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Water and Sanitation Challenges of Slum Dwellers in Ghana: The Case of Nima Women

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Abstract:

Urban centres are often seen as engines of development, but rapid urbanisation in most of the developing world has also resulted in stark inequalities between the rich and the poor, environmental degradation and growing numbers of slum dwellers. Women in cities often suffer disproportionately, not only because they are, on average, poorer than men (three-fifths of the world's one billion poorest people are women and girls), but often also because they experience greater difficulty in accessing resources and services tailored to their needs, and decision-making opportunities (WEDO, 2003).

The water and sanitation practices of women in poor settlements in Accra are worrying. Thus inadequate social amenities in the slums, the people of Nima lose their productive time in search of water and sanitation services. The residents have also developed bad habits which degrade the environment and also make them more vulnerable to health problems. Proper solid waste disposal methods should be encouraged in the Nima community with the provision of more designated places and more refuse containers at vantage points in Nima. There should also be the discouragement of the payment of tokens to persons who are caretakers of these refuse dumps.

Residents, especially women and children should be educated to refrain from throwing human excreta into refuse containers and gutters in the community. The AMA should also ensure that refuse is collected daily from the community so as to minimize the health risks residents are exposed to.

1. Introduction

Cities are often engines of economic growth and social advancement, but rapid urbanisation in most of the developing world has also resulted in stark inequalities between the rich and the poor, environmental degradation and growing numbers of slum dwellers. Women in cities often suffer disproportionately, not only because they are, on average, poorer than men (three-fifths of the world's one billion poorest people are women and girls), but often also because they experience greater difficulty in accessing resources and services tailored to their needs, and decision-making opportunities (WEDO, 2003).

The presentation of this paper has been approached as the cry of a woman living at Nima in Accra. This woman is called Safiata and her cry is about the true experiences of women in the Nima locality which was relayed to me during an assignment I was engaged in on Water and Poverty by WaterAid, Ghana. This cry is representative of what the majority of the women conceive of the water and sanitation situation. Safiata engaged me in a conversation on the water and sanitation problems facing women in the Nima community. She explains how women and girls in the community, especially the Muslims cannot use the public toilet facilities, especially those provided by the Metropolitan Assembly.

I am called Safiata a resident of Nima, I am married with five (5) children, two (2) boys and three (3) girls, I live with my husband, the children and two of my nephews. I sell 'koko' (porridge) and 'koose' (beans cake), I know you are here to do a research on our water and sanitation issues. I will tell you everything you need to know especially concerning the experiences of women and girls in the Nima community. Then she first asked me these questions. Can you bath a 'booter' (1.5 to 3 litres) of water? Have you already been to the public toilet facilities provided by the Metropolitan Assembly? Have you taken a critical look at the design? Well, the design prevents women and girls from patronising the facility. We simply cannot use the facility knowing there are naked men next door.

2. Materials and Methods

This study is part of a large study of water and poverty selected poor communities in Accra. The analysis is based on data generated from various methods, namely secondary sources, focus group discussions (FGDs), interviews and field observations. The use of multiple methods ensured triangulation of data by allowing for the cross-checking of information with the basic aim of validating answers and conclusions reached in the study.

Poor urban communities of Accra (including) were selected on the basis of several criteria, location, age of settlement and demographic composition. Nima is largely a migrant community.

With the help of a local guide, a transect walk/observation was conducted in the community; this provided an opportunity to observe directly the community water and sanitation infrastructure and services. Data collected were edited, coded, and analyzed with the aid of Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) to generate tables. The result of this study has been published as a technical report from WaterAid Ghana.

Nima was chosen for the study because it is considered to be a poor community in Accra by WaterAid Ghana. This cry of a slum woman is taken out of a larger study on 'Poverty and Water'.

Nima is densely populated with 82,329 people in 2008 (UNESCO-IHE/SWITCH, 2010). The population is made up of various ethnic groups but predominantly Muslims from the northern parts of Ghana and neighbouring West African countries. Water supply in Nima is served by Accra North District of Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL) while the collection of solid waste is contracted to ABC waste management company.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Water

3.1.1. Access to Water

Water is essential to life and everybody deserves to have access to safe water. The Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL) is responsible for urban water supply and at the moment has about 86 systems (Sarpong and Abrampah, 2006) serving a total population of some six million. As at 2004, urban water coverage was estimated at 59% on account of their obsolete equipment and limited capacity of their plants, however, coverage is expected to reach 85% by 2015 in line with the Millennium Development Goals (PURC, 2005). Honestly getting water for our daily use is very difficult in the Nima Community, for most households in the Nima areas, the taps are opened mostly in the night and only for brief moments. In some instances, interruptions in water supply can last for as long as six months, thus as a coping measure residents of Nima travel over long distances ranging between 5 km to 10km to fetch water. The study revealed that this has affected the education of some girls and even boys in the community because they lost school hours in the process of searching for water.

