

Women and WaterAid



WaterAid/Jon Spaul

In Africa and Asia women are generally responsible for collecting water for their families. On average, in rural Africa, women spend 26% of their time collecting water, which often means having to walk five miles or more to the nearest water source. In the dry season, when water becomes more scarce, this distance can double and it can take hours just to fill up one container as the water slowly filters through the ground. Women often have to wait in turn to collect water, forcing many to leave home in the middle of the night to reach the source when there is no queue. Then, when they have collected enough water for their family, they will start the long journey back home carrying their heavy water containers.

Women's work:

The tragedy is that the water, which women work so hard to collect, is often dirty, polluted and unsafe to drink. It could come from a river or pond or simply just a hole in the ground where animals drink too. In urban areas, where communities live in slum or squatter settlements without safe water, women either have to walk long distances to collect water, use polluted sources such as factory outlets or buy expensive water from vendors.

Without somewhere safe and clean to go to the toilet women have more daily problems. When people go to the toilet in the open, human waste is left around which can spread diseases and pollute water sources. In many cultures women have to wait until it is dark to relieve themselves causing discomfort, loss of dignity and sometimes illness. Women can become prisoners of daylight.



WaterAid/Jon Spaul

Impacts on health

Nearly two million people in developing countries die each year from diseases associated with unsafe drinking water, a lack of water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene. Most of these deaths are from diarrhoea and can be easily prevented. Diseases related to poor sanitation and water include: cholera, dysentery, typhoid, bilharzia, guinea

worm, hookworm, trachoma and scabies.

Because women can only carry a limited amount of water their family will often have to survive on a very small daily ration. The average person in the developing world uses 10 litres of water a day compared to 200 litres a day in Europe. However in the dry season when water is scarcer people can use even less than this. It is also common for women to drink less than the rest of the family, as they will drink at the water source, leaving the bulk

of the supply that they carry home for their family.

Women are also exposed to other risks because of a lack of clean water and sanitation. As the dry season progresses and water tables become lower, wells are dug deeper and can become dangerous, causing falls and injuries. Accidents can also occur on the uneven paths that women walk down while collecting water.

Walking to remote water sources and places to go to the toilet, often at night, further exposes women to the

risk of both sexual harassment and animal attacks.

Constantly carrying heavy water containers, that weigh up to 20kg, on the head, hip or back, has severe health implications. In extreme cases curved spines and pelvic deformities can result, causing problems in childbirth.

Further problems occur during childbirth and when women are menstruating because of a lack of water. Women are often unable to wash themselves or the baby, prepare traditional foods containing water or simply drink enough water to replace the fluids they have lost. In areas of Tanzania women have reported taking water as a special gift to a new mother as it is considered to be the most precious gift you can give.

Wider impacts

The lack of clean water and sanitation impacts upon women's lives in many ways.

As young girls are also expected to help their mothers collect water they are often unable to attend school. Girls are also prevented from attending school, particularly when they are menstruating, when there are no toilets available. The lack of education means that very few women in developing countries are decision-makers. Enabling women's voices to be heard in decision-making is not easy but a crucial step in development.

Collecting water takes up valuable time and energy, leaving women unable to do household or income-generating work. The lack of water impacts on women's ability to spend time caring for their children. The World Health Organisation estimates that African women and children spend up to 40 billion hours every year collecting water.

Illness adds to women's workloads as they are also responsible for looking after sick children. Sickness has financial implications too; doctor's fees and medicines are expensive and people who are unable to work cannot earn an income. For many families a lack of income means that they are unable to pay for their children's school fees.

Studies have also shown that the lack of water and sanitation causes stress in communities. Family relationships also suffer because women and children spend so much time collecting water.

Women and WaterAid

WaterAid works with communities to help provide clean, safe water supplies, effective sanitation and hygiene education. These basic services help people escape the spiral of poverty and achieve a better quality of life.

WaterAid believes that it is vital for women to be actively involved in all stages of these projects, including the planning, construction and decision making stages. However, the societies that WaterAid works in are generally male dominated and so extra care and attention has to be taken to ensure women are equally included in the projects. As the main users of the future water points women are best placed to choose the ideal location. Women have a great deal of knowledge on the local water sources that is crucial in the planning stages, for example where the nearest, cleanest sources are and when they dry out.

Women must also be consulted on their choice and location of latrines, as often it is women who are most affected by privacy issues.

Community members, including women, will also



WaterAid/Marco Betti

form water committees to manage their water and sanitation supplies. They are responsible for the project maintenance and the collecting and banking of funds. It is often women who are trusted with the position of treasurer or attendant for sanitation blocks, tapstands or wells. Women also often become hygiene educators as they are able to talk to other women freely. They receive basic training in sanitation and hygiene and then spread these messages throughout their community.

Involving women in projects also has a positive impact on women's positions in the community. By having such an important role as hygiene educator, water committee member or sanitation block attendant the women's status is enhanced.

