

**ROLE OF WOMEN IN WATER RESOURCE AND DOMESTIC WATER QUALITY  
MANAGEMENT IN RURAL AREAS**

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**Introduction**

In the modern times with the realisation of correlation between treated water quality, extent of sanitation, and diseases it has become very necessary to ensure that the treated water supply reaches the consumers without any contamination or that the sanitation facility viz., latrine, is used by the people in the proper form. And when this is not followed the water supply and sanitation projects cannot yield the desired benefits.

1981-1990 was the International water supply and sanitation decade. Our observations and observations of those involved in preparing, planning and executing water supply and sanitation projects have revealed an important finding, that, for the desired success of such projects, either water supply or sanitation, it is imperative to involve the women concerned with the project, right from the time the project is conceived.

What makes women so vividly identified as a group for such involvement needs to be analysed for effective implementation. It is an established fact that women as housewives and managers of households, educators of children, protectors of family health play a vital role in welfare of their families in particular and community in general. Besides this, today's women with their roles as teachers, nurses, doctors, <sup>and</sup> even business entrepreneurs contribute a great deal towards building up a stable, secured and happy society and the nation at large.

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There would be no two opinions that it is the environment which determines the "Life" in toto. It is also well understood that the physical environment (temperature, humidity, rainfall, forests, salinity, floods and droughts etc.) has a bearing on social environment (custom and traditions as regards food habits, clothing's, health etc.) and these two components make the total environment determining the life pattern. As such it becomes imperative to safeguard physical environment for a healthy secured social environment. Here, it needs to be brought to the notice that women by virtue of their multiple roles are directly involved in the environment upkeep and should be considered as custodians of the immediate environment in general. This can be well exemplified by : - take the case of water environment, women are the maximum users and drawers of water as housewives and any problems related to water resource as inadequacy, pollution, etc. would generate an alarming situation for the women. This is so, because proper and wholesome water supply for the members of the family is women's responsibility. This in turn would have an impact on the life pattern and general environment. As such with this background it becomes evident that more and more efforts need to be made by all those concerned towards working out strategies for,

1. effective participation of local women in water resource management for domestic use and sanitation - possible modes and changes in present management and delivery systems and
2. defining role of catalyst viz Non-Government organisation, social institutions in motivating and channelising women's potentials for their effective participation.

#### Salient Issues and Discussions

An effort is made in this presentation to draw upon our experiences to focus these issues with special reference to rural environment. With this background the following observations are recorded :-

- It has been now rightly realised and the components of "Environmental Education", and "Health Education" are many a times integrated in the environment development

projects. What needs to be done is to assess the real needs of the community concerned before deciding upon the nature of such an education programme. Conducting an environmental awareness camp in a village where there is no enough water to drink will not serve the purpose of creating awareness. What needs to be done in such a situation is to establish contacts with the people of the village, assess the availability of basic amenities in the village, locate the resources from where the help can be sought to overcome the shortages, take the people in confidence, initiate the movement, guide and help wherever necessary and then conduct the environmental awareness and education programmes.

- Efforts to create awareness about environment should be so channelised that the need is felt by the people and not thrust upon them. A demand for hand pumps, community latrines etc. should come forth from within the community. This would happen only when people in general and women in particular are made to realize that the environment in which one lives has a direct bearing on his/her health. It is a well known and established fact that the gastro-intestinal diseases like cholera, typhoid dysentery etc. are spread through a faecal oral cycle and that blocking this cycle is the preventive measure. But it is a sad situation that in our country in rural and even in urban areas there are many who believe that these diseases and epidemics occur only because the 'God' or the "Godess" due to some errors caused with regard to some festival celebrations or some worship procedures is unhappy and cursing. This is more pathetic because according to W.H.O. 1980 statistics, 80% of diseases in developing countries are due to contaminated waters i.e. water borne diseases.

- In some surveys which were done for a Health education programme in the rural area for "Community diagnosis" and "Educational diagnosis of the Community" it is realised that such diagnoses are the most essential prerequisites for any awareness programme leading to desirable participation of women in water management and sanitation projects.

