

POSTCARDS FROM SAMBURU, KENYA

Pumping empowerment

Wells are about more than clean water in remote Kenyan villages

By IRIS SCHNEIDER >> Every day across sub-Saharan Africa, 13.5 million women spend hours searching for water and carrying it back to their families. The water they find is often contaminated with bacteria or viruses that can cause diarrhea, which kills more of the region's children than any disease. ¶ The women suffer back and neck pain from hauling heavy jerrycans, often while pregnant or with a baby in tow. The daily ritual limits their ability to participate in the economy. Often, their daughters do not go to school so they can help with daily chores like getting water or caring for animals not out to pasture. ¶ The women of Samburu, Kenya, an arid region about 250 miles north of the capital, Nairobi, are luckier than many. ¶ A nonprofit known as the Samburu Project has drilled 84 wells there since 2005, providing clean, accessible water.

Each well serves at least 1,000 people. ¶ The wells bring not only health improvements that come with clean water but also economic opportunity for women. Nobody has to walk more than a few miles to reach a well. That's not far in the nomadic culture. Men trek often for days herding sheep, cattle and goats while women do most everything else. ¶ Having wells nearby means more time for other pursuits, including making beaded jewelry to sell at the market. And daughters who once accompanied their mothers on long walks for water can now attend school. ¶ A community must apply for a well. For each well it approves, the nonprofit must raise \$20,000 to drill it. The wells are usually 230 feet deep. ¶ This summer I spent a week in Samburu to meet women there and see how access to clean water had changed their lives.



A village hub

Women fill their jerrycans, wash their clothes and bathe their children at a busy well in Kenya's northern Samburu region. The well must be pumped by hand, a task that is often a team effort. The wells here have become the village equivalent of the office water cooler. Other communities that do not yet have wells must apply for them and go through an approval process. A hydrogeologist must determine whether water is available, and if all goes smoothly, a well will eventually be drilled.



Photographs by IRIS SCHNEIDER For The Times

Heavy load

Women from the village of Ntilal, Kenya, head home after a midday visit to their well, which was built in 2013. Mangilian Lebasha, left, and Sophia Lemoyong haul their jerrycans filled with clean water. Lemoyong also carries her daughter Argira. At right is Sytoon Lelesara. The round trip to the well took them about an hour. In communities without nearby wells, some people use donkeys to help transport larger quantities of clean water.



Clean water

Mangilian Lebasha, who estimates that she is 42, cooks with clean water in her *manyatta*, a hut built from sticks, animal skins, cardboard and plywood. Like most Samburu, she has a fire in her *manyatta* that she uses for cooking and preparing the sweet, milky tea that she and her family drink each morning. After breakfast, she boils water to make lunch or dinner for her family, which usually consists of beans or a dense cornmeal called *ugali*.