Suffering for Water, Suffering from Water: Gendered and Classed Dimensions of Arsenic Poisoning in Bangladesh

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Drinking Water Crisis in Bangladesh

- About 30 million people exposed to drinking poisoned water
- Naturally-occurring, carcinogenic arsenic
- High spatial heterogeneity and contamination levels
- ‘Largest mass poisoning of a people in history’ (World Health Organization)
- Often called the ‘Arsenic crisis’
- Data: Fieldwork between 2003-05 in 18 villages of 4 districts of rural Bangladesh

WHO allowable arsenic standard = 10 ppb (or µg/L)
Bangladesh government arsenic standard = 50 ppb (or µg/L)
Ubiquitous Tubewells: The Making and Unmaking of a Development Success Story
Drinking Water: Gendered Responsibilities
Increased Hardship in Collecting Drinking Water Due to Arsenic

Comparison of situation in fetching water before and after arsenic was discovered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>1. Got better</th>
<th>2. Stayed the same</th>
<th>3. Got worse</th>
<th>4. Don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical labor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time involved</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Workload increase in water collection due to arsenic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Stayed the Same</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%Men</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%Women</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Time difference pre- and post-arsenic situation in water fetching per day

Distance difference in pre- and post-arsenic situation in fetching water per day

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Negotiating Water Access and Use
Negotiating Water Politics and Conflict
• “Even if we are ill our men will not fetch water for us. It is not a man’s job to fetch water, but it would be nice if they did sometimes. But we don’t ask.” (Woman in focus group discussion)

• “I would die before I fetched water for a woman. If I did, people would think I am mad.” (Man in interview)

• “Why should men fetch the water? That is a woman’s job.” (Woman in interview)

• “We should help women fetch water only if she is ill or unable to do so.” (Man in interview)

• “My in-laws don’t want me to outside of the bari to get safe water, so we all drink our own arsenic water.” (Woman in interview)
Water for the rich…
Water for the poor…
Arsenicosis
Problems Facing Arsenicosis Patients

- Physical/health suffering
- Financial/medical costs
- Maritality problems, esp. for women
- Psychological/emotional suffering
- Livelihood loss
- Death
- Don't know

Percentage of Respondents

- % Men
- % Women

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Arsenicosis: Social Aspects
• “We were poor before, we are poorer now. No one wants to employ my husband, he is too weak.” (Woman in interview)

• “My husband died from arsenic, and now I am ill. I can’t afford the medication. I worry about who will look after my children.” (Woman in interview)

• “No one wants to marry anyone from this village. It has been nicknamed ‘Arsenic village’.” (Man in interview)

• “It is easier to marry off an ill son than a daughter, no one wants a sick bride.” (Woman in focus group discussion)

• “Who wants an afflicted woman? She would bring bad luck.” (Woman in interview)
Suffering *for* and *from* Water…

- Social relations and natural heterogeneity in arsenic distribution interact to produce complex landscapes
- Gendered/classed social relations are compounded by water access, use, control, as well as implications of water poisoning
- Multiple ways that people suffer *for* and *from* water
- Holistic approach to understanding nuanced socio-ecological implications of arsenic contamination is needed

More detail is available in the linked publications at: www.farhanasultana.com/publications/publications.html