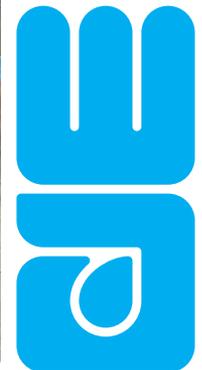


Leaving no one behind: lived experience of water and sanitation in Kampong Chhnang



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Let's start with listening and understanding first



Understanding social context and tradition is the key to development



Why do you discriminate against me when you don't understand what pain is?



Keep struggling for clean water no matter how hard life is



Action needed to provide the elderly with independent access to clean water



Unable to read, villagers want sanitation and health information in image and sound, not just text



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Home connected to piped water supply network saves time for female household leaders



Let's start with listening and understanding first



Imagine you are a wheelchair-bound person. It was raining when you had to wheel yourself through a muddy path using one hand while another holding a hoe on your shoulder. You would do the same in dry season by braving the scorching heat and dust to find a spot to defecate. But once there, you have to tell yourself to hold on for a few more seconds until you finish digging a hole using the hoe you have brought along.

“It was raining heavily and my stomach could not wait any longer so I had to wheel myself out under the rain. It was so difficult to wheel on the muddy path. My wheelchair got stuck in the mud along the way. When I tried digging a hole, I splashed dirty water onto myself. That was such an unforgettable moment for me. My shoulder hurt so much from digging the hole that I felt as if one of my arms was about to break apart from my body,” Navy said.



It was an experience Navy has been living for more than 20 years now although she already has a toilet built at home. She is 29, a widow with a 6-year-old daughter. They share a wooden house with Navy's 58-year-old mother, 87-year-old grandmother, and two brothers in Kralanh village, O Russei commune, Kampong Tralach district, Kampong Chhnang province. Her father died when she was 18. Navy lost her ability to walk when she was four years old due to an illness that left one of her arms and both legs paralyzed.

With material support from donors, Navy's family had a toilet built behind her house. During the construction, Navy oversaw the work, concerned that the facility was being built in such a way that would be inaccessible for her wheelchair. She gave the contractors some feedback but they did not listen to her or try to understand her needs at all. After the construction was completed, she tried to use the toilet by leaving her

wheelchair outside. But the experience extremely difficult, which compelled her go back and practice the old way – open defecation. Each time she needs to do it, she has to make a trip in her wheelchair out to the field with one hand carrying a hoe before making a return trip to clean herself at home afterward.

She said: "For me, health, sanitation, and washing are very important. When they were building the toilet they completely ignored the need of people with disability like me. As a result, I still cannot use this toilet because the inside compartment is too narrow for the wheelchair to roll in. The toilet bowl is too high, making it impossible for me to move myself from the wheelchair and onto the bowl. The contractors did not bother to build a ramp for the wheelchair either. I told them about my needs when they were building the toilet but they responded that it could not be done. As a result, I still continue practicing open defecation the same as before."



However, she added: "I am presently trying to save money to build another toilet, which I hope will help significantly reduce my hardship, especially when it rains or at night time. With a proper toilet I will not have to go out to the field anymore. It is an extremely difficult experience for me. I just want to have an easily accessible toilet to use like everyone else does."





Understanding social context and tradition is the key to development



In the community where Mr. San Tol lives, the majority of old people work in agriculture while the younger ones study at the university in the provincial town. Some of them work overseas (mostly in South Korea), and others go to university in Phnom Penh.

They practice the Islamic religion. According to their tradition, Mr. San Tol said, the elderly look after children who, in turn, must respect their caretakers and never talk back to them. Such a respect is of utmost importance in Islam.

As parents, Mr. San Tol and his wife shouldered responsibility to raise their five daughters until all of them were married. At present, he and his wife live on their own after their children moved out to live in their respective homes. He gave each of them a house, which unfortunately, he said, does not have a toilet yet. His own house does not have a toilet either – an issue his wife constantly complains about due to the difficulty she has with open defecation. He said that often arguments break out between him and his wife over the issue of their lack of a toilet.



“Water is the main problem followed by the toilet. Each time she has to defecate, I have to accompany her to the field, especially at night and when it rains, because she is afraid of the dark and bugs. I do not have the money to build a toilet yet and because of that she always complains about it, causing an argument between us,” he said.

