LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

ELECTED WOMEN LEADERS BRING WATER & SANITATION TO THEIR VILLAGES
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THE HUNGER PROJECT
INTRODUCTION

In Rama Devi’s home, she along with her two daughters look troubled; as it is yet not dark enough to venture out to defecate in the open. In their mind, nature’s call is equal to dark. They wake up at midnight, go to the field and relieve themselves. Their wait starts again holding bladders and bowels until it is dark. Rama depicts the situation of women of rural India who practice open defecation.

The country leads the world in open defecation where most of the rural communities do not have accessibility to toilets. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), more than 60 per cent households defecate in the open. This not only affects their health but also their safety while being out in the open in dark.

In addition to staggering sanitation crisis, the situation with regard to water must be addressed which is no better where women have to walk miles in search of any water source where collecting water take several hours a day. “Let the companion die but the matki (earthen pot) should not be broken,” a local saying from Central India clearly summarizes the water stressed situation of the country. Most of the time, water is not clean, leaving people’s lives vulnerable to the life-threatening waterborne diseases. The struggle women have to face to get a bucket-full of water is another sad story.

Together, unclean-inaccessible water and poor sanitation give women and adolescent girls no time to study or rest or to engage in livelihood activities. Growing consciousness of Elected Women Representatives (EWRs) considered it as one of the issues that needs to get an urgent attention. Thus began a journey of efforts which was fully supported by The Hunger Project (THP) since 2001. It showed equal commitment to their issues and equipped them with the knowledge to participate in the development activities for their communities. The training received by these women enabled them to be effective leaders in their constituencies determined to solve issues like water and sanitation.

Initially their voices were barely audible and remained unheard by their own people! Yet, no stranger to hardships, they tried hard and as a result, people started acknowledging the problems. With determined efforts and approach, they have been working together to bring water and sanitation facilities to their communities and to their villages.

To highlight the efforts of EWRs, THP has compiled this compendium, named, “Leadership in Action – Elected Women Leaders Bring Water and Sanitation to Their Villages”. The selected case studies are based on the data collected from all seven states where THP works. This booklet talks about the efforts of these women leaders towards the betterment of the society and the struggles they face in doing such work.
For most women in Rajasthan, life is a little harder than usual. Steeped in patriarchy in the garb of traditions, women are often relegated to the margins of the society with highly prevalent customs of child marriage, dowry system and domestic violence. Added to many problems, water being scarce is another burden in the lives of these women who have to walk many kilometers to fetch water for their families.

Deepa Rajguru, 26, a resident of village Sanwada was elected as Upasarpanch of Gram Panchayat Udvariya. However, the Panchayat proceedings and meetings were controlled by the male Panchayat members who resisted participation of women in these meetings. Therefore, like other elected women leaders, Deepa was also expected to sit at the back of the room during Panchayat meetings.

Shortly after attending a capacity building program organized by The Hunger Project (THP), Deepa became determined not to allow any hurdles come in her way of being an effective leader. With the support of other women in her Panchayat, Deepa started voicing her opinion on various issues.

During the process of hiring water tankers in the Panchayat, Deepa noticed various discrepancies and that transparency had not been maintained. Tankers were being procured at a higher rate of Rs 300 per tanker, as against the prevalent market rate. Deepa opposed this and also dismissed the earlier tenders. A new process was initiated in the Panchayat wherein 18 tenders were filled and tankers were procured by the Panchayat at a lower rate of Rs 100 hereby saving Rs 72,000 for the Panchayat on the whole.

In less than two years, Deepa has had work sanctioned for a drain and had a 600 meter water pipeline installed in the Panchayat. She has also met the District Collector (DC) to have the Panchayat Secretary whose work was not satisfactory, relieved from his job.

The problems faced by women in her Panchayat remains a major and a persistent concern for Deepa. Besides prioritizing the issue of water and ensuring its accessibility to families; she is working to raise awareness on the issues of domestic violence, by making women aware of their legal rights and laws which can be used against such atrocities.
Kalawati Devi, 45, makes adolescent girls dream of becoming doctors or teachers. She makes women dream of achieving complete economic independence. As a Ward Member, one of the most precious gifts she has given to her community is ‘time’ which previously was solely kept for water collection leaving no time for any productive work.

Routinely, women and girls of Simarka village walked a distance of about two kilometers every morning. The walk was not intended for health benefits but to reach the nearest water source which is contaminated and often made people in the village ill.

According to Kalawati it was a matter of “illness or survival”. The choice was simple, as most of the community members accepted the water impurity as a fact of life. “It was a long walk, the pots of water hammered our necks and shoulders. It was for cooking and cleaning but collecting the water was unsafe,” Kalawati said. “We divided our days into fetching water and household chores. No rest. No study.”

