

# Women's Control of Clean Water: The Key to Eliminating Poverty and Violence

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On March 8th, the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of International Women's Day, celebrations are taking place worldwide to highlight both the progress made for women's rights and the distance we have yet to go. We must also not forget another day that will take place later this month honoring an issue of grave importance to women. March 22 is World Water Day. Unfortunately, the explicit and critical link between women's wellbeing and their access to clean water often goes unnoticed.

Globally, women make up more than half of the 884 million people who have no access to safe water.<sup>1</sup> They also represent those most often tasked with daily collection. According to UNWomen, on average women travel 10-15 kilometers or 6-9 miles every day, spending eight hours or more collecting water then hand carrying it to their home.<sup>2</sup> Most women can only carry one large jerrycan, each of which holds 5 gallons or 20 liters. This water must then serve an average of 8 to 10 people in a household daily for drinking, cooking, washing clothes and dishes, bathing and cleaning their home. Compare this ½ - 1 gallon usage per person per day, to the 69.5 gallons per capita use of water in America, including 11.6 gallons for a shower, 15 gallons for clothes washing, 18.5 gallons for flushing toilets, 9.5 gallons lost through leaks, and 14.7 gallons for all other uses per day.<sup>3</sup>

According to the World Health Organization and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation, girls under 15 years of age are twice as likely as boys the same age to be given the responsibility to collect water.<sup>4</sup> Girls who are tasked with the collection of water in place of their mothers miss part of their school day. Overtime, they can fall behind and eventually drop out. Women who manage this task for their family, give up hours of productivity that might have been spent other ways to enhance a family's economic wellbeing. Water collection thus continues to perpetuate the vulnerability of women, undermining the economic and educational opportunities that may exist to advance their wellbeing.

Even more unfortunate is the violence inherent in the process of collection. Because it takes so many hours to reach and return with water, many women leave before dawn and travel in the dark to get to a water access point early. Some water access points serve thousands of surrounding villagers. Arriving early means women can avoid the crowds that often break into violence as individuals compete for

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization and UNICEF. Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation: Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Special Focus on Sanitation. 2008; 23 - 37  
[http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/monitoring/jmp2008/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmp2008/en/index.html) 2010. Accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> UN Entity for the Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, UNIFEM Fact Sheet: At a Glance – Women and Water. UNWomen. [http://www.unifem.org/materials/fact\\_sheets.php?StoryID=289](http://www.unifem.org/materials/fact_sheets.php?StoryID=289). Accessed February 25, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> American Water Works. Water Use Statistics. DrinkTap.org  
<http://www.drinktap.org/consumerdnn/Home/WaterInformation/Conservation/WaterUseStatistics/tabid/85/Default.aspx>. 2010. Accessed February 26, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization and UNICEF. Joint Monitoring Program for Water Supply and Sanitation: Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Special Focus on Sanitation. 2008; 23 - 37  
[http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/monitoring/jmp2008/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/monitoring/jmp2008/en/index.html) 2010. Accessed February 28, 2011.

access. It also means that they are more likely to collect clear water from shallow creeks or hand-dug wells before it gets muddied with dozens of others coming for collection. However, traveling alone through the dark also leaves women more susceptible to sexual assault. On the other hand, returning later than expected from collecting water is often a trigger for domestic violence as husbands await their morning tea or bath. Pregnant women carrying heavy water jugs are more likely to suffer a miscarriage. Women who are blind, elderly, disabled or too sick to carry water on their own are often forced to trade sex for men to deliver it for them when they cannot afford to pay for the service.

Not only is the collection process racked with violence and exploitation, but the water itself is a source of harm, spreading dangerous water-borne diseases. Globally, diarrhea is the second leading cause of death among children under five.<sup>5</sup> And it is the lack of clean drinking water and proper hygiene and sanitation that are the primary causes of diarrhea.<sup>6</sup> Safe water is also essential for reducing maternal mortality and infant mortality rates.

While women remain those most deeply impacted by the lack of access to clean water, unfortunately, women are least likely to control or manage water infrastructure. And yet, women represent the most critical stakeholders with a vested interest in resolving this issue. No country can deny the statistics that when economic opportunity is given to women, development soars. In a speech given by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on International Women's Day, March 8, 2003, he stated, "Study after study has shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries."

How is it not recognized then how much economic development is hindered if women spend 4-8 hours each day collecting water. Further, water ventures can provide women with a viable and sustainable income, and an opportunity to serve as a change agent within her community serving the marginalized. The World Health Organization estimates that depending upon the region, for every \$1 invested in water and sanitation it yields an economic return of between \$3 and \$34.<sup>7</sup> Ensuring women's participation and opportunity to design and manage water ventures allows them to ensure their own protection and livelihood.

