Chapter 13

GENDER AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM DOMESTIC WATER SUPPLY IN SEMI-ARID AREAS: A CASE STUDY IN BANASKANTHA DISTRICT, GUJARAT, WESTERN-INDIA

Joep Verhagen
Freelance Rural Development Consultant

Mary Miller
SEWA, Columbia University, New York City

Neeta Patel
Senior Coordinator SEWA, India

Reema Nanavaty
Director Rural Development, SEWA, India

1. Introduction

Combining improved water-supply with micro-enterprise development has much potential to alleviate poverty in semi-arid areas. This case study, implemented by the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in Banaskantha district (Gujarat, India), combines the revival of the piped water supply and traditional water sources with a micro-enterprise development program for female entrepreneurs.

Joint research by IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), SEWA, and Foundation of Public Interest (FPI) revealed that the time released by an improved water supply enables women enterprise members to make a substantial contribution to the household income, especially at times when other income generating opportunities are absent, for instance, during drought. In addition, gender relations have changed in favour of these women. Policy-wise, the study suggests the need for:
• An integrated, holistic approach to rural development in which women influence the design and operation of the service so that it meets their domestic and economic requirements;

• Involving CBOs, NGOs, and other institutions with experience in improving water supply and supporting micro-enterprise development in the reformulation of current policies;

• Using the development of women’s enterprises combined with the improvement of domestic water supply as a major entry points for rural poverty alleviation programmes;

• De-linking water and poverty by providing income-generating opportunities that depend less, or not at all on water, and are demand-driven;

• The government, SEWA and other institutions to provide drought relief work in the form of craftwork at times when other economic opportunities are at their lowest;

• Gender programmes to start addressing women’s immediate gender needs and link these with the improvement of gender equality between, but also among the sexes i.e., for women of different ages and positions in the family.

• The final recommendation is to find ways to scale-up SEWA’s efforts and implement similar programs elsewhere.

Every day, innumerable women still spend substantial amounts of time carrying home domestic water for the family. Water collection reduces the time left for welfare-increasing work and is a drain on household labour resources (Kamminga, 1991). Domestic water projects are generally designed with only such domestic uses in mind. Common objectives are improving welfare and health. This places domestic water projects firmly in the social or health sector and not in the sector of economic development. Yet if women’s water collection was valued at paid labour, it would have high economic costs. Women themselves see domestic water services also as an opportunity for economic development. Especially where gains are substantial, “Poor women … feel [that] time spent … should contribute primarily to the family income” (Wijk, 1998).

SEWA is a trade union registered in 1972. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers, who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. SEWA organizes women labourers for full employment and self-reliance so they have a regular income, food security, and access to health and childcare for themselves and their families. As self-reliant, autonomous actors, these women make their own decisions and control their economic activities independently.

SEWA initiated activities in Banaskantha1 to, amongst others, improve the domestic water supply through better management of the piped