Most of the villagers earn a living from farming. In addition to vegetable gardening, Mr. San Tol also raises ducks to produce eggs to supplement his income. They farm vegetables mostly during the rainy season and not at all during the dry season from January to May due to a severe shortage of water. In the dry season, the villagers must fetch water from a pond or well 300 meters away from their farms.

“I remember the time when our rice and other crops died due to the lack of water. Currently, we are staying in a hut on the farm where we grow vegetables and raise ducks after we gave up our house to our children who got married. Water shortage is a problem and not having a toilet is also

a difficulty. We do not have a toilet yet since we do not know where we will go to live in the next few years, because this house is not ours. On top of that, building a toilet costs a lot of money and that is why we are not going to build it at this time,” he said.

“My wife constantly complains about it because she does not like defecating in the field. She is angry about it, saying we are getting too old already but we still don’t have a toilet in the house. The house is surrounded by a foul smell. In dry season, the ground is so hard to dig and it is muddy in rainy season. Sometimes we step on somebody else’s excrement which was not properly covered. Whenever there is a heavy rain, we defecate in plastic bags and wait until the rain stops or the morning to take them out to bury. Our current situation is not good and there is nothing we can do about it yet,” he said.

According to Mr. San Tol, in the past it was customary for most people in the village to go to defecate in the forest near their village. But the forest is now gone and, as a result, many villagers have decided



WaterAid/ Vat Mom

to build their own toilets since they no longer have any forest for privacy like before. He said he and the villagers would like very much to have access to clean water to improve the living standard in their community. They hope that their wish will be heeded by the local authority or organizations working in water supply.



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Why do you discriminate against me when you don't understand what pain is?



The woman appears skinny and pale, her eyes filled with anxiety. Already living with a chronic illness, she bears the brunt of both verbal and physical discrimination and numerous prohibitions that severely affect the daily life of her family as well. Living in a remote village, she, her husband, and a son live with a chronic illness for which they have been discriminated against by a small group of fellow villagers.

“We have been living with AIDS for a long time already. The disease bothers me physically so much especially when I do hard work. Each month we have to travel to the provincial town to receive medicines for me and my son. He is six years old but cannot speak because he was born without a uvula.”

She earns income from harvesting bamboo shoots and from cutting bamboo. Her husband works as a motor-taxi driver. Because of their health conditions, several of their neighbours have discriminated against them with some hurling unpleasant words at them whenever



they walk past in front of their houses. But much worse is that they have even prevented her family from using water from a communal pond in the village too.

“We are currently living on a hillside which is state property. The area has no water and even though we want to dig a well there is no water to be found as the ground is just hard and rocky. Our daily life is a hardship. It is hard to earn an income and get access to water because we have AIDS. Other people around us do not want to let us use the same water source as them. In the past they did not even wish to talk with us.”

The authorities have intervened but some villagers remain unwilling to change their attitude toward the family. Concerned for their safety, the couple were compelled to persist with the hardship by walking long distances to fetch water from another source far away from home.

“We spend a lot of time collecting water. We spend up to one hour in order to collect four buckets of water because the small, rocky hole which has water is located far into the rice field and impassable to motorcycles. Sometimes some kind-hearted villagers lend us a cart so that we can fetch a large quantity of water in just one trip. Otherwise, we could end up wasting the entire day fetching water, preventing me and my

husband from going to work to earn any money. We use the water for drinking, cooking, and washing dishes and clothes.”

Recently, the majority of the villagers have gained access to clean water following the installation of a pipe network. A small group of them, however, are still not connected to the new system due to lack of money to pay for the connection. But what has been baffling the woman is that, after they have access to clean water, those families began throwing garbage or even excrement into the pond near their houses that they used to rely on for water. She has been very upset considering the long distance she and her husband have to walk to collect water and the pain their weak bodies have to endure under the weight of water they so badly need.

“A clean water network has already reached our village but we still cannot afford it because we are extremely poor. Our son is our main priority. He is sick and we have to save money for his treatment, and this is not easy since we are not able to earn much like other families. On average we make 10,000 riel (US\$2.50) a day, but if the connection fee costs just around 100,000 riel (US\$25), I think we can save up for the connection to be installed to our house in the future.”