Take Global Grassroots venture "Hard Workers" for instance. In a rural community called Gahanga on the outskirts of mountainous Kigali, a team of 19 women including their leader Seraphine Hacimana, have been particularly troubled by the long journey they must embark upon each day to collect water. Rwanda is a spectacular, mountainous country. And in Gahanga, like many parts of Rwanda, women rarely have a water source near the home, so must walk 3-4 miles down a hillside to collect water at a dirty valley creek. In addition to the disease and poor hygiene associated with poor water access, many of those who were left physically disabled by the war and those who are elderly, blind, pregnant or HIV

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<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. Diarrhoea: Why children are still dying and what can be done. UNICEF and WHO. 2009; v. [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598415\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2009/9789241598415_eng.pdf) Accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council. A Guide to Investigating One of the Biggest Scandals of the Last 50 Years. 2008. [http://esa.un.org/iys/docs/san\\_lib\\_docs/WASH\\_media\\_guide\\_en%5B1%5D.pdf](http://esa.un.org/iys/docs/san_lib_docs/WASH_media_guide_en%5B1%5D.pdf) Accessed February 28, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council. A Guide to Investigating One of the Biggest Scandals of the Last 50 Years. 2008; 3. [http://esa.un.org/iys/docs/san\\_lib\\_docs/WASH\\_media\\_guide\\_en%5B1%5D.pdf](http://esa.un.org/iys/docs/san_lib_docs/WASH_media_guide_en%5B1%5D.pdf) Accessed February 28, 2011.

positive are too weak to make this journey. In this area, a service has sprung up where local men agree to deliver water on bicycles for a fee. But if you cannot pay, as one woman told us: “your children are coming home from school for lunch and you have no water to cook them rice and beans. And so, you do what you have to do.” Many women end up having to exchange sex water delivery, just to feed their children.

With our social entrepreneurship training and an initial \$2600 grant, Seraphine and her team designed their own non-profit water solution. They installed a water tank next to a church within close walking distance of this remote community to collect and purify rainwater from the roof during the rainy season. In the dry season, they pay for clean water to be delivered by truck from the city. Hard Workers supplies 100 households (totaling between 800 – 1000 people) with fresh clean water daily. The revenue generated from those who can afford to pay, ensures the most vulnerable always have water for free. Further, the team uses any profits to pay orphan school fees and provide annual health insurance for vulnerable women and their families. In its fourth year, the project is operating sustainably and preparing to expand to three additional sites to serve another 6000 people, protecting even more women from sexual exploitation. The team members, some even widows in their 70s, sleep side-by-side in shifts each night to protect their tanks from people stealing their water. The venture has become so valuable to the community that even some of the village men have asked to join the project, and occasionally when a woman is sick, their husbands will take their shift guarding the tanks t night.

These women have become established leaders in their community and have begun to make a major difference in a critical issue facing vulnerable women. Women from as far as three hours away have walked to visit the team to see how they were able to initiate their project alone. Project leader Seraphine has spoken on the radio about water issues, has been invited to Kenya to share their solution and is now seen as the first to bring development to their remote community. But what is most remarkable about this team is that of its 19 members, only 7 are actually literate. And Seraphine is a 39 year old mother of 7 children with only a 1<sup>st</sup> grade education. Once living on the edge of survival, Seraphine is now a community change leader.

Though it may take longer to combat the patriarchal, cultural institution that essentially holds women in servitude to the process of collecting water, the act itself may prove an opportunity for intervention on other issues. Water access points where women gather make assembling and sensitizing large groups remarkably easy. Take Have a Good Life for example, another Global Grassroots water venture located within a hillside community of Kigali. Similar to the issues faced by Hard Workers, vulnerable women in Have a Good Life's community have been exploited in exchange for water delivery adding to the prevalence of HIV. Further, contaminated water sources have contributed to high incidences of cholera, typhoid and diarrhea. A baseline issue study among a sample of the population revealed: 95 percent said they had suffered from diseases related to unclean water, 81.4 percent had traded sex for water, 100 percent knew someone infected by HIV while trading sex for water, yet only 25 percent had taken HIV tests. Have a Good Life extended a municipal pipeline from a more populated area and constructed a water access point to bring water into their hillside community. Not only do they now serve 200 families (1600 – 2000 people) with clean water, they use their water access point as a location where they can speak to women about proper hygiene as well as HIV/AIDS testing.

