



## Gender appreciation in Gujarat - India

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WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION services are the basic necessities of the community and are a pre-condition for development. They also play an important role in improving the health and quality of life. It is therefore rightly said that *efficient water and sanitation services are the indicators of progress made by a nation.*

Gujarat is one of the states in India which has put in commendable efforts to provide safe water supply to its 41.2 million people, 66 percent of which are living in rural areas. Out of total 18569 villages in the state, as many as 14503 villages were having either quality or quantity problems of water and were declared as "No Source" villages. The State Govt. in support of Union Govt., the Royal Netherlands Govt. and the World Bank, has so far (March 1994) covered 14407 villages by providing safe and dependable source of water with delivery systems.

However to achieve the set objectives, it is essential to have sustainability of the systems which are developed and also provide satisfaction to the consumers. Obviously, this can not be accomplished without the support and involvement of community for whom the services are created. Since women are main caretakers of water and sanitation facilities, their role and participation assumes great significance.

The State Government through its Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB) and other departments, has initiated various action to appreciate and encourage involvement and participation of women in this vital sector and the results are quite encouraging.

### Why focus on women ?

Looking to the Indian conditions and socio-cultural traditions, women have to play a major role in the management of water and sanitary services at domestic level. They play multifarious role in the society, as a mother, house-wife, cook, cattle breeder and artisan. Traditionally, they are the custodian and manager of water in the house and play a role in management of water sources and environmental hygiene in their neighbourhood. They draw, store, utilize and manage water as per requirements of the family. Many a time girls are also engaged in fetching water.

So far as health of the people is concerned, women provide most health care. In a family they prepare food and nourish children, they clean the house and sweep the yard, they dispose of children's excreta and other domestic wastes including cattle waste. They teach hygienic habits to the children and care for the sick in the family.

Almost all traditional birth attendants and nurses are women. Thus programmes on health and sanitation can not succeed without the active role played by the women as they better understand their own problem and can solve them.

Women are considered to be best teachers and have potential influence on the family members and particularly children. They have also got a high degree of tolerance and capacity to work. So their involvement can be beneficial in three ways, as a beneficiary, as a mother or a family member and as a motivator.

Out of the total 41.2 million population of Gujarat, nearly half i.e. 19.9 million is that of women, of which 65.5 percent are living in villages. It is therefore essential to join the other half of the society in the developmental activities and that too, activities, concurring them the most. Literacy rate of women particularly in rural areas is less, only 33 percent and are poorly represented. In such circumstances no progress or success could be achieved without recognizing the importance and role of women who are considered to be *agents for change.*

Considering above aspects and also to remove imbalance by uplifting their social status, their involvement in water and sanitation services can become an entry point for many other developmental activities.

### Objectives for involvement of women

Since women are more concerned with water, for understanding their choices and conveniences, they need to be involved in the management of services right from the project stage and taken into confidence while selecting the source, location of structures and implementation of the project. Bringing water and sanitation facilities, nearer to their houses, diminishes drudgery of women and save considerable time which otherwise is spent in walking long distances. This leisure time could be fruitfully utilized for some productive work which can uplift their status, enhance their grip on the life and strive for betterment of their families.

Sustainability of the system is most essential which could be ensured through satisfactory operation and maintenance. Men go out of villages for job and other purposes but women are available in the villages for most of the time. So they need to be involved in operation and maintenance of the system. Doing so they will take care of equal distribution to all sections of the society, protect the assets and attend to minor repairing works e.g. Handpump etc.

For utilizing their abilities and influence regarding health and hygiene aspects, women need to be awakened and motivated to participate in the health and sanitation programmes. This will help reduce the pollution and wastes of water resulting in reduction of water borne diseases.

For want of sanitation facilities in rural areas, women are facing lot of difficulties in going for defecation and taking bath. Avoiding nature's call till onset of darkness causes many health problems. Similarly non availability of bathing place forces them to avoid taking bath causing many skin diseases. Hence women need to be oriented for the use of toilet and bathroom.

### Current gender imbalance

The status of women is considerably low, resulting in many disadvantages and limitations to them. The present circumstances prevent them to participate freely and fully in the development programmes as well as improving their own life. Their activities and responsibilities are mostly confined to household only. These limitations remain as severe constraints while involving women in water and sanitation programmes.

