



Women and Water: A Relationship Both Obvious and Subtle

Water is Transformative

Improved access to water can transform the life of a woman. It could be through the extra time and subsequent opportunities that become available when women and girls no longer have to trek long, treacherous distances to collect water—a task that is often relegated exclusively to women and girls. Or it could be through the improved health of the woman and her family and the subsequent reductions in time spent caring for sick relatives—another role that women are more likely to play. Improved access could also improve her family's livelihood, whether directly through cooking, agriculture, and keeping livestock, or indirectly through running a small business.

The Subtle Benefits of Water Programs

However, beyond these evident benefits, improved access to water (and also related sanitation, hygiene, and watershed protection services) can have subtle but no less powerful effects on social dynamics within the home and on a woman's or girl's feelings of self worth, status, and confidence. In a study conducted by CARE Ethiopia on women's empowerment, 67 percent of the women responding reported feeling more equal, 68 percent reported a greater sense of control over household resources, and 67 percent reported increased feelings of respect or dignity. Importantly, women that found a role in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) intervention as committee members or in income-generation

opportunities reported the most significant changes to how they felt about themselves and how they were perceived within society.

Girls also gain from WASH improvements. In a study of school children in Western Kenya conducted by the SWASH+ Project, water treatment along with hygiene improvements such as hand washing with soap, resulted in a reduction in girls' absenteeism equivalent to 6 days per girl each year (controlling for age and grade).

CARE Ethiopia's research affirms what has been said repeatedly by women participating in WASH and water resource management projects and programs. They speak of subjective, yet very real, benefits such as the power of having a voice in the community, the pride of having a clean home and personal appearance, and the sense of security resulting from less domestic violence within the home and the absence of attacks en route to get water.

Opportunities for Action

The words of women and girls and our research findings have emboldened us to re-evaluate our water programs as pathways to greater influence in the lives of girls and women. Building on our current work, these will result in incremental but significant changes. For example, we will pay greater attention to menstrual management in schools through facilities that provide room for changing and washing, and we

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will deliberately involve girls in leadership opportunities within school health clubs. We will also pursue greater linkages with savings and loans opportunities both as a way of augmenting household income and women's empowerment as well as financing household access to water. Our interventions will also seek to change cultural norms and traditional and governmental policies that negate or ignore the voices of women in managing the use of and access to water both for domestic use and as a productive asset.

Our attention to the multi-faceted elements of a person's life will bring us into closer collaboration with other partners within and beyond CARE that work in related areas like food security, agriculture, education, and health. And though our programs will specially target women and girls, their benefits are intended for all, including men, boys and vulnerable populations such as the disabled, the very young and the elderly.

Women and Girls as Change Agents

Seeking to uplift women and girls through water and related programs is not merely fanciful or arbitrary. Years of development

experience have taught us that women's vulnerability to water and sanitation scarcity and quality is one side of the coin; the other is their tremendous potential to be change agents once they are given help in addressing their most basic needs. Women have defied cultural norms to become early adopters of latrines and are almost always the main participants at hygiene promotion sessions, because of their concern for the health of their families. Women have successfully managed water-user associations. They form the backbone of savings and loans associations and have much higher rates of repayment than men.

From our experience, the central involvement of women and girls in water-related programs can increase the benefits to women and the success of the programs. However, the challenge we must meet is for programs to be designed with an understanding of the potential of women and girls as change agents. Programs should raise the bar beyond service delivery and seek to transform the way women and girls think about themselves and their ability to change their lives and communities. In doing so, they will, no doubt, be made better by the ideas and insights of women and girls.

Some Factors Affecting Empowerment

A study by CARE in Ethiopia found the following correlations with feeling significantly more empowered:

- Those who reported adoption of a hand washing station near the latrine were 6.62 times more likely to have said they felt significantly more empowered after the intervention.
- Those who said they doubled the amount of water they collected following the intervention were 6.48 times more likely to have felt significantly more empowered.
- Those who reduced their water fetching time by half or more were 3.19 times more likely to have felt significantly more empowered.

For more information on CARE's work with water and related programs, please visit our public website at: <http://www.care.org> and our Water+ wiki page at: <http://water.care2share.wikispaces.net/>



CARE USA Headquarters
151 Ellis Street, Atlanta, GA 30303
404-681-2552 | www.care.org