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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, WATER SUPPLY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Gender and the Sanitation Gap

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Experience in the Decade Service rural sanitation projects is that women's cultural and traditional beliefs should be taken into account in training programmes. Care should be taken not to overburden already burdened rural women; men should be motivated to share and respect the views of women who should be visible in all aspects, from project planning to monitoring and evaluation and not only as 'carers' providing tea and meals or relegated to menial tasks of fetching and carrying.

Introduction

In rural Sri Lankan communities water is a woman's issue. It is the woman who manages the water in the home, rations it when necessary, ferries it from the common water point and her role is well accepted both in the home and the community.

Though the importance of environmental sanitation as an integral part of good health is now seeping into village homes, and in spite of knowing more about social and cultural factors that influence the use of sanitary facilities, women's role in sanitation remains the Cinderella of the water sector.

Many women may want to change this situation, at least in their own communities. But it is the men who generally have the means and wield power. For them the demands of sanitation – the need to use toilets when they need the urge, cleaning the environment, need of security and privacy -- are not as stringent as for the women. These factors usually limit the demands for sanitation unless women are more involved in the process of planning, designing and implementation and women's serious involvement in hygiene education programmes.

Women and children, too

These implications prevail beyond community level. Lack of proper sanitation and improper use of facilities are major risks in public health and a threat to water quality. Contamination of water sources is a reason for the prevalence of diarrhea and worm infestation – major killers of children in developing countries. 14 percent of the population in Sri Lanka has no sanitary toilets and only 38 percent have water seal toilets in their homes.

Through over a hundred small scale water and sanitation projects in remote rural areas in Sri Lanka, the NGO Water and Sanitation Decade Service (DS) (a consortium of 35 national level NGOs) has attempted to involve women more fully in sanitation in the home and the community. The drive to achieve women's full involvement at every level

of providing sanitary facilities has not been fully successful and women's role is still being under estimated.

Health education

Hygiene education along with the provision of sanitation 'hardware' – toilets, dug wells etc. – has been an integral part of every DS project. Even when women's participation in lectures, video presentations etc. have been satisfactory, women's traditional and conventional attitudes come into play in actual use of sanitary facilities.

For instance, women believe that children's faeces are harmless and allowing children to defecate in the open poses no health problems! An NGO project to provide special toilets without walls for children so that the idea of defecating in the open was preserved, met with opposition from mothers who expressed fears that the children will fall into the toilet pit. It took the project implementers a long time to bring the mothers around.

Gradually women are beginning to see the need for adult toilets, especially in areas where they have been used to defecate in the bush near their homes. Privacy and modesty among women have taken a toll of this habit where the women could not bring themselves to attend to these needs in daylight as they will be seen by men. This meant that they controlled themselves till they could attend to them under cover of the night. Instances of women being bitten by poisonous snakes in the vicinity of refugee camps and in remote villages have been recorded. Also instances of women suffering from diseases by not defecating and urinating when the needs arose have also been documented. Women, especially those in refugee camps, face special problems of privacy when they are menstruating. (Vitarana, 2006)

There are also problems of security in using toilets at night. Some women feel insecure due to bad lighting; some do not wish to go the distance to the toilet for fear of men seeing them and the possibility of their being watched by men. To some the door locks were not strong enough!

In most DS projects in rural settings the community works in partnership with the DS project. The community provides labour and bricks in addition to the grant from the DS. Often the toilets walls are raised high and the community often uses the toilet minus a roof. One family ran out of funds to fix a door and during an evaluation of the project, the woman of the house said that she did not use the new toilet “as there was no door”. When she was asked how she attends to this function, she boldly replied that she goes to the wooded area close by as she had always done. It was really difficult to make her understand the difference between using a toilet with no door and defecating in the open!

In the remote village of Madola in the Ratnapura district (60kms. from the capital Colombo) the DS was able to get toilets for the community. When the health educator went to the village to show the community the proper use of the new toilets, he found a village fair in progress. There were mounds of fresh vegetables and fruits, rice and coconuts on sale. This was the work of the children, their effort to raise money for two toilets for their school, one for the girls and one for the boys! This was a happy result of the hygiene education programme the DS was implementing and a lesson for us, too, that children together with women, should be involved in the process of providing sanitation options for rural communities. The children got their two toilets, one for the boys and one for the girls in their school!

