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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, WATER SUPPLY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

Better Sanitation in Bihar through Empowerment of Women

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Bihar is a backward state with 90% of rural population. Only 20% of the families have toilets. Men give least priority for sanitation. Culturally and socially it is a patriarchal society. Total Sanitation Campaign programme was launched in the year 2000 to facilitate and provide sanitary facilities, to every family and to promote hygiene practices. One of the key strategies adopted to increase sanitation coverage is to empower women folks to take responsibility in their hands. The key steps taken for women empowerment includes facilitating and supporting their access, participation, conscientisation and control leading to social change. Strategic partnership was developed with Mahila Samakhya, Milk Union, Women Development Corporation and NGOs working for women's issues. 136000 families constructed toilets in Bihar in year 2005-06, mainly through women self help groups. The key lesson learnt is that women participation in decision making can help in sustaining water and sanitation programmes.

BIHAR is a culturally rich old civilization with its capital known as Patliputra in ancient times. It's the land of great religious leaders like Buddha, Mahavir and Guru Govind Singh. 'Ahimsa' was propagated from here and Gandhiji launched his civil-disobedience movement against the mighty British from the state of Bihar. During ancient times the women enjoyed equal status with that of men but the patriarchal joint-family system has resulted in the downfall in the status of women that is persisting even today. Bihar is home to multi caste and multi dialect group of people where females are under purdah (head and face covered with tip of the saree and look down) and do not avail similar level of freedom as enjoyed by men in the society.

Bihar, one of India's most populous States with a population of 83 million, is now confronted with challenges in providing proper rural water supply, hygiene and sanitation facilities. The condition in terms of sanitation is dismal. Poor sanitation has become a serious threat to public health. The women and children in particular have been the worst affected victims. This may be substantiated by a few facts- 3.7% of infants below one year of age die of diarrhoea, in sharp contrast to all-India average of 2.4%. Also, about 4

in every 10 married women report at least one reproductive health problem arising from poor hygiene behaviour.

Problems faced by Women due to improper Hygiene and Sanitation facilities in Bihar

The baseline surveys shows more than 90% of women in Bihar have no options but to go out in open for defeca-



Table 1.

Social Indicator	India	Bihar
Infant Mortality Rate, per 1000 live births	67.6	73
Maternal Mortality Rate, per 100,000 live births	408	451
Female Literacy, %	58	33.6
Female School Enrolment	47	43.8
Women in Government, %	6	2

Box 1. Role of Women

If despite years of effort "sanitation and safe water for all" remain a distant goal, one reason is the low priority given to consulting and involving women & decision making by women. Women act as beneficiaries of sanitation and they facilitate and provide safe and secure access to marginalized and vulnerable populations. The issues like privacy, dignity, security and convenience are best known to women so they play the key role in bringing proper sanitation in homes.

tion. Lack of basic sanitation facilities and safe water is an acute problem for the girls and women in rural area. Hence sanitation and hygiene are critical to the interests of women. The various difficulties faced by women due to improper sanitation and lack of hygiene practices are mainly due to the compulsion of going out in the fields before sunrise or after sunset. For this they have to curb their urges and suffer from many health problems. This problem is not only related to **hygiene** but also to the **dignity** of women. **Privacy** is a right, which is being snatched away. This practice has also become a threat to their **security** and **safety** as it provides immense opportunity to many evildoers to molest the **honour** of the women.

Many a times, grown up girls refuse to go to schools or parents do not allow them to go to school due to lack of sanitation facilities, particularly the girls from Muslim communities.

During flood, the rural women wade through dirty, contaminated water and climb up a tree to relieve themselves.

“I have to crawl through the mud and muck to get to the trees about a kilometre away,” rued Sumitra Devi, a polio victim of Musehri block, Muzaffarpur.

What does women empowerment mean?

“We are convinced that it is essential to design, implement and monitor, with the full participation of women, effective, efficient and mutually reinforcing gender-sensitive policies and programmes, including development policies and programmes, at all levels that will foster the empowerment and advancement of women.”

-Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration, 1995.

Box 2.

