbish pits and washing facilities, which have reduced disease in the village. Children are also taught good hygiene practice.

Group initiatives with women are an effective way of transmitting key hygiene messages, which bring about radical changes in the health of the community.

- The Village Service Trust (VST) in India works with dalit women to improve their social, economic and political position, as well as the health of the poor. Preventative health involves women with knowledge of local disease and illness, carrying out house visits and co-ordinating group discussions.

- Nagarata Women's Group in Bauchi State, Nigeria, works closely with women in the delivery of water, sanitation and hygiene education for the communities. The hygiene component of the intervention has meant that women are now aware of basic hygiene practices, living conditions have become healthier, children are better nourished and mortality rates have fallen. Women also make a living producing and selling soap.

- The drinking water, sanitation and community organization programme in rural areas in Pasoc, Nicaragua, has focused on health and violence issues from a gender perspective. Part of this has been to increase the proportion of women participating in water committees to 45% and women committee coordinators to 50%. Educational materials used were adapted to include a focus on gender in school health education programmes.

Women's Privacy and Dignity

Women and girls can be forced to wait until nightfall to defecate, if there are no suitable sanitation facilities for them to use in the daytime. Evidence from Nazlet Fargallah in Upper Egypt confirms that this has severe detrimental health impacts and makes women vulnerable to violence. With access to appropriate toilets, women and girls can use them at any time, in private, without shame, embarrassment or fear. Making defecation less of a problem is a liberating and empowering development for women, whose lives can be dominated by this basic need.

The symptoms of menstruation, pregnancy and the postnatal period become more problematic if women have nowhere to deal with them adequately. The only way this can be remedied is by designing facilities that meet women's physical and psychological demands and preferences.

- Utthan is an Implementing Support Agency that aims to improve water and sanitation services, through capacity building and community mobilization, including women-focused hygiene programmes. Two women, Rudiben and Baluben, are advocating for the sanitation systems that women really want, i.e. those offering privacy and safety. In Chhaya, an integral element of this scheme was that stand posts are located in places preferred by women, in terms of their convenience and safety.

Ensuring women's privacy leads to their having greater confidence about their bodies and about themselves as women.

- Women in Songambele village, Tanzania, who were able to bathe regularly during menstruation, improved their personal hygiene and became more confident. Prior to this, women who experienced difficulties suffered humiliation by being taken before the elders for advice on cleanliness.

It is also known that laundering underclothes during menstruation requires more water than normal and women from NGO-supported projects in Nepal would put themselves at risk by collecting extra water at night.

- The Swayamsiddha project in India, which was implemented in four villages in the Chitrakut district in Uttar Pradesh state, carried out a Community Needs Assessment involving men and women separately. Open defecation was a common practice prior to the project interventions, which meant that women would wait until nightfall. This presented severe difficulties for them, and even more so when pregnant or menstruating. As a result of the project, 779 women were involved in Self Help Groups throughout the district, which provided a range of services including savings and credit facilities, health awareness, skill building and health training programmes. The groups were able to offer financial assistance for half the cost of toilet building, and initiated community drama activities to spread the message about their benefits. The impact of building these toilets was significant as women's perception of their own bodies changed as defecation, menstruation and pregnancy could now be dealt with discreetly. There was also a decrease in diarrhoeal incidence, a reduction in the girls' drop out rate from schools and an increase in women's technical knowledge.

Women's Health and Well Being

Water, sanitation and hygiene interventions are advantageous for women too, with regards to their own health and as they are the main carers of the sick.

Pregnancy and childbirth

MDG five is to "Improve maternal health". Access to safe water plays a vital role in this, partly as pregnant and nursing women no longer have to struggle with heavy loads of water. Sickness through water-borne disease and hepatitis is also avoided through use of clean water and better hygiene. Pregnant women are at risk of hookworm infestations, which has been linked to low birth weight and inhibited child growth.

- A study of Sri Lanka and Malaysia found that reductions in maternal mortality were linked to improvements in sanitation. As a result of government programmes based on a synergy of health care, education, water and sanitation, female life expectancy has increased from 58 to 69 years and maternal mortality has decreased by 70%.

Hygienic childbirth techniques, used by skilled birth attendants, can avert half of all infection-related deaths, which are mainly caused by unhygienic practices in labour and delivery.

- In Tanzania, increased availability of water during and after childbirth reduced postnatal infections. The work of traditional birth attendants like Mdala Rhoda in Songambele became more effective when she could replenish her water supply.

Women's safety

Years spent carrying heavy loads of water over long distances can inevitably result in physical damage to the back and neck.