3.1.2. Time Spent In Getting Water

We spend long hours looking for water; can you imagine we move from this community to places as far as Flagstaff House Area, Airport Residential Area and Kaneshie just in search of water? This search can take more than four hours. By the time we get the water and get home it's too late for my three daughters to go to school and even me, I sometimes cannot prepare 'koko' for sale. The implication for me not being able to prepare 'koko' for sale a day is not good to talk about; it actually affects how we eat on such days negatively. Due to the frequent absence from school, my first girl has dropped out of school and is now helping in the 'koko' and 'koose' business. I really wish she went to school but I also understand the difficulties she faces as a first child of the family. She is the first child and girl so much of the water burden rests on her, in this community you hardly see the boys helping in household chores thus the girls do all the domestic work and the consequences are most of the times a disadvantage to them.

3.1.3. Cost of Water

Many urban poor in developing countries, who have been deprived of public service, presently pay very high rates to informal providers for water supply services. In Ghana, many urban poor households already pay more for water than middle and upper class households. People pay as much as per 18 litre bucket of water. We pay for all the water we use even before we use it. Unlike the rich people who get water all the time, they rather use it on credit and pay for it at the end of the month. Sometimes it is difficult to get money to pay for water, we wish we could also use and pay GWCL later just like the rich people do so we can accumulate money and invest but we are denied of this opportunity because we are poor and live in a poor settlement.

According the PURC 2005, many urban communities face shortfalls in water supply. The situation is even more critical in the major cities, where the urban poor have to pay more than ten times the tariff for water as approved by the PURC through secondary and tertiary providers. Residents of Nima pay between GHp 1.00 to GHp 20.00 for water depending on the container being used to collect water, the source of the water and the period/season of the year. This is too much; imagine paying GHp 20.00 for 36 litres of water which would not be enough for even a family of two for a day. I have a family of nine (9) people, my five (5) children, two (2) nephews, my husband and myself. In a situation like this, we may have to buy more than GHc 3.00 of water per day to enable everybody bath twice and also cook and wash the dishes. This is not possible; we cannot spend this much on water for a day. It is not like this is what we will need for a day; we will still have to manage a lot before everybody in the family would get water to bath two times a day even if we spend the GHc 3.00.

3.1.4. Required quantity of Water per Day

The high cost of water has resulted in low water consumption levels among the urban poor. While an individual is required to have access to not less than 20 litres of water per day (Ministry of Water Resources, Works and Housing, 2005), an individual in the poor urban communities have access to between 7 litres and 18 litres of water per day. We do not have the ability to use water as much as

we would have liked to do in this community. We have learned over the years to manage water in difficult times. During the raining season we use more water because we collect water when it rains, thus the quantity used is higher than what we use during the dry season. During the dry season, we bath one “booter” (1.5 to 3 litres) of water each in the family, everybody washes down only once daily. Sometimes we do not even cook; we decide to buy food from vendors, so as to save water. Water is very important for us in Nima as we are Muslims, we perform *ablution* five times a day and also use water to clean our private parts anytime we visit the washroom.

3.1.5. Quality

We are not sure of the quality of water we use, normally one would have believed that water from the GWCL would be good for us to use for everything including drinking but we just realised quite recently that it can be polluted before it gets to our fetching points. Actually, the pipe water we fetch is not good, I will never drink water from the taps, because it is full of faeces. I say it is not good for us to drink because there was this day we were fetching water from the tap standing there (she pointed to a stand pipe in the middle of her compound) when it was opened. In no time we realised that the water was dirty and smelly, we continued fetching it anyway thinking it was dirty because the pipes have not been running for a long while. However in no time, we had the information from neighbours that a burst pipeline was filled with human excreta from a neighbour’s overflowing toilet and this explained the colour and unpleasant smell from the water. We had already collected human excreta into our containers, No; I will never drink water from the taps again, at least not from the taps in Nima. Unfortunately, water from the taps this woman is referring to is from the main urban water supplier. If they refuse to fetch from this source then it means the poor in this community are going to spend more on a very basic need as water.

