



Gender and Village based Management System in DANIDA assisted Water & Sanitation Project in Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

In India, the concept of gender and Village based Management System (VMS) is a recent approach in the development process for improving environment sanitation and safe domestic water. Today, the focus is how to mainstream gender issues and empower women in the process of local management system. The Danida assisted rural Water and Sanitation Project (WS) pilots the user financed VMS under the demand driven approach in Cuddalore and Villupuram districts of Tamil Nadu since 1996. Among others, promoting gender equity is one of the special features of the project's interventions.

This paper presents an overview of WS project's experiences on gender approaches implemented in all stages of project cycle, particularly in VMS. It also elucidates a few of the many success stories

The need for gender approach in VMS

Women have a major role in water and sanitation but generally, women are discriminated in the development processes. Resistance to change exists within individual men, women, families, community, and in institutions. The women and the girl children are the main sufferers if the water supply schemes do not function properly or sanitation facilities are not available. They waste their time and energy. Often, conflicts/quarrels between women lead to social problems. In general, women are the main care takers of their families' health. At the same time they are the one holding more responsibilities of spreading the diseases if they do not follow the sanitation and hygiene practices.

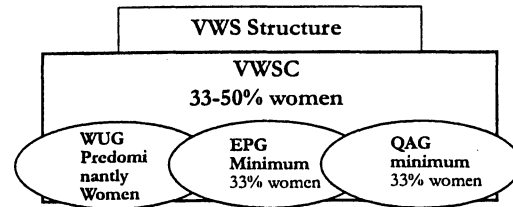
After the Panchayat Raj election in 1996, the responsibility of operation and maintenance is given to Village Panchayats. Last priority is given to build their management capacity. On the other side, many women Panchayat Presidents or elected women members are inactive, and they are treated like puppets in the hands of men. If the village men and women do not have equal access to information, knowledge, decision making process, management skills and powers, it is not only difficult to improve the sustainable safe water and sanitation practices, but also deprive them of access to their basic rights. To overcome these problems,

establishment of VMS with gender approach is needed.

The Village based Management System

The VMS is an establishment of a functional structure of local institution within the framework of Panchayat Raj Institution (PRI). In this structure, the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSC) is the main committee. The Water User Group (WUG), Quality Assurance Group (QAG) and Environment Protection Group (EPG) are the sub-committees to assist the VWSC. The VMS enables the Committees to plan, implement, operate, maintain and manage their water and sanitation facilities at the cost of users fund. The project's prime focus is capacitating the men and women members of the committees and the PRI by improving their management skills.

Place of women in VMS Structure



Functional structure of the Committees

1. **VWSC** (12-20 members) : It is the main Standing Committee to the Village Panchayat under the leadership of Village Panchayat President with the Panchayat Clerk as Secretary. The VWSC consists of all elected members, social leaders, youth leaders, representatives of women groups, and local teacher/health nurse. It has the autonomous powers to make all decisions, plans, collect users fund, approve budget, and manage social, technical and financial related issues of water and sanitation. It is accountable to all users in terms of ensuring equal distribution of safe water service and fund operation. It implements the by-laws on water supply and takes actions against those who breach the by-laws.

2. **WUG** (10-15 members): It consists of predominantly women users representing the entire Panchayat. It assists the VWSC in all stages of planning,

promoting sanitation, health and hygiene practices, and cleanliness around water collection points, preventing wastage and mobilizing water charges.

3. EPG (5-7 members): It consists of power pump operators, sanitation motivator, local teacher, SHG/ women representatives and Village Panchayat Vice President. Its roles are; assisting the VWSC to protect the environment and water sources and promoting household and school latrines.

4. QAG (5-7 members): It has men/women trained hand pump mechanics, power pump operators, plumber, mason, and Panchayat President. It looks after the technical aspects - repairs, quality control of construction and materials.

The members of the committee/groups (other than the elected members), are selected in a participatory method through gram sabha/village meetings. Gender balance is taken into consideration in the selection process.

Approaches and methods

For reducing the gender gap, the project has to pass through socially, culturally and institutionally many practical problems during the process of implementation. The project's innovative approaches have made quite a progressive changes after overcoming most of the problems.

Organizational development

The project gives more emphasis to maintain gender balanced staffing pattern at all levels which is vital for effective implementation of gender approach. All staff are gender sensitized and capacitated through various training, gender workshops, proper guidance and effective monitoring system.

Gender Action Plan, Gender disaggregated data and Gender analysis, systematic planning, designing appropriate implementation process, Guidelines, tools, and documentation are important initiatives, the project has adopted at organizational level.

Projects' mobilization phase

Among others, gender sensitization is integral part of mass awareness campaigns (through street theatre, video programmes), village level meetings and trainings. One of the effective methods is sharing of success stories by the villagers.

Planning and implementation phase

The Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) is an effective tool for activating the men and women's participation in the decision making and planning

process. Special attention is given to women's voices during problem analysis, need assessment, site selection for water collection points, preparation of estimates and approval of plans. Through this approach the men and women from the poor sectors also benefited equally.

During the execution stage, though the quality checking is predominantly done by the men groups there are many success stories of women's participation. Some of the women even stopped the construction of substandard quality. Some women and men use these experiences in checking the quality of other government schemes too. This approach improves the quality of men and women of QAG. and also increases the users satisfaction.

