

Empowerment through Entrepreneurship in Water and Sanitation



Water and Sanitation Program

An international partnership to help the poor gain sustained access to improved water supply and sanitation services

South Asia Region

Background

Although women are the primary stakeholders in the water and sanitation sector, their participation has often been restricted to a representative capacity; that is, it has simply meant membership of the village water and sanitation committee. Far too often they are excluded from the key decision-making roles and their economic empowerment has remained crucially lacking. Can women earn a living, or even supplement their income through water and sanitation related work? Can they successfully challenge male bastions and play an active role in water and sanitation? Finding answers to these questions was what the Women's Mela was about. It also provided women entrepreneurs with a unique opportunity to share their experiences and examine the factors contributing to the success and failure of programs in villages all over India. The Mela was hosted by UNICEF, the Water and Sanitation Program – South Asia and Vanangana, an all-women NGO working in this region. The first of its kind in this sector, the Mela was a celebration of women's empowerment and its huge success prompted a strong demand from the participants to make it an annual event.

Women's Mela

November 25-26, 1999
Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh, India



Who Came to the Mela ?

More than 50 women masons and mechanics participated in the Mela. They came from 10 projects spread across eight states – Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat, West Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Some participants travelled for two days to reach Chitrakoot and for most of the women, this was the first time they had travelled out of their villages. The majority of the mechanics and masons belonged to the 'scheduled and backward' castes.

The language barrier was overcome by the natural bonding amongst the participants and by using music, song, dance, *nukkad* (street theatre) and *phad* (a traditional story-telling technique in which a brightly coloured painted cloth is slowly unfurled during the narrative) to tell their stories. There were common themes... of water shortages, long treks to fetch water and of health problems caused by lack of decent sanitation. There was a common cause... a desire to improve their own lives and that of their communities.

Shantaben, Handpump Mechanic, Sabarkantha, Gujarat



"We wanted to learn this and bring water to our doorsteps. And so we did."

Shantaben has been a laborer since childhood. Her father died young and, living in a saline groundwater area where drinking water is hard to come by, she had to walk miles to collect water and work either in the fields or at home to help the younger children in the family. She had no education and was married at 15; she is now 42 years old with two sons and two daughters. A daily wage earner before training under the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) program, her monthly earnings now range from Rs 400-500 in the wet season and Rs 1,000 in dry weather. When the women first embarked on the training, village men ridiculed them. "What will you women be able to do? How will you ever learn to install or repair a handpump? You are far too weak," were typical comments. **"This is nonsense," said Shantaben, "we are used to far more difficult jobs in our day-to-day lives, from working in the fields to lifting heavy weights to walking long distances to fetch water for the whole family. Who says we are weak?"** As the women have proved themselves very capable they are now treated with respect, but unfortunately a systematic payment arrangement for their community-based handpump maintenance service is still lacking.

Chandra, Master Mechanic, Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh



"The Mela has given me good examples of how other women have tackled difficulties and setbacks. Now I must find new energy to try and work out problems caused by the transfer of the maintenance program to panchayats."

Chandra trained as a handpump mechanic under an UNICEF-assisted program eight years ago. Since then, she has trained many handpump mechanics, including men. She is 28, married with two children, and earns about Rs 800 per month with seasonal variations. Education is her major expense. The school costs only a few rupees but she has just spent Rs 1,200 on books for her son and Rs 900 for her daughter. **"I struggle to do this because I do not want my children to live the kind of life I have done,"** she says. Her husband tends their three acres of land but does little at home and her work burden is very heavy. She is respected in other communities but still has difficulty finding acceptance in her own village. People make nasty comments about her travelling, staying away, sometimes overnight. Two concerns are: (a) the annual maintenance fee which the UP Jal Nigam used to pay has ceased since the pumps were transferred to the control of the local panchayats; (b) some villages are not paying for repairs. Chandra says, **"Improved social status now needs to be reinforced by a more equitable system of payments."**

What Happened at the Mela?

The mood of the Mela was informal and the women interacted with self-confidence, wit and spirit. A host of **participatory activities, coupled with innovative games and competitions gave the participants a chance to share and compare their skills.**

Winners All!

Two groups of handpump mechanics matched their skills in dismantling India Mark II handpumps, while another two groups competed to reassemble them in a timed session. Meanwhile, four teams labored furiously to construct a house. Sonebhadra and Vanangana teams won hands down in handpump repair with Kerala outshining the rest in construction. Needless to say, the observers' team (comprising representatives from government and donor agencies) was a poor runner-up. No doubting who the professionals were!

The participants cooperated well in the group exercises and overcame the language barriers with great good humor and adaptive sign language. Lalita from Bihar commented that *"I feel strengthened and more confident"*, while Chandra from Karvi said: **"This Mela helps us all to understand the difficulties which women face and it also gives us the energy to find solutions to our problems."**

Impact of Empowerment

All the women reported **enhanced social status and improved self-esteem** – a motivating factor far more important than immediate economic gain. Communities benefit from speedy repair of handpumps and provision of latrines in villages. This is a valued service which has led to **wider acceptance of women in traditionally male occupations.** Access to safe drinking water is a commodity all participants wanted. **They unanimously supported some form of community contribution for water supply, acknowledging that a 'free' service rarely works in practice.** Many women report an increase in earnings which has enabled them to educate children and improve their standards of living.

