From Women to Gender Relations: Assessing the Impacts of Drinking Water Supply Interventions in the Morni Hills of North West India

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This paper examines the impacts of drinking water supply interventions on the quality of life of women in the Morni hills in the Shivaliks of the lower Himalayas in northwest India. Conventionally, women have collected water from bawdis (springs) by negotiating steep terrain over long distances. Reducing this drudgery has been a professed objective of installing water supply sources closer to their homes. The research shows that although installing water taps closer to homes did reduce the drudgery of walking long distances, it increased the load of water that women carried. This is because men's expectations of how the newly supplied water could be used changed. Men who would earlier bathe at common property sources such as the village johads (ponds) now wanted to bathe in the privacy of their homes. This was because of the demise of CPR institutions – the norms, values and codes of conduct regulating their use – and changed aspirations among men. The paper argues that assessing the impact of drinking water supply interventions on women through conventional indicators such as time spent collecting water or distance to water source misses the complete picture. This is because the impact of these interventions is gauged by interpreting 'gender' to mean 'women'. Focusing instead on how these interventions impact gender relations and the gender-based division of labour is likely to give a more complete picture.