Keep struggling for clean water no matter how hard life is



The strength of their desire to have clean water was on full display when a group of impoverished villagers decided to pool funds among themselves in order to get water for use for farming and household needs all year round. They believe that before getting help from others they must help themselves first. Nonetheless, their effort is unlikely to be sustainable without intervention from other stakeholders.

One of those villagers is Srey Mom, 26. She is a farmer and also a village health volunteer, who lives with her aging mother and a nephew. She has signed up to volunteer in her community, and together with other volunteers she has helped organize groups to try to address the issue of water for farming and daily use of their community members. Their action has been prompted by the chronic shortage of water to use for farming and daily needs. The issue has been particularly acute for woman-headed households, the elderly, and small children in terms of consumption and maintaining body hygiene.





“Currently I live with my mother and a nephew. I decided to drop out of school when I was in 9th grade at Phum Da School in 2008 in order to help look after our rice farm and my mother, who is in poor health. Our living standard has become much tougher since my father died in 2016,” she said.

She is the youngest among four siblings. Her older

siblings have all been married and moved out to live in their respective houses already. Her mother is 68 years old and often sick. Srey Mom herself also struggles with poor health, and that is why she decided to quit school to return home.

“The most difficult problem facing our village is the lack of clean water and sanitation awareness. In Phum Kangkep, our village, the ground is made up of clay and rocks, which make it extremely hard and makes it difficult to find potential water sources. Most of the wells in the village either dry up quickly or have little water left. The treated pipe water network has not reached our village yet. Aside from rice farming, I

have volunteered to increase health education in the village by actively joining the local authority, local network, and organizations that are helping our village and neighbours.”

Srey Mom said the villagers have recognized how precious water is and therefore they are always conscious to use it extremely frugally. They are careful not to waste too much water on laundry, bathing, or other types of cleaning. Usually during rainy season her family and those across the village make sure to store rain water for use in dry season in case the village wells and ponds dry out. In case of severe water shortage, the villagers are forced to buy water from private vendors at 10,000 riel (US\$2.50) to 20,000 riel (US\$5.00) per 300L jar. But sometimes the vendors themselves have no water to sell when nearby wells, streams, and canals dry up. For drinking, Srey Mom buys bottled water instead of using well or pond water, which contains metallic or other hard residues harmful to health. This is because her family has not bought a water filter for their household use yet.

Her community is home to 400 families who face a chronic water shortage every year. Last year, the village experienced a month-long drought, prompting the village chief and local authority to launch a water distribution drive for the villagers. However, the distribution exercise did not reach everyone as intended and many had had to put up with the

hardship caused by the water shortage. In light of this experience, the villagers wished that local authority and other stakeholders would respond with technical support and cooperation to help make clean water sustainably available for their use in the future. They are particularly interested in getting connected to a clean water supply network that is affordable, allowing the poor villagers to access the water they badly need.

Recently, the villagers have agreed to pool their funds with the aim to pay for outside contractors to dig a canal and to buy two pumping generators. But the money raised has not met the amount required since many families are poor and don't have money to contribute to the fund-raising. Those who have made contributions still have not received clean water because there was no money to buy diesel to operate the generators. They are hoping that the local authority will assist them with the diesel as they did in the past. They believe that a cooperative supply of clean water is the way to face their challenges as it reflects the solidarity of the community members in addressing their common problem.





WaterAid/Monory Sarom

Action needed to provide the elderly with independent access to clean water



Ms. Peng Chroeun, 65, and her husband, Mr. Hin Heang, 73, live together in a hut in Lech village, Chronauk commune, Kampong Leng district. Water and sanitation are the two main issues facing the villagers, especially the elderly who do not have children to help look after them as in the case of this couple.

“Currently we live on land that belongs to our children, and we make a living by growing some vegetables and raising chickens. But this year, we have noticed we have become physically weaker. I cannot go out to do farming work like I used to and my husband is deaf and has just recently had an operation to remove his appendix as well. We are aging and weaker by the day. This is all we can do to stay alive as our children are not well-off either. Everybody has their own family to look after and provide for as well,” Ms Chroeun said.

As for water, every day the couple buys water from private vendors, who deliver them the water in a cart. Sometimes they accept the





payment but sometimes they refuse payment out of pity for the old couple. When they need to defecate, they have to go to the nearby bushes or to their backyard. Ms. Peng Chroeun said the practice is extremely difficult due to her frailty, which sometimes can cause her to easily trip over. Without a proper toilet, she has to dig a hole in the ground in order to defecate. But it is not easy for her to squat and get up due to a chronic pain she has in her knees.