The Management phase Technical skills development

The project experienced significant successes in building up the technical capacity of local men and women such as hand pump mechanics, masons, power pump operators and members of quality assurance groups. Significant improvements have been seen in maintenance of schemes and the management of quality services. Some of the women users expressed that contacting women mechanics is easier and quicker than the men mechanics. The best performed women mechanics, masons and sanitation motivators stand as role models to other women. They act as change agents, trainers and resource persons at all level workshops and training to share their success stories. Some of the women mechanics and masons have reached the stage of getting equal wage to that of men.

Financial and general management skills development

The men and women members of VWSC are trained on annual and long term planning, budget preparation, accounts maintenance and efficient management of funds. The village level budget session is an eye opener to the villagers particularly to the women, to know about the financial requirements on O&M, the need for user financing and efficient management. The women first time use their rights of questioning financial related aspects in the open meeting. The women play a vital role in sensitizing the women, mobilizing water charges, and managing the conflicts.

Gender Mela - special events

The state level Gender Mela was an innovative approach and also a successful workshop. Presenting their own success stories by village stakeholder in the form of drama, dance, song and the competitions between project trained men and women to prove their

technical skills to the audiences of top level officials and the villagers had wider impact on increasing gender awareness, confidence and women's participation.

Sanitation and Hygiene

Sanitation and hygiene are integral part of all types of training, mass and village meetings, and school health education. The EPG, local sanitation motivators and masons are gender balanced. They are equipped with technical and motivational skills in implementation of sanitation. The PLA and gender tools are new methods in sanitation which increase the participation of men and women in all stages. SHGs and WUGs also play a major role in promoting sanitation. The project experienced high utilization of latrines. The increased involvement of men and women beneficiaries effected this success.

Gender disaggregated data in capacity building activities

Activities	male	female
Orientation on project	2336	1293
VMS-General management	6131	6622
VMS technical Skills	1036	302
Reorientation	509	309
Health & Hygiene education	82809	72980
Workshops/gender Mela	1656	2517
Total	94477	84023

Practical problems faced

Non availability of professionally qualified women staff. PLA was perceived as time consuming process and resistance to accept it at government level. But later the significance of PLA was realized. Now there is a great demand from government to train the staff.

Till 1996, no single woman was willing to undergo technical training. Individual women's fear, illiteracy, less confidence, shyness, families' objections, teasing by men, less wage to women are the problems, the project passed across.

Too dominant men or too inactive women panchayat presidents' leaderships also affect the participation of men and women. There were conflicts and social problems, the men and women members of committees faced.

A FEW AMONG MANY SUCCESS STORIES IN CUDDALORE DISTRICT

1. **The first model for good governance :** Koonankurichi Panchayat was declared as the first model for VMS. 2 years ago it stood as a bad model for water

and sanitation facilities. The VWSC's efficient management system at their own cost turned this village reaching the status of self sufficiency in water and total sanitation. The men members after experiencing the benefit of women's participation said, "Now we could see the difference between the earlier traditional committee without women and the present VWSC with women members. We realized that without our women members, we could not have reached this stage".

The villagers reflected that this development gives a new status to Koonankurichi. All men and women have realized the importance of sanitation and hygiene. Now, we have happy and healthy life, particularly the women and the girl children got a freedom from the agony of water and sanitation problems. Now we can send our children to school in time. The WUG said, "We, our women group stopped wasting of water. You can see, all our water collection points are kept clean. Now our village looks cleaner than town". This village attracted many state officials and they viewed this development as, "Project empowered by the people" "This model should be replicated all over the country".

2. **A woman Mason:** "I am an illiterate poor woman. My husband separated me 20 years ago. I struggled hard to run my family with 2 small children and debt burden. The masonry training elevated my status from labour to Master mason. My wage increased from Rs 40 to equal to men's wage Rs 120 per day. Now I can do some small savings. I am proud of having constructed many latrines, platforms, houses, trained many other woman masons, and participated in many workshops"-Kamalam, Keerapalayam village, said her story.

3. **A scheduled caste woman hand pump mechanic :** Mrs. Selvi, Valakollai village, said "After becoming a hand pump mechanic, the non-scheduled caste people respect me and allow me to touch their hand pumps and repairing them. My inner feeling says that my status is elevated" This change is a sign of forward step to reduce the social and gender gap in the community.

4. **The first hand pump mechanic:** Mrs. Sudha keerapalayam is an eye opener to other women and also a trainer of 80 women mechanics. She said, "I feel proud when the neighbouring pachayat Presidents come to my house and invite me for repairing their hand pumps. Whenever breakdowns occurred in the hand pumps in my village, I need not go to block office, I can rectify it immediately. This training built my confidence that I can earn some money and give better education to my children".

5. The first model Panchayat in Total Rural Sanitation: The then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, declared Keerapalayam Panchayat as first model for Total Rural Sanitation in 1997. This elevated the status of its President, selected as a member of State Planning Committee.

6. State award : The state award for 4 outstanding women mechanics and masons has been announced and to be honoured by the present Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

Conclusion

The experimentation of gender approach in VMS indicates positive signs for improving sustainable management of water and sanitation and gender equity.

It improves quality services and environment protection. It provides lessons and directions to the Sector Reform Project in India for wider application. The world bank also supports this approach. This approach also serves as a base for building strong PRI system, democracy, protecting the state resources.

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