The Mela's striking success was to demonstrate that many women have been able to move forward from representative participation through reservation quotas to **working successfully, as trained professionals, in a wide range of water and sanitation projects throughout India. This has greatly improved their social status and in most cases given direct economic benefit** – both very tangible forms of empowerment. But the quality of the women's experiences and the impact of their newly acquired skills on their villages depend on the community in which they are working and on the attitudes which local governments adopt towards their work. Growing social acceptance has enhanced self-esteem and confidence but this needs to be underpinned by an arrangement that ensures women are adequately paid for their work. It is unfair to expect women to be social assets within their community, especially to other women, without rewarding them for their skill and professionalism.

Four Critical Issues which Emerged at the Mela

Community Acceptance

All women report prejudice to a greater or lesser degree from families, the local community and from panchayats and local leaders, especially during the early stages of training. In many cases, this gradually evaporates when the quality of the work speaks for itself and the family starts to benefit from the extra income.

Criticism centers around women working outside the home, taking on non-traditional roles in the workplace, depriving

men of employment, travelling and staying away from the village on work-related business, and sheer disbelief that women are capable of "doing a man's work". **Gender sensitization courses and inviting officials to observe work during training should help change opinions.**



Sudha, Master Handpump Mechanic, Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu



"Being a handpump mechanic is even better than being a gram panchayat president because our skills will last while the job of president will not."

Sudha comes from a very poor family. Her husband is a coolie and they have two children. When the DANIDA water and sanitation project came to her village, she seized the opportunity to train as a handpump mechanic. The incentive was more than the additional money or status; it was a desire to improve the lot of village women like herself because **broken village pumps, which necessitated long walks to fetch water took a tremendous toll of time and health.** Her potential having been recognized, she was given intensive skills training and is now a master mechanic, training other women. Initially, she hesitated to charge the full market rate but as her self-confidence grew, she refused to accept contracts offering a lower wage than the rate paid to men. The quality of her work ensures she is in constant demand; she insists on the market rate for the job and is confident of earning at least Rs 100 per day. The work gives her a good income and status in the community. Her husband was originally resistant to the idea of her taking on a non-traditional role, but having seen the respect in which she is now held and enjoyed the extra income, he is very supportive. Significantly, Sudha says, **"The extra money has enabled me to pay for the education of my daughter as well as my son... something I definitely would not have considered before."**

Mony V.R., Master Mason, Trivandrum, Kerala



"Unlike men, we have to prove ourselves time and time again; but this has brought its own rewards as the constant questioning of our skills has made us more conscientious about our work."

Mony trained as a mason under a Dutch-assisted water and sanitation project in rural Kerala. She has trained 250 new masons and won an open competition which included male masons. Deserted by her husband 18 years ago, she has brought up her two children alone. Before training she earned Rs 30 a day as an unskilled construction laborer; significantly, she can now, based on the quality of her work, command the same rate as a man (Rs 150 per day). She lives in a brick house, is able to afford milk, fish and meat, and has been able to provide the dowry for her recently married daughter. Mony is proud of being a mason; not only has she increased her income but she has gained social acceptance and value in the eyes of the community. She says, **"Earlier, I had to work very hard for very little and still the contractors would shout at me. Now I am my own master and have more dignity; the other members in my family respect me and I am recognized in my community. I feel proud of all this."**

Festivity, Fun and Feasting



Saying no to gender discrimination: Evening entertainment for the all-women audience was provided by an exuberant all-male dance troupe from a tribal village.



Enjoying the fruits of Vanangana's chefs: From five in the morning till ten at night, the participants were treated to delicious hot meals prepared on site by the catering arm of the host NGO, Vanangana.

Unequal Wages

With the exception of groups working in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, women are unable to achieve parity with men despite producing work of equal, or better, quality. In some cases, men are paid double and in a few cases – West Bengal and Assam – women are expected to repair handpumps for no wage but as a community benefit. This standard of 'community benevolence' is never applied to men.

Dealing with this issue will be critical to the success of the projects and NGOs and training organizations will need to **influence policy-makers about the importance of equal pay for equal work and train the women to enable them to have the confidence to negotiate a rate based on current market prices.** The continued quality performance of the women will, in the end, speak for itself.

Lack of Availability of Spare Parts

The problem of spare parts was reported in all areas with the exception of Assam. In some cases, the problem is so acute that it is impacting on the women's work. Unsupportive communities are quick to blame the women for failing to find the right parts. It also means handpumps remain in disrepair for longer than necessary. Where governments have the responsibility to replace defective parts, the bureaucratic procedures are overwhelmingly time-consuming. Transportation of heavy spare parts is also difficult in some areas.

One way to tackle this problem would be for the government to decentralize supply of spare parts through the private sector and allow local groups to place orders through existing outlets such as rural sanitary marts or local hardware stores.

Recognition by Government

Some states which provide handpumps usually do not encourage payment for operation and maintenance services that the women provide. In such cases where women are unable to get remuneration for work, the sustainability of projects will remain uncertain. The women at the Mela suggested that they could pressurize the government to recognize their role in water and sanitation service provision by forming a registered society of masons/mechanics. Involving block officials for training would further ensure higher visibility and acceptance.

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