Women's empowerment has five components:

- Women's sense of self worth;
- The right to determine choices;
- The power to control their own lives
- The power to handle and manage resources and
- The ability to influence the direction of social change; and create a just social and economic order nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment emphasizes women's freedom of choice and power to control their own lives at the public level of social and economic policy making. There being no difference between male and female entitlements like work, employment, earnings, education, health status and decision-making powers. The effective participation of women as environmental managers is vital to achieve sustainable human development

Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC)

It is a government initiated programme which is aimed at

creating demand and providing Sanitation facilities to all household, schools and Anganwadis (Child care centres). It aims at making a village clean and 100% sanitized and adopt better hygiene practices among all family members. For benefiting the women from marginalized and poor communities, there is a provision of giving Rs.1200/- as incentive to a BPL (Below Poverty Line) family who constructs a toilet. The programme aims to bring a behavioural change in the sanitation habit of community. Also there is a provision for school toilet separate for girls and boys in each school. Swajaldhara is also government initiated programme to provide safe drinking water to all families in rural areas on demand basis and managed by communities themselves. This also focuses on women from marginalized communities thus reducing their burdens.

UNICEF is committed to facilitate the implementation of TSC and Swajaldhara programmes in Bihar ensuring gender equity, social inclusion, sustainable use and community participation and decision making process particularly the women folks. Key steps were taken for empowering women by moving gender strategy into practice.

Positive steps taken in the implementation of TSC in Bihar

ACCESS: The first step towards women empowerment was their access to Water & Sanitation project. UNICEF and other partners support the principle of empowering community women in all aspects of its work. In the past community decisions were made by a small group of village leaders which almost always consisted of only men. Applying the Participatory Approach in a systematic manner opens opportunities for both women and men to be involved together in all aspect of the project. Participatory approach offered women their first occasion to discuss, plan, decide, implement and manage village action equally with men. Through this approach, Integrated Hygiene, Sanitation & Water Supply project has put gender equality into core of its community work.

PARTICIPATION: The process of participation of women in Water & Sanitation projects started right from the access of women to Water & Sanitation. But women participation was further increased and women folk participated in a number of trainings along with men, be it training of hand pump mechanics or orientation of project managers.

CONSCIENTISATION: Women not only participated in trainings, the skills acquired during the trainings were successfully implemented in Water & Sanitation project, resulting in tremendous change in the attitude of the community.

CONTROL: Not only women are engaged in discussing, planning or managing activities in Water & Sanitation project, they are holding important positions enabling them to take key decision and have access to resources and manage them.

Partnership with Mahila Samakhya (women empowerment)

The Mahila Samakhya (MS) has been designed to fulfil the commitment of affirmative action in support of women's education mandated in the National Policy on Education. A programme for **women's education and empowerment**, Mahila Samakhya endeavours to create a learning environment where women can collectively affirm their potential, gain the strength to demand information and knowledge and move forward to change and take charge of their lives.

MS is active in 10 districts with 2191 women self-help groups for women's education, their economic empowerment, health and other women issues. It launched its initiatives in improved sanitation and hygiene in 2001. MS has been involved in working with the *samooh* (federation) on issues of health and nutrition, thus ensuring a healthy environment. MS- for its parent organization, the Bihar Education Project (BEP) had already decided to mobilize its members and the communities in which they were working to participate in the movement for sanitation.

The **MS approach** is that the improvement in personal and environmental hygiene would lead to a decrease in illnesses and that good sanitation would prevent major health problems for the community overall more specifically for women and children. It therefore intends to ensure that-

- Women, primarily, and the entire community comprehensively, understand the basic principles of hygiene and sanitation, within the home and in the community and its environs; and
- Women are empowered to participate in planning for and management of water and sanitation resources and systems to ensure their optimal and sustainable use.

As the programme got off the ground, MS took the initiative to begin training women in handling the nuts and bolts of sanitation structure. MS offers to empower rural women socially and economically through skill development by training them- as masons, hand pump mechanics, to handle and cure diarrhoea, construct smokeless chulhas, treat water using home based treatment techniques like chlorination, filtration, etc., manufacture low cost sanitary napkins, construct mosaic pans and squatting plates for toilets, and purify drinking water in flood struck areas.

Altogether, 138 MS women have received masonry training in the state.

Savitri, who works at the Muzaffarpur production centre, masonry work is interesting because "it provides opportunities to meet so many different people and visit so many different villages."

The Mahila Samooh (women federation) and Sakhi (female friend) are the grass root people. They are empowered and trained and act as agents spreading the message of safe hygiene habit in the community. Each member of MS constructs a toilet first in her house before carrying the message to others.