- In the rural areas of Tibet, the 'back happy' tapstand, an adaptation with a waist high shelf and an extra, higher tap added, allows women to fill and carry 15-20 litre jars of water, without bending.

Physical assault and rape are risks faced when women collect water from isolated places or use a secluded spot at night to relieve themselves. Where water is in short supply, women can be intimidated when they collect it. Such harassment and abuse from local well owners was avoided when there was a more plentiful supply of water in Tanzania.

Accessing some sources of water can present dangers.

- In Kenya, Nakwetikya, a 60 year old Masai woman has benefited from a new water source as she no longer has to climb down very dangerous open wells. Her sister was crushed to death when one of these collapsed, leaving Nakwetikya to bring up her sister's four children. Before the improvements, cholera was an annual occurrence and the incidence of diarrhoea was high, with frequent child deaths, of which three were Nakwetikya's children.

Disability and women

Disabled women and men benefit directly from innovations relating to their use of water and sanitation as they can wash and toilet themselves without help, they are less restricted and so can contribute to the family's livelihood.

- Mrs Pethayee lives in Tamil Nadu, India and struggles to walk due to the effects of polio. The installation of a western-style toilet rather than a squat-style latrine is easier for her to use. Rather than resorting to open defecation, the toilet has improved her quality of life and made her home a healthier place.

Interventions which assist the disabled person in his/her use of water and sanitation facilities also make the job of the carer, who is often a woman, easier.

- Nine year old Shathi, from a Dhaka slum, suffers from cerebral palsy which prevents her from standing or walking. She has benefited from the use of a commode chair with an inset toilet pan on which she can sit unaided and in privacy. Shathi's mother now spends less energy and effort assisting her daughter, freeing up time to take her daughter to the therapy centre and to carry out other domestic tasks.

Girls' School Attendance

Poor or non-existent sanitation keeps girls, in particular, out of the classroom. Of the 120 million children not attending school, the majority are girls. Consequently, two thirds of those who are illiterate in the world are women.

- The Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Project of the World Bank aimed to improve girls' school attendance in Morocco, through reducing the traditional burden on them to fetch water. School attendance increased by 20% over four years.
- The Ponnuansangampatti project in Tamil Nadu, India, has included latrine building, installing new handpumps and digging wells. S. Ganhamani took out a loan for a tap connection to her house, which provides the means to grow bananas, adding five weeks wages to her annual income. This means she can now send her daughter to school.

Pubescent and menstruating female pupils can be deterred from attending school if there are no private sanitation facilities and a clean water supply. Where these are provided, school enrolment rates increase and drop out rates decrease.

- An assessment in 20 schools in rural Tajikistan revealed that all girls chose not to attend when they had their periods, as there were no facilities available.
- In 1999, a borehole, handpump and separate pit latrines were constructed in the Nigerian village of Bashibo. A school Health Club was also established, promoting hygienic behaviour. By 2001, hand washing had increased by 95%, with 90% bathing and brushing teeth regularly. Girls' school attendance has increased, as has the general health and nutritional status of the community.

Finally, the recruitment and retention of female teachers is also affected by lack of services. In addition, female teachers have the tasks of water collection and caring for the sick. WaterAid reports that since their clean water programmes in India, Tanzania and Ghana, more teachers are accepting posts in areas which were formerly difficult to recruit for.

Women's Income Generation

Making an income from water

Some women have taken matters into their own hands, due to the high prices they often pay for water and have set up their own licensed water vending points. This has happened in low-income neighbourhoods in Honduras, Burkina Faso and Kenya. The results have been a fairer, fixed price for water, employment for women servicing these water points, with profits contributing to funding local community projects. There are other examples of women in Mexico, Kenya and Brazil taking steps to organize their own water supply or connection to the municipal network. However, detailed financial benefits have not been quantified.

Sometimes women are able to earn a living by supporting the improved services in some way.

- Women's groups work with a UNICEF programme in Nyakitunda, Uganda, which promotes rainwater harvesting and trains women in all associated technical, marketing and management aspects. With UNICEF's help and seed funding for premises and casting yards, the women make and sell water jars and slabs.

A good water source can provide additional income-generating opportunities in activities which require plentiful, clean water such as brewing, running teashops and laundering clothes. Such trades can become a reliable and sustainable source of income for women.

- In Ghana, women potters had both time and resources to be able to increase their production and trade due to improved water services. Water was also available for cola nut and palm oil processing and for distilling Akpeteshie, a local alcoholic drink.