There are various apprehensions and misunderstandings which hinder women's participation such as customs, traditions, mode of behavioral practices etc. Questions pertaining to these would bring to light the real situation in a village and would help to plan the education programme. It is necessary to evolve some models of Environmental Education with reference to different types of communities viz. tribal, rural in the interior, rural with urban influence, rural with industrial influence etc. These models can be altered depending upon the variation in the situation under consideration. This can be explained by few of our experiences like in a village we found that women felt that scabies occurred because of plenty of sweets being eaten, personal hygiene was nowhere under consideration. Such "Environmental Education Models" is the primary need when so much is being talked about the environmental awareness.

- Involvement of women right from the time of the conception of the project and encouragement to women to voice their opinions are other important factors. We have found out that there are number of enlightened and aspiring women in the rural areas but they are not given any opportunities to come forward and voice their opinions. The men in the village refuse to let their women speak assuming that they are ignorant or have a feeling that women should not be given undue importance. This attitude needs to be corrected.
- Choice of the person who would be directly dealing with the rural women is a very crucial problem. Preferably trained women social workers should be put to this job. Preparedness for patient persuasion of the women for any active response should be the selecting criterion. In the rural area making the women come out of their houses for any activity is a big problem.
- A change in the general attitude towards women is also very necessary recognising the women's role in water management and sanitation. It is necessary to take into account their opinion regarding -

- \* Site for fixing up stand posts
- \* Fixing up water supply timings
- \* Fixing up site for community latrines

Besides this, small jobs which can be accomplished with some training like repairing Hand pumps minor defects, manufacturing of latrine moulds etc. can be handled by women if properly trained and provided with tools. Some elementary education, say upto 8th standard or so should be sufficient qualifications for such jobs. This would provide jobs to women as well as they would feel more involved in the project. This would also have an additional advantage that women will not have to wait for help from the nearby town and also they will have a personal interest in the maintenance of the commodity. Generation of a feeling of 'belonging' to the project amongst the community is a stepping stone to success of rural projects. This feeling would come only out of proper involvement. This would also check vandalism.

- To keep women's interest sustained, we have observed that there should be some financial strings attached to the project. Wasteland development or wasteland farming with the aid of proper drainage, use of waste water for kitchen garden are some of the projects for income generation and these can be integrated in a rural project. In a village near Nagpur a competition for "best kitchen garden" yielded very good results with reference to otherwise irregular drainage and mosquito problem.
- The excellent work that has been carried out by various voluntary organisations (Non-Government Agencies) has been recognised by the planning commission, with reference to this, based on our observations in rural areas following points are recorded:
  - \* Voluntary agencies try and get funds from various funding organisations and execute the programme. A continued interest in the programme is very rarely noticed. This results in the loss of acceptability for other organisations desiring to work in the area. For this it is necessary that some representative of the agency should keep on monitoring the programme

with interest and for this there should be sufficient fund allocations.

- \* "Human Resource Development" should be an important feature on the work plan of these agencies. If this is carried out by way of training programme, rural camps etc. the programme will be continued even after agency leaves the village after some time.
- \* Minor details as instructions regarding proper storage of water, withdrawal of water, proper usage of latrines etc. should be viewed as important result oriented parameters and should be integrated in the water supply and sanitation project. Negligence of such seemingly minor points would result in failure of the project.

- In an All India Co-ordinated project "Awareness on Water Management, Health and Sanitation for Rural Women" sponsored by Department of Science Technology, New Delhi, it has been observed that the rural women get very much interested and look forward to the improvement in water supply and sanitation in their village provided all out efforts are made to create awareness and educate them with sustained interest. This project was carried out in all 4 zones of India at 20 places.

### Conclusion

Based on our observations as summerised above it can be concluded that for the desired success of water supply and sanitation projects with reference to water resource management, proper utilization of treated water being supplied and proper use of sanitation facilities provided, it is necessary to involve women. This needs sustained interest, patient persuasion and on urge to follow up the programme with commitment to achieve the desired benefits of the project for the rural community.

It is also necessary to view such "Women's Participation" as an important component and sufficient fund allocation should be made for it. Women's issues should not be only referred to, talked about and forgotten in course of time.

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