Partnership with National Dairy Development Board (NDDDB) Sanitary Promotion through Dairy Cooperatives

The Bihar Dairy Cooperative is one of the leading dairy cooperatives in India. With a strong network of nearly 37000 women group it is widely spread in the rural part of Bihar. UNICEF has been working with dairy cooperatives in 12 districts. Most of the female members of these cooperative are the only bread earner of their family as their males migrate to other states. These women ensure the hygiene and safety of their cattle to improve milk productivity and the quality of milk so as to get better price. They are made aware about the hygiene practices through cleanliness drives, hand washing campaign, *Janajagran* (awareness campaigns), video shows, etc. They become role models for other women in their communities.

Partnership with Women Development Corporation (WDC)

WDC has approximate 10,500 Self Help Groups (SHGs) in 84 blocks of 22 districts of Bihar. These SHGs started with thrift and credit, are now independent bodies working for economic benefits. These SHGs are attached with TSC and being provided with initial revolving funds for setting up Sanitary manufacturing units. These empowered 1.25 lakh women are motivated to construct toilets in their households.

These women have been trained on making low cost hygienic sanitary napkins. Apart from the economic gain these members are also carrying forward the message of practicing good hygiene habits. They are also involved in door-to-door marketing and selling of these napkins.

Few other steps taken are:

- Facilitating government to provide revolving fund for setting up Production Centres and Rural Sanitary Marts.
- Due to availability of water under government scheme like Swajaldhara the women could utilize their days to earn their living rather than wasting their time in fetching water from distant places.
- Facilitating government to provide incentive in advance to SHGs for accelerating sanitation coverage.

Partnership with NGOs which are sensitive towards women & their needs

UNICEF has been working with 600 different NGOs which are working for gender issues. These NGOs have been sharing information related to safe hygiene and sanitation facilities with the rural women. These empowered women shared their achievement at different forums.

- Women from rural part of Bihar participated and shared their experiences in a workshop at National level. These rural women are also motivated to exercise their **decision making power-**



- Women membership in the Vidyalaya Shiksha Samiti (VSS).
- 50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj election.
- Girls and female teachers to participate in the decision of site selection of toilets in schools.
- In the TSC the motivators at village level needs to be a female.
- The girl child has 50 % reservation in all post of Bal Sansad (child cabinet) and have forum for their voice.
- Orientation of all elected female panchayat members on their rights and how to leverage funds for water and sanitation facilities.

Bihar is one of the 14 states in India to receive Nirmal Gram Award in 2005. The Nirmal Gram Puruskar (award) was launched by Government of India in 2004. The women from the villages are proud of their achievement and we salute them.

Nirmal Gram Award is given to a panchayat which is 100% sanitized, where all households have toilet, each school and Anganwadi have toilet and the people are well informed and practice hygiene habits. The women of four Gram Panchayats Goitha in Banke Bazar, Baraki Chilami in Amas block of Gaya district and Maeel of Vaishali and Bhagwanpur of Muzaffarpur are smiling because they are the first to receive this prestigious award. These awards are effort of the female group functional in these panchayats. In all the villages the women masons of Mahila Samakhya installed toilets. It is felt by the members of Mahila Samakhya that since women suffer most due to lack in toilets, hence, sanitation is a women's issue. Parvati says that, "we do not see flies on our food now as all family members use toilets as well as faeces of infants are disposed off safely." The four Nirmal Gram Awards were received by the respective elected heads of the local government body (Gram Panchayat) of the award winning panchayats. By empowering the 50% women, elected as

heads of the Gram Panchayats, Bihar will achieve the goal of being an open defecation free State by 2015.

Lessons learnt from experiences on Gender, Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply programmes in Bihar

- Gender and the role of women is a central concern in hygiene, water and sanitation.
- Specific, simple mechanisms must be created to ensure women's involvement.
- Gender analysis is integral to project identification and data collection.
- Attention to gender needs to start as early as possible.
- Ensuring both women's and men's participation improves project performance.
- A learning-by-doing approach is more gender responsive than a blue print approach which assumes that everything is known & can be planned in advance.
- Projects are more effective when both women's and men's preferences about "hardware/choices of technology" are addressed.
- Women and men promote project goals through both their traditional and non-traditional roles.
- NGOs and especially women's group can facilitate a gender balance approach.
- Gender-related indicators should be included when assessing project performance.
- Gender issues are important because the influence sustainability and effective use of facility.

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