



Mainstreaming gender in sanitation

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THE INTEGRATED WATER and Environmental Sanitation (IWES) Project is implemented in the Indian state of Jharkhand by the local government and seven NGOs. Funded by SIDA, and coordinated by UNICEF, the project promotes sanitation in rural East Singhbhum district.

There is increasing acknowledgement that gender mainstreaming is essential if development projects are to address the strategic needs of women. In East Singhbhum, though, it has proved difficult to engage women in decision-making processes. Research was therefore undertaken to investigate local gender dynamics and their underlying causes, in the context of the sanitation element of the IWES Project.

Fieldwork was carried out under UNICEF's Internship Scheme over a period of 3 months in 2001. The study areas included in three tribal villages (Bangora, Kuilisuta and Korashole) in Musabani Block, and two villages in Phulwarisarif Block, near Patna, where UNICEF is supporting development through Convergent Community Action (CCA). The research was greatly assisted by the NGOs SEEDS and IDF.

Research methods

The initial research comprised a review of over 100 texts, reports and articles, including some from Indian journals discussing the socio-economics of tribal forest societies. This was followed, in the villages, by the investigation of customs and gender dynamics using formal and informal, qualitative methods. The specific tools, selected from the array suggested in the literature (e.g. Chambers, 1992) were:

- Participatory ranking, in which women villagers described and prioritised their interests.
- A gender task analysis in which villagers depicted the distribution of work between women and men. The resulting diagram was used to prompt later discussions about gender roles.
- Causality diagramming, in which officers of Women's Self Help Groups participated, to determine and diagram the reasons for existing gender positions, and possible mechanisms for change.
- Semi-structured interviews. Here, a written checklist was used as a prompt (for the researcher) to guide informal interactions with villagers.
- Key informant interviews. A group of cultural performers recounted the many tribal marriages they attended,

and a more senior community member told of the changes that had occurred over the years.

- Structured observations, to determine behaviours at village meetings between women and men. Decision-making processes and gender sensitivity were similarly investigated at agency meetings.
- Focus group discussions were held with NGO field workers, village committees and women's groups.

To investigate agency capacity with regard to gender mainstreaming, a survey was carried out amongst project staff members. The questions were intended to elicit opinions about decision-making roles, project objectives and the strengths of the agencies, and were based on a methodology proposed by Dayal et al (2000), for assessing the gender focus of development projects. The results were analysed using a method proposed by Tesch (1990), in which responses are studied to determine common themes that underlie them. These themes are then categorised and used to gauge the prevalence of specific ideas and attitudes in the returns.

Presentation and analysis of results

Decision making and financial control

In Musabani, the women's self-help groups (WSHGs) are one of the few sources of income for local women. An interview conducted with a 60-year old community member confirmed that the denudation of local forests by contractors had denied women access to the forest products that have been a traditional source of independent income, and it was confirmed that only men sit on the local forest liaison committees. Kekar and Nathan (2001) suggest that social and economic circumstances strongly underlie gender relations in tribal societies.

Evidence from the fieldwork clearly supports the relationship between financial power and influence in decision-making. In Musabani, members of WSHGs and NGO staff confirmed that, where women have an income, they exert greater influence in domestic decision-making.

Gender roles in decision making were investigated further through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Many villagers stated that household decisions were shared between men and women, but there was evidence that men's views usually prevail. Participants in a focus group discussion stated that, in Musabani, men control household finances and take decisions about household expenditure. This was confirmed in many other

interactions. In all the interviewed male-headed households, for example, the decision to adopt a household latrine had been taken by the senior male family member. Conversely, in one relatively wealthy household, the female majority's desire for a household latrine remained unmet. Another man initially stated that he would decide on a household latrine with his wife but, asked what would happen in the case of a disagreement, he replied, "If I'm ready to install a toilet, then she must be ready!"

In contrast, women members of CCA groups in Phulwarisarif Block related that their thrift and credit activities had made them independent of local moneylenders and given them access to bank facilities. Though they had problems with water supplies, drainage and excreta disposal, they considered that they themselves were responsible for making decisions about these issues. The group recounted that money had always been short, but CCA meant that they could use household funds for their own needs, and were in a stronger position to argue their case. Now, the women said, the only thing standing between them and the adoption of household latrines was the unavailability of hardware.

Customs

During interactions with villagers in their homes, men dominated the discussions. In Korashole, a discussion with a group of women was interrupted by the arrival of a group of men. The women gave up their seats and sat on the ground some way away while the men spoke to the researcher. Such marginalisation of women was often evident. During semi-structured interviews with mixed groups, it was usual for the men to sit on seats at the front of the group, closest to the researcher, and for the women to sit on the ground, or stand, at the rear. In Kuilisuta, one woman member said that involvement in the village water and sanitation committees (VWSCs) did little to empower women because they did not participate fully in the discussions.