- In Bangladesh, the Grameen Bank and Grameen Krishi Foundation deep tube well programme was aimed at linking agricultural efficiency with women's empowerment. Improved irrigation schemes led to increases in women's income, giving them more confidence and reducing their dependence on men, in spite of some loss of status in contravening purdah norms.

Having more time to earn an income

Serious time savings have a significant effect on the quality of women's lives.

- In Ethiopia, community-managed integrated water, sanitation and hygiene projects increased the amount of water available for domestic uses from less than 10 litres a day per person to 18-22 litres. The length of time women spend providing water for the family has reduced from around six to eight hours down to five to 20 minutes. The women reported that their domestic chores were easier to carry out as the amount of water used was not so severely restricted.

Women show great resourcefulness and energy in finding alternative uses for their time. The impacts of these activities range from increased income, greater equality in marriage and the ability to save money.

- In India, Gujarati women's economic productivity was increased by time saved due to a new water supply system. An additional programme of support for the women to develop handicrafts addressed the usual constraints to taking up new enterprises, which are the lack of funds and access to credit.

- Tanzanian women devoted more time to economic activities such as working in shops and tea-rooms, and selling their produce (ground nuts, potatoes, cassava and fruit).

- Zeini Batti, an Ethiopian widow, felt huge benefits when a water point was installed, allowing her to spend time basket weaving and making utensils, and in that way, amassing some savings.

Women's Status

Having a role in the planning, design and implementation of water, sanitation and hygiene interventions is often an empowering experience for women. The improvement in status opens up opportunities for income generation and other public and influential roles.

Women as positive role models

- Shanti Bhut is from Baitandi, Nepal. She became vice chair of a Water and Sanitation User Committee and trained as a paid maintenance caretaker. She has since progressed to vice president of a gender-sensitive savings and credit steering committee. Her skills and ability to earn an independent income mean that she is a source of pride to her in-laws and is held up as a positive role model within the community.

- Programmes aimed at involving women by the Waters of Nouadhibou Project in Mauritania offer training on water quality, management and water use in agriculture, providing support for trickle and sprinkler irrigation systems. Automatic drinking fountains have been installed in schools, with senior female students as role models responsible for these.

Women as skilled workers

Women can be involved directly in the technical operations and management of services. Again, challenging gender-specific roles helps to change traditional perceptions about women's status, skills and capabilities.

- In El Salvador, the Agua Project promotes leadership in women and trains them as Community Producers, Promoters and Managers. They have acquired knowledge and skills to perform tasks previously considered to be suitable only for men.

There are many instances of women working successfully in technical jobs.

- Sirumbayi is a female handpump caretaker in the Krishnarayapuram Panchayat Union in Tiruchirappali district, India. As she is from a lower social caste, previously forbidden to touch water sources, this has increased her status in the community.

- Janaki Karki is a skilled mason in Nepal in spite of male opposition. Abandoned by her husband, her work has given her more self confidence, and she is able to provide for her children alone.

Key Messages

Involving women in water supply, sanitation and hygiene interventions has proven beneficial through:

- an increase in the success rate of these interventions, due to the fact that women have a good knowledge of local water and sanitation practices, which, when incorporated into improvement programmes results in better health and quality of life for the community;
- improved design, greater transparency and accountability of projects;
- more effective hygiene promotion, when women use established group activities to reach other women;
- promoting change in traditional gender roles, thereby contributing to the empowerment of women in the communities, and their more active participation in decision making; and
- promoting opportunities for women to make a valuable contribution to their families' incomes and livelihoods or to gain financial independence, through freedom from the constraints caused by a lack of safe water and adequate sanitation and good hygiene practice.

Taking women's needs and preferences into account in water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion has resulted in:

- an increase in attendance and a decrease in drop out rates at school of young women, due to the provision of separate and adequate sanitation;
- an increase in the level of education and literacy rates of girls since easier access to water supply and less time spent caring for sick family members allow them to spend more time at school;
- reductions in child mortality and maternal morbidity and mortality as a result of appropriate access to water supply and sanitation facilities and improved hygiene during childbirth;
- improved health for women and girls who no longer have to delay defecation and urination;
- less physical injury from constant lifting and carrying heavy loads of water; and
- less harassment and risk of sexual assault and increased safety as women and girls do not have to go to remote and dangerous places to defecate or to fetch water.

This briefing note provides evidence to demonstrate how women's empowerment and the improvement of water supply, sanitation facilities and hygiene practice are inextricably linked and highlights some of the benefits of placing women and their concerns at the centre of decision-making about such interventions.

Key references

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