For women everywhere providing clean, accessible water and sanitation facilities not only prevents needless drudgery and indignity but improves their health and that of the whole family. Women's time is freed up for agriculture or other income-generating work, looking after children or simply relaxing. It also enables their children, including girls, to go to school. In time women gain more skills and become stronger, with more prominent roles in society.

Factfile

- A study in Karachi, Pakistan, found that people living in areas without adequate sanitation who had no hygiene education spent six times more on medical treatments than those with sanitation facilities
- Without the pressures of collecting water, and when there are toilets in schools, the number of female students increases. Women with even a few years of basic education have smaller, healthier families, are more likely to be able to work their way out of poverty and are more likely to send their own children, girls and boys, to school. Each additional year of female education is thought to reduce child mortality by 5-10% (DFID 2000)
- Water-related diseases cost the Indian economy 73 million working days a year

WOMEN'S LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH (YEARS)

UK	81
India	65.3
Malawi	39.6
Mali	48.7

ADULT LITERACY RATE %

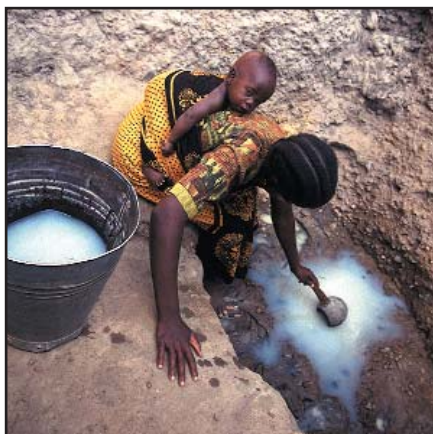
UK	M	99%
	F	99%
India	M	73.4%
	F	47.8%
Malawi	M	74.9%
	F	54%
Mali	M	26.7%
	F	11.9%

ACCESS TO WATER

UK	100%
India	86%
Malawi	73%
Mali	50%

SANITATION

UK	• NOT AVAILABLE •
India	33%
Malawi	61%
Mali	46%



WaterAid/Jim Holmes

Waiting for water

Eighteen year old Rachel Anton waits for three hours in the baking Tanzanian sun for her turn to collect water from this traditional well in Inonelwa village. The 'well' is just a small puddle of water slowly seeping through the ground at the bottom of a deep pit. Yet it is the only water available.

Some days Rachel waits from 5am to 11pm to fill her buckets which she will then carry back, a long way home, to share with her husband and seven month old son Laurent Julios. Her husband does not come and help her collect water as it is considered women's work.

Her family has stomach problems all year round. When it is wet she collects water from any stream or pond, when it is dry she says "you can see the problem." She knows that the stomach problems are caused by the water but this is the only water available to her and she cannot go home without it.



WaterAid/Jon Spaul

A brighter future

Mrs Gamma is a member of the Lifuwu village water project committee in Malawi. "The well here used to be unprotected and our children were always sick," she says. "We spent so much time taking our children to hospital when we really just wanted to work in the fields to get a good harvest."

"We decided to form a committee because we were so concerned about our open wells. WaterAid showed us the way forward. We've been collecting contributions from the villagers and have cash in a bank account ready for any repairs. I feel like we can stand on our own feet now and maintain our pump with no problems."

"Now I am freer to earn money and I also have more power of persuasion over my husband. I feel like our relationship is more equal. Now we have clean water there is so much time and I am free to think about the future. I can work and will also help to build a school. I feel our children are learning from our empowerment and they will do better than we have in the future. For the first time I feel like it's possible to have a few dreams. The difference is that we're not sat here waiting for dreams to come true, we can do something about it ourselves now. We'll do it!"



WaterAid/Abir Abdullah

Urban sanitation

Hasina is the caretaker of the WaterAid sanitation block in Tajgoan slum, Dhaka, Bangladesh. "Before the block it was difficult to find a place to go to the toilet," she says. "Sanitation was the biggest problem for women in this area before. The conditions are so crowded that there isn't a spare place and having no privacy whatsoever was awful. I used to be lucky to get a wash every three days. I had to travel to the market and buy expensive water which I would have to carry home quite some distance. I would also wait for the rain for a wash."

"We used to put up with the situation. Then a female health worker came into our community and brought the women together. She gave us the courage to speak about our problems and for the first time gave us hope that things could change. We felt more powerful as a group and soon found that our shyness left us when we came together. We worked long and hard to change our hygiene behaviour."

"Now the popularity of good hygiene and sanitation has spread. Everyone wants clean latrines and a clean and private place to wash. This block has also become an income generator for our community and our children are much healthier now. As women we have more time to spend on our household duties and can feed and clean our children better too."



WaterAid – water for life

The UK's only major charity dedicated exclusively to the provision of safe domestic water, sanitation and hygiene education to the world's poorest people.

For further information about WaterAid:

WaterAid, 47-49 Durham Street, London, SE11 5JD
 T: 020 7793 4500
 F: 020 7793 4545
 E: wateraid@wateraid.org