Male VWSC members were asked why they did not encourage women to speak at the committee meetings. They replied that any such a change was bound to take time and that the position of women in meetings might change in the future "according to need".

One man was quickly put right by the women of the group when he suggested that they knew nothing of the local sanitary park – a demonstration area for latrine technologies – and such events showed that, if women's expertise in water and sanitation is not actively sought by their male counterparts at meetings this may be because it is underestimated.

This situation has its roots in the customs of the villages, where there is no tradition of men and women meeting together in public. VWSC members in Kuilisuta said that women attend their meetings only because of the IWES Project. Villagers reported that women are not invited to regular village meetings (unrelated to water and sanitation)

because they were "not meant to convey information to women".

More detailed research was undertaken at a meeting of WSHG officers. There, discussions focused on the reasons for women's silence at mixed meetings, and the group participated in the generation of a causality diagram. Prepared sketches at the foot of a poster depicted two men speaking together, while a woman remained silent in the background. The underlying reasons given by the women's group were depicted on the sheet and correspond closely with those proposed in the literature (Kumari, 1995) and are described in the following list:

- Men are greater than women. A man is like a god.
- Boys continue their education, while girls return to the home after finishing at the local school.
- Boys are free to move around outside and have time to play, while girls remain in the home and have to help with domestic chores.
- It is the custom.
- In the home, boys are encouraged to speak openly, and are praised for doing so by parents. Girls are scolded for speaking.

Tellingly, the image chosen by the group to depict "custom" was that of a hand wielding a stick. This, they said, reflected the tradition that men with sticks would chase women away from village meetings.

To further investigate gender differences in village society, a task analysis was carried out in the hamlet of Bangora. Men and women participated in depicting the work they undertake throughout each day. The pictures were transcribed on to a large sheet of card, using the local idiom, and proved useful in prompting later discussions about gender roles. The images depicting the tasks were selected by the participants.

Men usually stated that work in the villages was split equally between women and men. Faced with the diagram, though, most eventually agreed that women had the greatest workload and, again, tradition was the main reason given for this inequity. Though men said they rarely rested during the day, they were observed sleeping in the afternoons and had often finished their work by 2pm. A man in Kuilisuta reluctantly agreed, "It's true: when we get time, we sleep."

The gender task diagram, and further observations made in the villages, indicate differences in the types of work undertaken by women and men. Women are responsible for cooking and childcare, and they do most of the cleaning, fetching and carrying. These traditional roles can pervade beyond the environs of home and field. Observation of a mixed team of mechanics at work on a handpump riser pipe, showed the women repeatedly carrying pipe sections from the truck to the pump, while the men took a minute's rest.

In Kuilisuta, members of the WSHG said that women had always worked harder and that, unlike men, women worked

until they died. This, they said, was a God-given fact of life. For most, it seemed impossible to redress the balance of work between women and men, and the only perceived potential for change was the arrival in their homes of a daughter-in-law to share the work. One member, though, suggested that improving opportunities in education would empower women so that they could “force” their husbands to help out.

Education

Panda’s 1997 study, carried out in Orissa, suggests that post-primary education of mothers has a more significant effect than water and sanitation improvements in reducing the occurrence of diarrhoeal episodes.

In Musabani a key-informant interview revealed that, though the local school opened in 1970, girls began attending only in 1975, and then only a few. Hence, even if all else was equal, women now in their 30s are educationally disadvantaged in relation to men of the same age.

During the research, local women repeatedly expressed their demand for learning. One group participated in a ranking exercise in which they sorted cards upon which they had depicted practical measures that might assist them in their lives. Education was ranked fifth out of 14 ideas. WSHG officers in Musabani cited literacy as the primary factor in increasing women’s participation at mixed meetings, and other women in Kuilisuta concurred that women’s participation would increase as they became more educated. As a result of a presentation made by the local government engineer they could speak confidently about the advantages of different latrine models, and this supports the argument that technical learning carried out in ways that are appropriate to the local context of poor, illiterate women, encourages their participation.

Members of Phulwarisarif’s CCA groups were also able to talk in detail about the relative merits of communal and household sanitation facilities, and of the costs and benefits of single- versus twin-pit latrines. “CCA” they said, “has opened our eyes”. Prior to the intervention, no knowledge had been available. Now, some of the women were learning literacy skills and could write their names. They said they appreciated the importance of education.