The girls are usually engaged in household activities and are not sent to school for education. So the literacy rate among women is very low in rural areas. Without proper education, they cannot assimilate information so also, they cannot appreciate the importance of safe water and clean environment. The new technologies could also be not known to them, as they remain the domain of men. Thus they are deprived of the technological developments and their use in reducing the drudgeries and sufferings.

Due to man dominant society, women have less power and authority to take decisions. Decisions outside home are mostly taken by men. No properties are transferred on their name and no credits are given to women. This state of affairs deprives them of having any authority or confidence to manage any aspect independently.

Although women are required to attend to sick persons in the family and provide health care, they have to rely on traditional knowledge and views on health and hygiene. They have no access to training facilities. Such training are limited to men only. In many cases, they themselves become the victim of unhygienic conditions and suffer miserably for want of knowledge or access to remedies.

Social customs and traditions prevent them to communicate with men members. Women are also not allowed to attend evening meetings or outstation visits. Similarly, socio-culture traditions and prejudices have sex-specific beliefs. Due to menstruation, women and men are not allowed at many places to defecate and bath at the same place. Women have to go for defecation at night only for reasons of privacy, thus depriving them from the benefit of basic services.

Due to untouchability and other taboos, the women of backward communities are not allowed to use public

sources of water supply and sanitation. Similarly, they do not attend the meeting. And even if they attend, the meetings, they do not speak out in open. Thus their difficulties remain untold and unsolved.

### Findings of survey on water related gender problems

The Royal Netherlands Government is supporting the State Government in providing safe water supply and sanitation facilities in acute problem areas. Three projects have been implemented with their financial support, in scarcity, salinity and fluoride prone areas.

In these areas, post-project implementation activities are also monitored by them in which support of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) is obtained. With a view to knowing the gender specific problems and for their redressal, a survey of 300 women in 30 villages was carried out (1989) with the support of an NGO (SEWA). The finding of the survey are as follows:

- 78% of women spend about 4 hours daily to fetch water.
- Women walk a minimum of 6 km to transport water.
- 53% of women in drought prone areas complained that they could not bring enough water for even personal hygiene during menstruation and post-natal period.
- 42% of women replied that they were never consulted about the site of the bore well or the standpost of water supply.
- 63% of women showed their readiness to learn skills of water harvesting, bunding, drip irrigation, afforestation and desalination.
- 86% of women said that they did not enjoy seeing their children and family members getting sick from water borne diseases due to dirty and contaminated water.
- In most of the projects, women are not consulted while deciding the site, budget, formulation of scheme and its operation/maintenance.

The report has also provided the following information.

- Due to migration of men to the cities in search of job, women have to take help of children in fetching water with the result that they miss school.
- Women living in desert areas have to travel long distances in summer in an attempt to save their cattle from heat. During journey, they loose large number of cattle.
- Due to lack of safe and adequate water and sanitation facilities, many children die of diarrhoea and dehydration.
- Resort to unsafe source of water results in sickness, diseases, and death-especially of children.
- Due to social practice of untouchability, women of scheduled caste/tribe communities do not have access to new source and depend on traditional sources.

## Strategies for a gender approach

To involve the women in the programme and motivate them to achieve targeted objectives, it is imperative to work out strategies and action plan for implementation. The first and foremost of it would be to recognise and accept the vital role to be played by women in the programme. Once their role is recognised, it is essential to create awareness among them about the issues most concerning them and support required from them.

The water supply and sanitation services are most beneficial to women as they ameliorate their drudgeries and health sufferings. The benefits available from such services need to be explained to them so as to seek their support in making the services sustainable. By explaining the scarcity of fresh water, women could be convinced to conserve water for its economic use. Similarly, the health implications of polluted water can convince them to protect the sources from pollution.

This leisure time could be utilised for some productive work and to train the family members especially children to use and keep the latrines and bathrooms clean. To bring women in to this process, special measures are needed to overcome the constraints described under Gender imbalance. Women need access to information and take part in decision making and management of the village water system, not in name, but in reality. To do so, they need to be encouraged to attend project meetings either mixed, or with women alone, and choose their own representatives, in local water and health committees. The programme also needed to see that they are capacitated and get the scope to influence the sustainability of the water supply and sanitation facilities.