3.2. Sanitation

3.2.1. Toilets

According to Obirih-Opareh2001, Accra faces acute sanitation problems. These are manifested in unsanitary conditions in and around most of the public toilets, poor and dilapidated infrastructure for liquid waste management, inadequate funding for maintenance, poor sanitary practices, deficient management of existing toilet facilities, indiscriminate defecation in open spaces, into water bodies and drains, irregular collection of liquid waste from septic and other storage tanks, as well as from pan latrines, and limited connections from houses to the central sewerage system.

Safiata continues the narration of her story, we do not have a toilet in this compound however women and girls are also discouraged from using the kind of toilet facility the AMA has provided for the community due to its design, we simply cannot be naked in the cubicles knowing that there are men, some we do not even know also being naked next door, the Assembly’s toilets are very filthy and stink so much that you cannot keep the clothes you took to the toilet on, you would smell faeces all day. In this community, you would hardly see a Muslim lady going to the Assembly’s toilet. We prefer going to the private public toilets being operated by individuals in the community. These are normally flush toilets and thus are expensive, whereas the AMA’s facilities charge 20Gp the private public facilities charge between GHp 50Gp and GHc 1.00 for their services. Most of us the Muslim women in Nima cannot pay for this service so we simply ease ourselves into carrier bags and throw them at the refuse dumping sites or into the public drains. Sometimes we also ease ourselves into chamber pots at midnight and throw the content into the public drains. We know these practices are not good for our health and those of our children but we cannot help the situation, these seem to be the only way out for us.



Some public toilet facilities in the Nima community

3.2.2. Bathrooms

Most of the houses in Nima and in most slum settlements in Accra do not have bathrooms; the bathrooms are either converted to rooms or stores, thus making residents to resort to the use of commercial bathhouse services. We are many in this house, about six families but there is only one filthy and rundown bathroom. As a result most of us use the public bathroom facilities where we pay before we are allowed to use them. Our younger children bath in the open space in the house. Sometimes we also go to meet very long queues at these commercial bathhouses which waste time and make you get to work late. These bathhouses are also not very clean but we patronise them because they are better than those in our houses.

3.2.3. Solid Waste Management

The Waste Management Department (WMD) of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly is responsible for garbage collection and disposal and general sanitation within Accra. Sanitation and solid waste management practices are urgent health concerns for the residents of the Accra Metropolitan Assembly. We are told that people in areas such as Nima do not have to pay anything when we are throwing away our refuse, but in practice this is not true, we pay 20Gp to the caretakers at the dumping sites anytime we want to throw refuse away. We are told this is not official but because they are taking care of the place, we need to give them a token. If we do not have the token of 20Gp to be given to the caretaker, we resort to throwing the refuse into the public drains, which unfortunately passes through some people's homes and also make the gutters in the community blocked and stinky. Essentially, in Nima we use the gutters as places of convenience and refuse dump sites.

They also said the skips at the refuse dumps are to be removed everyday or sometimes twice daily but the ones in this community are sometimes removed once in two weeks or once in a month. Thus the dump sites are always filthy with spilling over skips.



Refuse Dumping Sites and a public drain in the Nima community

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The water and sanitation experiences of women in poor settlements in Accra are worrying. As a result of inadequate social amenities in the slum areas of Accra, the people of Nima lose their productive time in search of water and sanitation services. The residents have also developed bad habits which degrade the environment and also make them more vulnerable to health problems.

Proper solid waste disposal methods should be encouraged in the Nima community with the provision of more designated places and more refuse containers at vantage points in Nima. There should also be the discouragement of the payment of tokens to persons who are caretakers of these refuse dumps.

Residents, especially women and children should be educated to refrain from throwing human excreta into refuse containers and gutters in the community. The AMA should also ensure that refuse is collected daily from the community so as to minimize the health risks residents are exposed to.

The water rationing days and time should be increases to ease the acute water supply problems to Nima, the GWCL should also ensure that the pipelines in the community are checked regularly and repaired if necessary. This would help curtail the problem of human excreta running through the standpipes in the community.

5. Acknowledgement

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