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## WOMEN AND THE WATER SECTOR IN INDIA

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### 1. Early experiences

The involvement of women in water and sanitation projects is not new in India. As early as 1957, a project in Orissa found that it could promote latrines more easily through women. The project therefore employed female fieldstaff and took special steps to involve village women as soon as they started a new project in a village. The staff also evaluated latrine maintenance and use in an effort to improve project results (Ref.1).

Another case is an urban development project in a low income neighbourhood in Delhi. When the women were interviewed separately, health and environmental sanitation were the second highest identified community need. Participation of women in community organization was then facilitated by holding both mixed meetings and separate meetings with women at the lowest katra, or street, level. As a next step, the women were assisted to form a women's organization in their own area and to choose two or three natural leaders to represent them at the men's committee at the next level, the vikas mandal. Special measures were taken to make it easier for the women to participate in the meetings. The role of women in development was discussed with both male and female representatives to create a better understanding. Regular meetings of all women representatives in area-level meetings also helped the women to become more assertive and represent the issues at hart with more confidence and backing.

Of all projects undertaken through these neighbourhood organizations, water supply and sanitation projects had the highest level of participation (31%). Activities included the installation of additional taps, construction of drainage gutters, repair and improvement of latrines, and construction of bathing enclosures. Women helped design better tap platforms, and gutters with one higher side to discourage children from squatting over them. They held women's health classes and were less divided than men by political controversies in their efforts to improve their living environment. The projects not only brought physical improvements, but brought women closer together and did much to enhance their feelings of self-reliance and selfrespect (Ref.2).

### 2. Absence from the mainstream

In the mainstream of developments in the rural water supply and sanitation sector, women have however been conspicuously absent. In 1985, a large comparative study into the field experiences of women's involvement in water supply and sanitation (Ref.3) identified only one account of women's involvement in an ongoing water project in India: a project in 5 villages in West Bengal (Ref.4).

This phenomenon can perhaps be ascribed to the closed character of the engineering sector on the one hand, and the emphasis on technology development on the other. Engineering in India has always had a high status and has remained the exclusive domain of

a limited and closed group of professionals, other than in public health, where many NGOs are active. In technology development, great advances were made in development, standardization and local production of low-cost technologies, especially handpumps and latrines. Meanwhile, the social aspects of low-cost water supply and sanitation, including those of women's involvement, remained relatively neglected. Community and women's involvement in water supply and sanitation projects were confined to small-scale projects, often started by NGOs involved in the public health sector, such as the Jamkhed project.

### 3. Role of donor-supported projects

Active participation of women in water and sanitation projects in India has started to increase in the second half of the 1980s. The greatest progress has been made in projects supported by DANIDA, DGIS, SIDA and UNICEF:

- over 4000 female handpump caretakers have been trained in Karnataka alone;
- Several dozen women handpump mechanics have been trained and employed in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh;
- Women are members of village water committees in projects implemented by state water authorities in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Gujarat;
- They are members of waterpoint committees in donor-assisted projects in Uttar Pradesh;
- Several dozen female latrine masons are trained and employed in sanitation projects in Kerala (rural sanitation) and Uttar Pradesh (urban sanitation);
- Female mobilizers help village women participate in a large rural water supply and sanitation project in Rajasthan;
- Women members of ward water committees monitor latrine maintenance and use in a sanitation project in Kerala.

However, participation of women is not yet without its problems:

- A study of Shamala Devi (Ref. 5) on the female handpump caretakers showed that the women function in an institutional vacuum. Their communities were not involved in the planning of the local maintenance system and give the women little support.
- In Gujarat, female water committee members are not generally known to the other women (Ref. 6), and sometimes the women themselves did not know what they were a member of (pers.com).
- In Kerala, the project organized a women's day with the female members of the water committees, on which the women said they had problems in getting heard at committee meetings (Ref. 7).

### 4. Operationalization of women's participation

From these and other experiences, a number of conclusions can be drawn on conditions and measures for effective participation of women in water supply and sanitation projects:

- Understanding and support of male leadership for the reasons and forms of women's participation in planning, training, management, maintenance, etc.;
- Encouragement and facilitation of women's participation in project meetings:
- times of meeting suitable to women;

- places of meeting suitable to women;
- information on project and meetings to reach women;
- cultural appropriate seating arrangements;
- assistance of women in speaking out, e.g. through respected spokeswomen, internal consultation between the women, etc.;
- Separate meetings with women where necessary (women in purdah, poor women);
- Involvement in local planning and decisions on relevant technical and managerial aspects, such as:
  - design and location of waterpoints and latrines;
  - choice of handpump caretaker trainees;
  - choice of women members of local water organizations;
  - choice of local financing system
- monitoring systems on local maintenance of water supply and construction, maintenance and use of latrines;
- Elected rather than appointed committees, with women choosing women on trust, capacity, time, etc.;
- Women represented also in higher-level committees;
- Training of women for technical and managerial tasks in water supply, sanitation and hygiene education.
- Training of male and female staff on reasons and methods for women's involvement;
- Linkage with income-generation projects for women.

## 5. Training and institutional development

Experiences with training local women for handpump maintenance and latrine construction show that they are generally highly interested and dedicated, but that employment has to be available. In a tribal area of Uttar Pradesh, for example, the salary formally used to employ 2 Block Mechanics is now used to pay 9 female mechanics a monthly honorarium of Rs. 150 each. For this payment, they maintain the handpumps in between 15 and 20 villages around their home village, depending on distances and capacity. For repairs, they get an agreed additional payment from the state water authority, which also delivers the spares free of charge at block level. The toolkit the women purchase themselves on a 50% grant, 50% loan basis. Above-average pump performance and lower transport costs are reported for this system and are to be quantified through a recent monitoring system (Ref. 8).

Although female fieldstaff are an obvious advantage and sometimes conditional for women to participate, male fieldworkers have sometimes also been effective. In the integrated water and sanitation project of the Dept. of Public Health Engineering, Danida and Unicef in Bangladesh, the planned female workers were not employed. Nevertheless, special measures to reach and involve women increased sanitation awareness to 89% and involvement in well location from 40% to 71%. An important factor was the attitude of the male workers concerned and their efforts to use culturally accepted methods for consulting the women (Ref.9).

Linkage with income generation activities for women occurs among others in the dry Banaskantha district in Gujarat, where the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) assists the women to form and manage women's milk cooperatives, eco-regeneration projects and handicraft projects. The income, work, group cooperation and enhanced status has made the women more self-confident. They have

become more united and natural leadership and problem-solving actions have emerged. The project has also brought out problems on water management: these women are not on the village water committees and the supply is very irregular, which has a negative effect on the time and water availability for their work.

Engineering departments and NGOs such as SEWA still work separately, not in an integrated way. Each has, and attaches value to keeping its own programme, and the expertise of the NGO in involving women, though recognized, is not mustered and used by the water authorities.

In another institutional set-up, donors create socio-economic units with their own, donor-paid social specialists and field staff. Informally, teamwork develops between the technical and social workers, but this is not reflected in the formal set-up of the water authority: recruitment, staffing, job descriptions, promotion systems and training all remain the same. Two major questions to consider with regard to donor-assisted water and sanitation projects are therefore:

- a) How to get technical and social programmes integrated within the donor-supported water supply and sanitation projects, and
- b) How to get community participation and women's involvement expanded to the other, non-donor supported projects carried out by the same engineering department or water authority.

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