“The difficulty is indescribable for us. Everything requires money. Going to the hospital requires money, so does building a toilet and buying water. But we no longer possess the physical strength we used to use to earn money. All we can do to survive is grow a few crops, weave mats, raise chickens, and sell mangos and cashew nuts. We are trying to stay alive on our own without having to bother our children too much,” she said.

Their village has about 500 families. The villagers rely totally on 10 wells for water for daily use. The village has 102 elderly people, who are compelled to work on their own to survive since they do not have children or grandchildren nearby to look after them or have been abandoned by them altogether. Due to a lack of money to buy filters or purified water, the villagers usually drink raw water they collect from wells or rain. Without family to help them, the elderly face a daunting task of collecting water from the wells, which are located far from their houses.

Ms. Chuon Nen, 59, and her 66-year-old husband, Mr. Chap Choy, are another example. They have 16 children but eight of them have unfortunately died from various illnesses. The couple earn a living from farming rice, growing vegetables, and raising some livestock. Water is the main challenge they face to maintain their livelihood. Ms. Chuon Nen said she hopes that one day her village will have an elderly center where old people like her can receive healthcare and other care free of charge. Access to clean water and sanitation is of utmost importance for them and the entire community. Such a facility would significantly help ease the hardship of the villagers, especially old people who are left with the burden to raise and care for young grandchildren after the children's parents migrated to work in factories or construction sites in the provincial towns and cities.



WaterAid/ Monory Sarohn



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Unable to read, villagers want sanitation and health information in image and sound, not just text



Ms. Prak Siek, 48, is a widow with two daughters. She has a strong desire to see both of them receive high education, get a job, and have a better life than the one they live today. For that goal, she clearly understands the importance of her daughters maintaining good health. She is fully aware how important it is for them to drink only clean water and have access to a proper toilet – all for the sake of their health and safety.

The mother and daughters live in a zinc-roofed wooden house in an area which experiences flood and drought for six months every year. Their house is typical of the area with the front section perched on a dyke and the rear extended into the canal and propped up by stilts that stretch eight meters below. The height is the main reason why many villagers do not want to build a toilet inside their houses due to the high cost involved. The higher the house, the more concrete pipes they need to install to form a septic tank for the toilet.

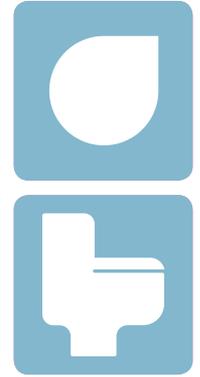




"Defecating has been the main difficulty facing our family since we do not have a toilet. In rainy season, we just dump it straight into the water below. But in the dry season, we have to find a spot behind bushes or row the boat up to 150 meters from the house in order to defecate privately. We have to be patient and wait until dusk in order to avoid being noticed. In the past, we didn't have to take a long trip to do it because there was still plenty of forest nearby. Now we have to go a bit far in order to find a quieter place, especially in dry season. In rainy season, we can just do it on a boat near the house," says Ms Prak Siek.

"Access to information about this subject is important for my family but we rarely receive it when local authority came to disseminate information about health and hygiene related information. They usually conduct such an awareness campaign only when the water subsides; at which time I am busy working as a laborer in the field to earn an income. On the other hand, they rarely give advance notice before they come and I cannot read either," she says.

Ms. Prak Siek has learned about the importance of drinking boiled water through radio broadcast she and her fellow villagers listen regularly to while out fishing at night or laboring in the field during the day. She said that because she and most villagers cannot read they are often unable to comprehend educational materials that are full of texts. Even though the materials are usually elaborated upon by those who brought them, she said the villagers can understand very little and often forget everything by the time they get back home. Therefore, she said it is most preferable that these education materials be delivered in image, sound, or video format to help the villagers memorize their intended messages better.





Women and children are the real victims of expensive 'flying toilet'



The village sits on a flooded island where villagers travel by boat from one place to another. The flood occurs between July and December, followed by a dry season which last from January to May.

