

REDUCING THE 'INVISIBLE WORKLOAD'

by providing access to safe drinking water

Mangroves for the Future



Photo credits: IUCN/Women fetching daily drinking water from far away ponds, Shyamnagar, Bangladesh

In many parts of the developing world, women spend many hours each day performing tasks such as gathering fuel wood or collecting water. Improved access to basic needs and services, introduction of new technology and practices can help free women from these physically demanding and time-consuming tasks, so that women have more time to care for their own health, earn cash income, cultivate gardens and new crops, improve their knowledge and education and participate in the enhancement of their communities.

According to Water.org, 180 million people are without access to safe drinking water in South, West and Central Asia. Millions of women and children in developing countries like Bangladesh, and especially in the coastal zone, spend a significant part of each day, collecting water for household use, a pre-occupation prohibiting them from accessing other crucial life opportunities. A survey conducted by Water.org, in 45 developing countries, showed that in 76% of rural household's women and children have the greater responsibility for collecting water for household use. The responsibility and time commitment required for fetching fresh water often exacerbates conditions of poor health and low educational attainment.

In Kultoli village, Shyamnagar, Bangladesh, the increasing shrimp production and high salinity levels in the Chuna

River are the prime causes for the scarcity of potable water. Following Cyclone Aila in 2009 the freshwater ponds on which the local community had traditionally relied for their household water needs had become shallow and highly saline rendering them unsafe and unusable. Women of the village, traditionally tasked with collecting freshwater for the family, were faced with no choice but to spend up to two hours of their day to walk the three kilometers to the next, nearest clean water source.

To help address this issue in Kultoli village, the Mangroves for the Future program supported the implementation of a Small Grant Project through the local organization NakshikanthaMohilaUnnayanSangstha. The project focused on rehabilitating local freshwater sources but achieved multiple benefits beyond this.

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The Nakshikantha organization seeks to improve gender equality through economic empowerment. One of their main approaches is to promote household based trades by training women. This is the first time the organization worked on a project to address the fresh water scarcity issue, the central priority concern of Kultoli village, and an issue preventing women from having the time to engage in skills development for other trade based activities.

Kultoli village stands at the border of the Sundarban, the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world, which is heavily depended upon for the livelihood of many, including the people of Kultoli. Men traditionally harvest forest resources such as Mud crab, honey, Nipa palm products, and fish. Men are rarely involved in household 'reproductive' responsibilities such as cooking, water collection, or childcare, as these tasks are traditionally considered to be the women's domain. Women, in an effort to contribute to household income, also find time to collect shrimp larvae and crabs from nearby canals of the Sundarban after completing their household tasks. Some women also work as laborers to clean the aquatic weeds from privately owned shrimp ponds; or other forms of labor requirements in the area.

Due to the freshwater scarcity the people of Kultoli had been living with extreme hardship; with poor sanitation conditions and waterborne diseases. The MFF Small Grant Project re-excavated five freshwater ponds and provided

33 plastic tanks for storing rainwater in order to increase access to safe water for consumption. In April 2014, four ponds were successfully re-excavated, with one pond being made into a reservoir that can store up to seven million liters of fresh water.

A year later, in May 2015, at least 250 Kultoli village families were accessing clean fresh water from the re-excavated ponds, situated only 250 meters from their houses. The project also provided significant additional positive spin offs. Today the time needed to collect water has been reduced to half an hour a day, a time saving of over two and a half hours each day that women now dedicate to other activities that benefit themselves and their families. Closer access to water sources has also reduced the risk to personal security that women and children were facing. Previously, women collecting water in the evenings, after completing their daily household activities, would often return home after dark, frequently facing sexual harassment and teasing on the way. In this respect having water available near their residence has improved personal security and provided a kind of social security for women.

These unintended consequences of time saving and increased personal security have had a profound impact in themselves. Time saved in collecting potable water has been redirected to productive work within the village and the once 'invisible work' of women and children is now visible and recognized.

As a result of the project the villagers now have more time for meaningful social activities and the 'multiple burden' of taking on both reproductive and productive responsibilities has been relatively reduced. The women of Kultoli have taken up various new activities that were previously not possible, including, new forms of trade for income generation which has resulted in a sense of empowerment. The alternative activities include: chicken raising, home gardening, providing well cooked meals for their families and teaching their children lessons for schools. Individual women have even reported that having more time and less stress has lead to "fewer quarrels with their husbands".

At the same time, it should be noted that providing access to new sources of freshwater has not dramatically changed the behavior of villagers towards water usage and sanitation and there continues to be a high prevalence of waterborne diseases. In an effort to address this, the fresh water ponds are overseen by a village committee, led by the women living nearest to the ponds. The committee has installed public announcement boards with messages about good practice related to sanitation and clean water, e.g. the good practice of boiling water before drinking; do's and don'ts when collecting water from the ponds and ensuring that poultry and livestock stay away from the ponds. Today, the village is creating a collective fund from the contribution of water users, so the ponds can be maintained and kept in a good state.

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Inequality takes many different forms, including income inequality, unequal access to and control over property and resources, unequal access to civil and political rights, and unequal access to social, cultural, and economic rights. These forms of inequality possess inherent gender dimensions, but the one form of inequality that has received less recognition but which has major adverse implications for accessing economic rights, is time poverty, the relative allocation of time between women and men in the household and in the economy. MFF works to recognize and address all forms of inequality and to build resilience for coastal communities.

This article documents the increase in women's discretionary time in just one of the Small Grant Facility projects, by measuring the shift in the use of time away from lower-value activities (such as water collection) toward higher-value activities (caring for family, education, income generation activities). Improved access to potable water sources and water storage facilities, along with building awareness and

capacity and management mechanisms has led not only to an increase in access to potable water, but also an increase in the discretionary time women have for other high value activities. Until women are freed from the necessary chores that consume so much time, they will make little progress in other areas. Time is the key.