

When the water runs out...

Challenges facing schools in rural Papua New Guinea

For sixth grader Bathshiba Un and her sister Georgina's (a grade three pupil) every school day starts with a 20 minute walk down to the river to bathe. Both girls take a container each to fetch water they will need at school. It takes them another half an hour to walk from home to their school. This has been Bathshiba's regular routine for the last five years.

Bathshiba has lost count of how many times over the years she and her schoolmates from rural Koglam Primary School have been sent home because of water problems at school. This is an important year for her and she is worried if the situation continues, it will affect her education.

She is not alone and her concern is shared by many in her class who are competing to get a place in grade seven and continue through to grade eight and onto secondary school. Bathshiba and many other students have come to accept that spending only half a day at school during the dry season when water runs out is normal. The school's only source of water, an 800 gallon water tank, has become a breeding ground for mosquitoes.



Missing out on school

"Because of the problems with water at school, the smaller grades are sent home early while the upper grades are told to stay on for the full day. Teachers tell us not to play too much because if we do we might get thirsty," said Bathshiba.

Teachers encourage their students to bring their own water to school during the dry season so that they can finish school on time like other schools in the country.

Gender matters

In this region of Papua New Guinea, girls are marginalized and do not have many choices in life. Unfortunately, girls usually oblige with whatever decisions their parents make for them which in most cases involve early marriage. It is quite common for a girl child to take on responsibilities well beyond her age, taking care of her siblings and often looking after the household with her mother. Bathshiba is used to this lifestyle of fending for herself and her younger sister.

Girls like Bathshiba are normally given away in marriage to a husband whom they barely know. Strong cultural practices have given women a very low status in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea and boys are often given educational priorities over their sisters. Girls who go to school often drop out due to non payment of school fees and lack of proper water and sanitation facilities in school.

Bathshiba says she is lucky that she and her little sister are able to go to school and she thanks her father for supporting them through their hard work on the land to raise money for their school fees. Her afternoons after school are usually spent attending to garden chores while the weekends see Bathshiba and her sister selling food at the market.

Coming from this challenging background, the young girl knows that her only chance to make a better life for herself is through education which is why she takes her school very seriously. Bathshiba hopes to one day become a teacher and her hard work in school paid off handsomely when she took out the second prize in her class last year.

The water problems at school are major challenges for Bathshiba but she continues to go to school because she values her education. She often wishes her school was like the town schools who have a reliable water supply.

"I do not want to miss a day in school because I know I have to learn as much as I can and do well in my tests so when there is water shortage at school I make sure I carry a big container of water from home to school with me," said the determined young girl.

Problems with water supply in most schools especially in the rural areas of Papua New Guinea are affecting many students. Building proper water supply systems for schools in this developing country is not seen as a priority for many successive governments and that responsibility is often given back to parents and school managements to take care of.

However with close to eighty five percent of the country's population living in rural areas with no formal income, it is a daunting task for parents to raise funds to build sustainable school infrastructures that will benefit their children.

For now Bathshiba continues to bring a liter of water to school every because she is convinced that after two years she will make it into senior high school in town and will not have to worry about water problems but concentrate fully on her schooling.