There was also evidence that education for men would be a useful measure towards gender equity. NGO field coordinators suggested social orientation for men, to encourage them to consider the distribution between women and men of work, payment, benefits and responsibilities. This type of self-assessment, which could be called a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) (Chambers, 1992), might orientate men to actively support women’s participation, and could build on men’s existing ideas of their responsibilities.

Project implementation

Agency staff members “often find it difficult to relate to the sociological issues of gender” (Smout and Parry-Jones, 1999) and little practical guidance is published. Dayal et al

(2000) show that gender sensitivity within implementing agencies is directly related to project sustainability.

The research therefore went on to investigate the opportunities for, and barriers to, gender mainstreaming within the agencies responsible for managing and implementing the IWES Project. This included a review of key project documents, a questionnaire survey of staff and observation of project meetings.

The goals, and methods of implementation of the IWES Project are based on a logical framework analysis (LFA) undertaken in 1998 by agency representatives. This proposes that the project will facilitate women’s empowerment, but does not define project objectives related to gender issues, except for the proposal that women should comprise one-third of VWSC members. Though this has been achieved, the fieldwork indicates that women’s level of active participation is very limited.

The results of the survey indicated that agency staff recognise the aims of community strengthening, and improving the quality of life for villagers, but indicators of progress towards these goals are not clearly defined. Instead, the project has relied on quantitative indicators related to hardware installation. In particular, specific gender mainstreaming aims are undefined, and a lack of training means that some staff members hold misguided, or perhaps outdated, perceptions about community participation and women’s roles. By the end of October 2001, gender sensitisation of agency staff had been limited to a brief presentation by UNICEF. Indeed, proposals such as the orientation of women’s groups on water and sanitation issues; gender sensitivity workshops for project functionaries; and the preparation of a PRA plan remained unapproved at the time of the research, though their cost represented only 2% of the IWES Project’s technical training budget for 1999-2000 (GoB et al, 1999). Dayal et al (2000) suggest that expenditure on social capacity building at agency level should equate to 10% of the technical training budget.

Further evidence about the existing perceptions of agency staff came from meetings held to generate hygiene promotion slogans. The slogans were in Hindi and intended for incorporation into wall-writings in the villages. However, any such messages would be useless to many women in the villages for whom the Hindi language and the written word are inaccessible. This language barrier was also evident in many of the interactions between the researcher and the villagers, facilitated by agency staff. Such discussions often slipped into Hindi. The presence of a Hindi-speaking agency representative, and the predominant involvement of men in the discussion, made Hindi the easiest choice. Because many women speak only local dialects, they soon lost interest and began to drift away. Similar tendencies were observed on three occasions when Hindi-speaking project functionaries were present.

At the hygiene meeting, participants went on to consider some dedicated messages to “address gender issues”, and

thus exposed a perception that gender is an issue to be dealt with separately, rather than an all-pervading theme. Indeed, the generation of hygiene messages at agency level is perhaps, indicative of a rather prescriptive project approach that was further demonstrated elsewhere. Respondents to the questionnaire indicated that choices regarding the promoted technologies, handpump locations, performance targets and the level of villagers' financial contributions were generally made by the agencies.

Further evidence was provided by the participatory card-sorting exercise already described. Though many of the women's ideas were unrelated to water and sanitation, a public, open well was selected as the third priority, because of the low perceived reliability of handpumps, and a bathing pond was selected as number six. Neither is promoted under the IWES Project, and this suggests that the project may not be responding to the priorities of these particular women, because they have not been given an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process that defines its goals.

Finally, and on a practical note, each VWSC is guided by a list of rights and duties that prescribe their functions in terms of ensuring the upkeep of tube wells, and collecting funds. The guidelines do not, however, cover the conduct of meetings and the committees are not orientated towards facilitating or encouraging contributions from women members.

The way forward

The results of this research project (Marshall, 2001) are in the hands of the agencies, and it is these agencies that will decide on the way forward for the IWES Project. The work has highlighted a number of issues, though, that are supported in the literature.

Women's financial independence can lead to a more equitable sharing of decision-making power in the household. The CCA approach, and the women's self help groups of Musabani Block, offer strong examples for the IWES project.

The position of women in the tribal societies of Jharkhand results from a complex mix of customs and socio-economic influences. If the IWES Project is to really engage women it must overcome these constraints, and this requires research and continuous, skilled monitoring at village level. There is also a clear need for training and gender sensitisation within the agencies.

"To evoke community participation, we need to yield control over key decisions" (UNICEF, 1997). The IWES Project must, then, focus on empowering rural women and men through education, and allow the exercise of that new power through participation in project design.

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