Regularising operation and maintenance of services will not only create satisfaction among them but also create sense of sharing responsibility. Maintenance and management of handpumps and village schemes can be done jointly by men and women, if both are capacitated. In regional schemes, management can only be done jointly, with the water authorities managing intake, transmission lines, treatment plant, etc. and the local communities managing the village distribution nets, and minor repairs.

Male members need to be sensitized so as to appreciate the partnership of women in the projects and encourage them. Providing back up support and funding by the implementing agencies will help women bring success in the programme. This process can also be accelerated by adopting integrated approach with other NGOs and concerned departments.

## Action taken

The State Government has made a modest beginning to involve women in the water supply and sanitation services by initiating various actions. The first thing to start with was the recognition and adoption of the fact that role of women in this sector is vital and inevitable. The au-

thorities supported the Royal Netherlands Embassy (RNE) and a Gujarati NGO to carry out a fact finding survey on the status of service and problems of women.

The authorities also initiated dialogue with the NGOs to attract them in the field and motivate and enable village women to take interest. Subsequently in the Netherlands Aided Projects (NAP), Pani Panchayats (Pani means water and Panchayat means Committee i.e. a village level water committee) were formed. So far such committees are formed in 77 villages. Pani Panchayat is a non-governmental/non-political body of six selected members from different socio-economic groups. The structure of Pani Panchayat consists of two male members, two female members, the Sarpanch (village head) or Deputy Sarpanch and Lineman/women. The Pani Panchayats work as a watch dog to ensure the smooth functioning of services.

Female members from various groups are given proper representation in the committee. With a view to providing necessary training and awareness in the programmes, the State Government has established a State level Training Institute with the financial support from the World Bank (INR 30 million). The Institute was commissioned in 1988 which has by now gained National reputation. This Institute is catering to the needs of Government staff, NGO functionaries and the beneficiaries. The members of Pani Panchayat and village women groups are also provided training. Women staff in schools, in health and paramedical services and social service groups are also provided awareness and training.

Priority is accorded in providing training to women participants/groups. Similarly departmental women candidates are provided adequate training within country and abroad.

Income generating activities for women in NAP areas have been started with the support of RNE and an NGO (SEWA). The local women's craft activities are encouraged through providing them basic facilities and market. The income generating activities include Dairy Cooperative, Handi-Craft, Salt production, Charcoal production, Nursery, Afforestation, etc.

In addition to this, a large number of NGOs are working in various activities related to Water Supply and Sanitation programme; majority of them are concerning awareness and training with special emphasis on women.

To accelerate the activities of awareness and training in NAP areas, a separate Cell known as Socio-economic Unit (SEU) has been created with the support of the Royal Netherlands Government. Similarly, under the support of UNICEF funding, an IEC Unit (Information, Education and Communication) has been recently created. These units are working for social mobilization in the sector programmes. To monitor these activities a State level *Steering Committee* headed by Secretary of the department and District level *Advisory Committee* headed by Collector of the District are formed.

Under the Rajiv Gandhi National Technology Mission Programme of Government of India, a separate "*Literacy*

*Mission*” for promoting the Literacy, through Adult Education Programme, is started which is doing commendable work in rural areas of the State. This mission is concentrating more on education of female members. The State Government has made *girls education free* at all levels. The Government of India and State Government, both, have also resolved recently to *reserve 33% of seats for women* in all Government elections and office bearers.

Once the water supply system is developed at village level, the operation and maintenance is required to be handed over to the respective village panchayat (administration). It has been experienced that due to various reasons, such O&M is not done properly by the village body and the systems fails, thereby defeating the objectives of the project.

The salient reasons of this failure are non-payment of water tax and lack of O & M skills. To overcome these difficulties, Pani Panchayats in a large number of villages under NAP areas are established. As mentioned above, women are also members of these pani panchayats. It is now envisaged to operationalize more and more Pani Panchayats for handing over the village level O&M to these Panchayats after training and equipping them for local maintenance and management. Special attention is being given to involve also women in this training process. An experimental project is taken up in 5 villages and the members of the panchayat are provided orientation

and training. It is encouraging to note that women participants are taking keen interest in such activities.

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