Multiple burden

The concept of women in development (WID) should not be taken at face value. In situations of poverty, women’s burden is not dual – it is multiple. The women are burdened with household and children’s work, fetching water, attending to the sick, growing home gardens, at times working a full day at picking tea leaves or collecting latex in the plantations, and working during harvesting in rice cultivation. The onus of sanitation should not be left to them alone. The men have a role to play and it is where the concept that men and women work together in water provision and sanitation, that progress has been visible.

An important issue is that women’s ‘participation’ should not mean that women only provide labour for the menial tasks of keeping toilets and the environment clean. Women should ideally be part of the designing process and they should also have access to resources, decision making and management as far as possible. In many of the DS projects we tried to avoid further overburdening of women and also took care that traditional and conventional beliefs were not perpetuated, but wherever useful such views can be adapted and incorporated for the common good. (Fernando, 1995)

Gender sensitizing of men is easier said than done! A whole host of issues comes into play when we try to make men aware of gender balances and gender issues. In one project an elderly participant said that though he realised the value of men and women working together, conventional attitudes among the men prevented him from even articulating his views. How could he, he asked despairingly, help his wife

in domestic work when he had been the principal of the local school and respected by the community as a leader and everyone believed that domestic work was the domain of the women!

Globalisation and the resultant economic transformation of the country have brought both rural and urban poor women into the limelight. In the last three decades women have gone in large numbers to foreign countries as domestic labour. While this trend has brought the country large amounts of foreign exchange, the migration of women has had its fallout on families, children and the community as a whole. However, in the urban slums and shanties where hygienic disposal of human waste has been almost non-existent, women returning from a stint abroad have used their earnings to build toilets for their homes, thus easing a pressing problem.

A new concept

In the last decade or so Sri Lankan women have also responded well to a new concept on human waste management which has already been received well in some parts of India and Africa. **Eco Solutions** which introduced this concept to Sri Lanka has shown that in water scarce and water logged areas this simple, low cost easily maintained toilet saves large amounts of water and the human waste matter is composted into fertilizer thereby producing a useful byproduct with little effort and no cost.

“Ecological sanitation, a sustainable closed loop system is a practical, cost effective solution to human waste disposal,” say Calvert, Director of Eco Solutions who has had over a decade’s hands on experience in South Asia and Africa. (Calvert, 2001)

The initial problem in implementing this method is the prevalent cultural abhorrence to human waste. While cattle dung is used widely in all forms of agriculture, home gardens and in floriculture, using human excreta is “unthinkable!”

The National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) and the NGO, Sarvodaya have now introduced this concept in a number of projects breaking down the taboo against human waste use through awareness programmes.

In a simple explanation of how this system works, Ms. Udani Mendis, engineer attached to the Sarvodaya says that the urine and the water used for washing after defecation flow directly along a pipe to plant beds located outside the toilet. The urine contains valuable plant nutrients. Coconut, banana, vegetables and flowers thrive on this. The solid waste is contained in a pair of small chambers beneath the toilet where its volume is reduced by dehydration and decomposition and the pathogens are destroyed. After about a year the solids break down into fertilizer which is inoffensive and has no smell.

It was the women in some of these projects who had the greatest misgivings about handling human excreta even after decomposing for over a year! As they see that the new toilet does not smell and the compost is free and plentiful they are beginning to see the good points.

Guidelines

There are reservations still. One woman said that her family had a fine crop of chillies after using the compost from the toilet. But she will use them in her cooking only after drying them. "Not when they are fresh!" she says.

A regional workshop held in Sri Lanka facilitated by the DS and the International Reference Centre (IRC), Netherlands drew up some guidelines on applying a gender approach to water and sanitation projects, with special focus on developing countries. Many of these conclusions are still valid in the case of Sri Lanka. Some of these are: (IRC, 1994)

- Developing gender sensitive material for information and training of women
- Audio visual materials on women's involvement and gender issues which are acceptable and culturally appropriate to the women and placed where women have easy access to them.
- Women's involvement is more than labour contribution. It also means access to resources, decision making process and management tasks.
- Care should be taken not to over burden women and not to automatically perpetuate and reinforce the traditional roles of women.

Achieving these objectives means that men should be sensitized on gender issues, their own roles and those of women in sanitation.

'Together for Water and Sanitation' is a good maxim to follow.

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(Note on author : Vijita Fernando, a journalist by profession is the co-founder of the Decade Service, sponsored by UNDP, Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1983. She has been on the Governing Board of DS since then and is the editor of its newsletter "LINKS". Fernando is also the chairperson of the NGO, Centre for Family Services and she contributes both to national and international publications on women and development issues.)