In rainy season water is everywhere, spanning as far as an eye can see. Most of the houses here are built from wood with zinc roof. The flood brings many difficulties. When a big boat passes by, it sends huge waves and the smaller houses begin to shake violently. When a big thunder storm comes, it sends strong wind and water into the house. The families here pray often, fearing that their houses might collapse into the water.

Shortage of water is the main problem in the dry season since there is no well close to the house, so residents have to go to get it from a lake. It is less laborious in rainy season as water is available right underneath the house. The village does not have a lot of difficulties with water, which they can collect from a nearby lake when the water level drops. But it is a different story when it comes to accessing clean





drinking water, because a piped water supply network has not reached the village yet.

Ms. Mak Srei Suong, 67, said: “For us, the flooding season is less troublesome than dry season. We can draw water from the lake to use for drinking, cleaning, washing, bathing, and other purposes. It is also much easier for defecating as we can just dump it from the house straight into the water or take a short boat ride to do it. We all know that doing so is unhygienic but poverty compels us to do it this way.”

Although water is plentiful during the flood, a shortage of clean water consumption remains an issue for the villagers, in particular from November to July. There is only one well for every 10 families. Ms Mak Srei Suong and her fellow villagers hope to have access to enough clean water one day – along with better awareness about sanitation – to save time to tend to other businesses to support their families.

As far as toilets are concerned, the high cost for its construction has been a major obstacle. The high cost is associated with the need to build a strong foundation in order to withstand the waves coming from passing boats. For this reason only a few well-off families are able to afford to pay for what is locally known as a ‘flying toilet’ inside their concrete houses. The description derives from the height of the entire facility, where the toilet compartment is located at the same level of the house and connected to a septic tank eight to ten meters below via a stack of concrete pipes. The higher the house, the more concrete pipes will have to be installed, and the more expensive the toilet will become.

Building a toilet beneath the house is impractical as it will be quickly submerged during the flooding season.

The villagers hope to be able to resolve their predicament by one day having toilets that are both affordable and technically resilient to cope with the specific geographical conditions of their community.





WaterAid/ Sokmeng You

Clean water system is the breath for our life



A Khmer adage says ‘rice farming relies on water, waging a war relies on rice “ធ្វើស្រែនឹងទឹក ធ្វើសឹកនឹងបាយ”. The phrase has a profound significance for farmers like Ms. Nhep Samoeu and other villagers who make up a farmer cooperative in Angdaung Preng village. She and her husband have five children and make a living by farming rice.

“We are not a well-off family but we have to work very hard to save money from the farming and livestock raising in order to send our children to school. I have to support their studies until they complete at least 12th grade. Education is very important to me. It is an asset and a foundation for our family and the society, and I cannot be more delighted to see them go to school and become educated like other children,” Ms. Nhep Samoeu said.

Rice farming provides the family with much needed income to sustain itself, but water is a major problem facing them and other villagers. They rely heavily on rain water for farming and thus a lack of rain can severely affect their way of life. Every year the village faces acute





water shortages from February to June. During this time of year, the concrete-pipe wells across the village dry up and the villagers are forced to fetch water from a pagoda's pond located about 300 meters away.

Andaung Preng village has 138 families, most of whom rely on wells or the pagoda's pond for water for household use. Lack of awareness about safe water consumption and usage also remains a big issue among the local residents there. Most families have a habit of drinking raw water, saying that it is cooler and tastier than boiled water.

A severe drought hit the village hard in 2015 – so hard that many trees died. Each of the families in the village had to make three to four trips each day to collect water from the pagoda's pond for their household use. The water shortage became very acute, forcing many cattle and children to fall ill. But in 2018, the start of the rainy season was accompanied by heavy rains, which, strangely, made many villagers sick as well. Many people had to be admitted to the local health center or private clinic after developing a fever and vomiting. The nurses were unable to establish what might be the causes of their illnesses. Many villagers felt overwhelmed by concerns that their loved ones could die but luckily none did.

In the wake of that incident, the villagers desire to have a proper irrigation system in their community in order to assist them with farming and to improve their access to water for household use – particularly for the children. They look forward to seeing a treated piped water supply network arrive in their village as it did in the

neighbouring ones. In 2019, following the government's announcement about the dry season being potentially drier than normal, the villagers hope that the local authorities and other stakeholders will take necessary steps to respond to their needs in a timely manner.





Which one is the inclusive bathroom?



