

## “We get tired carrying water every day”

Little Karma Choden is still groggy from sleep but it's already 5 am and she has to wake up and prepare for school. As an informal boarder at the Sinchula Community Primary School, about an hour walk from the road head in Chukha (central Bhutan), Karma Choden has to sweep her one-room hut, make her bed, and cook breakfast on the wood-fed stove.

Crouching on the rough beaten mud floor, the 10-year old girl attempts to light the stove. She finally succeeds after blowing several gusts of air that her small lungs can muster. With ash and some traces of soot on her face, Karma finally places a small pot of water on the stove.

As the water heats up, Karma carries a 5-liter plastic container and calls out to her friends living in similar huts nearby. It's time for their daily 15-minute walk to the water source where they will wash their face and carry back some water to cook dinner and the next day's breakfast.

“  
If our school has water, a good toilet, a good hostel, I will be less tired. I can study more and play with my friends.”

However, she said living as an informal boarder entailed less hardship than having to walk for four hours every day from her home to the school and back. “It is also not safe to walk in the forest because many wild animals come,” she said adding that the footpaths were also narrow and steep.

Having eaten her breakfast, Karma quickly puts on her school uniform and joins her friends to school, each carrying neatly covered books and a geometry box.

“When I am in school I am very happy,” said Karma reasoning that she had fun playing games with her friends. Moreover, the World Food Programme supported school provided the children with free lunch.



“We get tired carrying water every day” – Karma Choden

As Karma returns to her hut, the water is already boiling. She deftly peels and cut two small potatoes and puts into the pot. She then adds a few green chillies, a little oil and some salt. After about 15 minutes, the curry is removed from the stove with which a plate of left-over rice from the previous night completes Karma's breakfast.

Over breakfast, Karma confided that she disliked living on her own as it was tiring and difficult.



Karma and her friends walk 30-minutes every morning to wash their face and to fetch water.



**No time for fun: Children do their laundry during weekends**

However, 'fun-time' for informal boarders ends after school. Karma and her friends have to get back to their small huts and start preparing for dinner. While some go out in forest looking for firewood, others fetch more water.

"I cook more rice at night so that I have leftover in the morning," said Karma adding that cooking rice in the morning took more time.

Though Karma and her friends are spared the grueling trek between their homes and the school, the lack of proper toilet and water facilities at the school have made their lives difficult.

"The water is far and very small. We cannot wash properly and we get tired carrying water every day," she said. "Our teachers tell us to wash hands or we will get sick but we do not have enough water."

For toilets, the children used the school's pit latrine.

However, difficulties for these children would be solved, to an extent, with the government already constructing a pour flush toilet. With UNICEF agreeing to provide water taps, the children would soon have clean drinking water at their doorstep.

Though, provision of such facilities would not lift the burden of having to fend for themselves at such tender age, the children would at least be spared from the tiring task of carrying water from outside the school compound. They will also have a proper toilet, a basic need to ensure hygiene.

Together with the Department of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education and the Department of Public Health Engineering, Ministry of Health, UNICEF works to promote health and hygiene in schools through provision of water and sanitation facilities. Many schools have benefited from the partnership. However, still more schools around the country needs similar support. Another challenge is to make these facilities sustainable.

Meanwhile, Karma Choden and her friends will have to continue to carry water until the water supply scheme is in place. The only days they look forward to are the weekends when their parents come to meet them with the weeks ration in tow.

UNICEF