When wells are dug near clinics, health care providers can gain access more easily to women and children when they come to collect water, allowing for more regular check-ups. In South Africa and Malawi, Roundabout Water Solutions is constructing wells with water pumps fueled by merry-go-rounds at schools. These PlayPumps ensure girls to remain in schools and use the power of play to fill a tank for

use by the school and community. Painted billboards are hung on the overhead tank containing awareness messages, allowing the water access site to become educational as well.

Water is simply a key lever for advancing women's rights and opportunity. Any group eager to eliminate violence against women ought to consider advocating for women's access to clean water. Women consistently face a risk of violence in the process of collecting water from sexual violence, sexual exploitation and domestic violence. Further, a lack of access to clean water has long been a driver of poverty as well. Not only does water collection rob women of a half day of productivity, but girls who participate on behalf of their family also fall behind in school and are at higher risk of dropping out all together. In contrast, women who manage their own clean water access not only ensure the most vulnerable women and girls are no longer subjected to such violence, but the ability of women to lead and control water ventures provides women with greater confidence, agency, leadership and engagement in community as change agents. Our experience has shown that one successful experience as a change agent is quickly followed by expansion and/or an iterative problem-solving process where women take on other challenges facing women in their communities. Women not only will have more courage, but they will also have greater access to resources to do so. Women-managed clean water access ensures girls' access to education will be protected and the next generation will have even greater opportunities.

The link between women and water is clear. In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving the number of people without access to water and sanitation by 2015, women must be engaged in all aspects of planning, design, implementation and management of water infrastructure. Water innovation should focus not just on large scale municipal and commercial water infrastructure, but as equally on individual and single-household usage tools that are immediately applicable, affordable and accessible to women in a developing country context. While other MDGs commit to advancing the rights and wellbeing of women, it can serve to make explicit the critical link between women's rights, wellbeing and opportunity and their access to water. Further, UNWomen in its commitment to advancing women's wellbeing must consider women's access to clean water a critical human right that can serve as a potent lever for advancing women's well-being on many other levels. Finally, global NGOs and environmental agencies committed to protecting clean water must not ignore the vested interests of women, and the knowledge base they represent in terms of the location, quality and reliability of water sources. Engaging women in the design, management and innovation around access, movement, utilization, conservation and treatment of water is essential.

Women want and deserve safe, easy, affordable access to clean water without violence, exploitation or a trade-off with other forms of economic or educational pursuits. More funding, training, and opportunity is needed to ensure locally-initiated water ventures can be advanced by grassroots women.

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seeds of change for women's empowerment

# TRANSFORMING WATER INTO POWER

## Women Controlled Water Access Points as a Tool for Women's Rights and Gender Empowerment

**1 Identify Marginalized, Emerging Women Change Agents**  
Seraphine Hacimana, a 38 year old mother of 8 with only a primary school education, decides to address water access in her rural Rwandan village. Physically disabled, sick and elderly women who cannot make the 3-4 hour round-trip into the valley to collect dirty creek water, face risk of sexual exploitation from delivery men when they cannot afford to pay for water.

**2 Provide Social Venture Training and 3 to 8 Months of Project Design Support**  
Seraphine, representing a team of 19 women, attends and graduates from Global Grassroots' 40-hour Conscious Social Change Training Program, learning how to design a sustainable social venture.

**3 Award Seed Grant for All Start-up Costs and Provide 12 Months of Advisory Support**  
With a \$2600 grant from Global Grassroots, Seraphine launches "Abanyamurava", a social-purpose venture that will sell purified water delivered by truck or from rainwater catchment to 60 families. This sustainable project will use profits to provide free water to vulnerable women and orphan-headed households, and also pay for orphan school fees and women's health insurance.

**RESULT: Measurable Social Impact, New Change Leaders & Culture of Social Entrepreneurship**  
After one year, Abanyamurava is operating sustainably, preparing to expand to two new sites, and is initiating a local women's microfinance fund. Seraphine is recognized as the first woman to bring development to her community and now mentors other emerging change agents committed to water access.

**The most effective lever of social change is a woman with the capability, resources and commitment to initiate positive-change for herself and others.**

### WATER ACCESS IN RWANDA

In Rwanda, the responsibility for water collection falls primarily on women and children, who spend hours each day hauling jerry cans of water long distances up and down the mountainous terrain. Limited access to clean water not only causes water borne illnesses and poor hygiene; but the time required to collect water often prevents children from attending school and serves as a trigger of domestic violence. Women who are too sick, disabled or elderly and cannot make the daily journey to collect water often face sexual exploitation to meet their basic needs.

At the grassroots level, the marginalized women experiencing these issues directly often have the best solutions. Unfortunately, they also often have the least access to the education, skills and funding necessary to advance their ideas. Global Grassroots helps women help themselves.