Each time Yat needs to use a public toilet, she always asks herself which one to enter in order to avoid being discriminated against by members of the public. It isn't a problem for her when she is at home, where she has her own bathroom. But whenever she goes out she rarely avoids people's raised eyebrows or prejudice about her because of the way she looks, dresses, and the fact that she is accompanied by a female companion.

In a social context where awareness about same-sex partnerships remains limited and where prejudice about sexual orientation is widespread, public bathrooms continue to be designated by the traditional identities – male and female.

Yat recalled her experience by saying: "Whenever I entered a female bathroom, some people were surprised or screamed when they saw me dressed like a man. They felt embarrassed and left the bathroom without using it."





WaterAid / Sokmeng You

Back at her home village, Yat is very well treated by her fellow villagers. But a small number of them still look at her with a stereotype and even sometimes refer to her as 'neither a man nor a woman.' Even her own brother often mocks her by dressing up and acting like a woman. Yat said she could not help it because she was born and grew up feeling the way she feels. She only hopes that one day the discrimination and the talk about her just stop.

Yat said she is not upset, nor does she regard the treatment she receives as a big deal. She said she just hopes for future construction of public bathrooms to be more inclusive, taking into consideration the needs of same-sex partners and making it more accessible to people of all kinds of social background – old people, people with disability, and children alike.



WaterAid / Sokmeng You



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Life with a care-taker but without a parent



Heng is an orphaned young girl. She and her three younger brothers live with their grandmother. The young girl is industrious at her study. But since she was a baby, she rarely experienced the love or care of her parents. Her father died when she was still a toddler. Her mother spent most of her time conducting business far away from the home village. She had been away for too long until one day she was gone forever.

“One day I received news that she fell gravely ill and I was asked to go to see her for one last time. I was overwhelmed by worries as I did not have the money to make a long trip,” Heng’s grandmother recalled. “A moment later I received a phone call telling me that my daughter had already passed away. My heart was suddenly filled with profound sadness for my five grandchildren who had just become orphaned with an uncertain future ahead of them.”



WaterAid/Vat Morn



Under her grandmother's care, Heng was able to continue her study. At school, she has received close attention from her teachers. Some of her classmates have discriminated against her for the fact that she is orphaned. But Heng never gives up on her struggle to study and cherishes a desire to complete schooling to become a policewoman and serve the people in her community.

At 14, she still lacks awareness about sexual reproductive health or about how to handle herself at the time when menstruation starts. She is shy and not so talkative. Every day after returning from school, she usually joins her neighbors in going out to the rice fields to find snails to cook for food. After dinner, she immediately tends to her homework and rarely has time to communicate with her grandmother. Like most people in her village, she drinks water straight from the well without boiling it first. For defecating, the family uses a latrine with thatched roof and walls. With her advancing age, Heng's grandma said she is not capable of understanding everything relating to health and sanitation because her main concern is the livelihood of the family. However, she hopes that education will lead her grandchildren to find a bright future and live a healthy life.





Home connected to piped water supply network saves time for female household leaders



Ms. Pen Yeout, 49, is a very busy woman. She is the household caretaker, works as a farmer to earn income for her family and is also the deputy village chief at the same time. In addition to these duties, like other widows in her village, Pen Yeout has another important assignment: collecting water for daily use.

“Widows like me shoulder responsibilities no less than men. But our tasks would be much easier if we had a clean piped water network running up to our house. Then we won’t need to worry so much about fetching water. It can certainly help lessen our burden and save our time too,” she said.

She said that half of the women in her village are widows due to divorce or the death of their husbands. In addition to working to generate income for their family, these women are responsible for taking care of household chores, rearing their children, and collecting water for daily use. In the dry season, she said she and other women





WaterAid / Monory Sarom

spend many hours collecting water because they do not have any means to transport large quantities of water in a single trip. Sometimes some kind-hearted villagers would lend their motorcycle for them to transport water but when such an offer is not available the women have to walk long distances to fetch the water.

She said her life would be a lot better if she had enough water for daily use. She wishes the same for the other women too. She said better access to water will give them more time to concentrate on other tasks or farming to increase income for the families. "It will help widow families like me build a more independent lifestyle unlike in the past when we used to rely so much on men. We can also use the time saved from the water collection to do something more meaningful for us too."



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