According to Kalawati the path to the water was dangerous but it was the only water source near to their village. While many died by drowning in the river basin which dangerously floods during the rainy season, she said the river would then completely dry up during summer.

Fed-up, Kalawati decided she could not stand back and allow the situation to continue anymore. Determined to become actively involved in the solution Kalawati decided to contest for the 2011 elections for the post of Ward Member and won. She started to attend various training workshops designed by The Hunger Project to arm herself with information in order to tackle the problem.

During one such workshop she came to learn about the possibility of getting a water pipe line and hand pumps installed in their village which would provide a much safer source of water for the community. “I held a meeting with the people in the village and asked them if they could come along with me to raise this issue,” she said. “We demanded the Junior Engineer (JE) and then the District Magistrate (DM) to support us and eventually we succeeded in getting three hand-pumps installed in our village.”

“The Hunger Project workshops taught me about what the people in my village are entitled to,” Kalawati says, “It shows how small steps can eventually lead to positive changes.”
Kamalakshi’s story illustrates how committed leadership combined with awareness can make a huge difference to the society. Not only has Kamalakshi become a role model in her community to others, she has increased the standard of living for everyone in her Panchayat. She has given priority to sanitation and as a result, her Panchayat was awarded Nirmal Gram Puraskar by Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (MoDWS), Government of India. Today her leadership as an elected leader is cherished everywhere be it her own people, government officials or local media. Leadership as an elected leader is cherished everywhere.

The development work in the area is self-evident, however a talk with community members could give a detailed description of work being carried out in Kadeshivalya Panchayat under the leadership of Kamalakshi. Being a member of the Panchayat for more than 11 years, she has played a pivotal role in ensuring that her Panchayat is fully developed.

When the Government sponsored Total Sanitation Campaign was launched in Dakshina Kannada, there were 560 households which did not have toilets in this Panchayat. The majority of population defecated in open. Women were also expected to do the same without considering the fact that open defecation not only affects their health but also it is a danger to their safety. While thinking of development priorities, Kamalakshi ensured that construction of toilets would be at the top of her agenda.

Kamalakshi had initiated towards her ambitious dream and launched several campaigns to convince people of having constructed toilets in their houses. She says, “It was essential to get them involved with the idea. Once they understood the dangers of open defecation, they decided to support me”. Kamalakshi also ensured the construction of public toilets for those who had no money or land to build a toilet. Now almost all the households have toilets and the Panchayat is free from open defecation.

Kamalakshi is now forging ahead with an idea of constituting an award for a model house. The model house will comprise of a kitchen garden and a compost pit to dump the degradable waste. A 15-member-committee has been formed to look into making cleanliness sustainable in her Panchayat.
Karuthammal, 58, has always been helping others in need; however her contesting the elections was born out of her desire to experience the joy of being actively involved in development cause. She says, “In my early days, I was upset by obvious hurdles as I was deprived of the opportunities to go to school due to family circumstances. However, I have been able to overcome all the difficulties and be successful in creating good impression on people who have showed faith in me.”

Confident and committed as Panchayat President, she belongs to the Scheduled Caste (SC) community, one of the castes which has usually occupied the lowest status in the nation. Her first and major task was making people aware about sanitation and she started talking about it. Earlier villagers used to defecate in open. Having a toilet in their own house was nowhere in their need list. In addition, mixing of sewage water with drinking water was common and was the root cause of waterborne life threatening infections and diseases.

Karuthammal thought, “I should sensitise the community.” Some other people joined in to shoulder the responsibility towards a healthy Panchayat and they started campaigning for the construction of toilets. Besides prioritising the issue of sanitation, she is working to bring adequate safe drinking water facilities for the villagers.

With a new strategy, karuthammal had started talking to children while in school and taught them about health hazards of defecating in open. A combination of unique strategies worked and most of the villagers have built toilets in their houses. Additionally, she assured that the community members have safe drinking water facility too.

Having come from a backward community and being a non-literate, what she has done is no mean feat. Under Kamalakshi’s leadership and with the support of other Panchayat members, there has been significant success in making the Panchayat truly a unit of local governance. Karuthammal is a true example of the power of collective work as she says, “The success of my Panchayat is due to the solidarity shared amongst members and the community at large.”
Even today, distressing news come in of deaths caused by diseases which are easily preventable. For example, a sizable number of people, especially children in rural areas die because of diarrhea or typhoid. K. Mangamma lives in one such settlement named Bomathathanoor Gram Panchayat where, earlier, the dream of achieving a clean and safe community was a difficult task. But as a President, Mangamma has taken lead role in ensuring that sanitation be the priority of her people. It was a huge challenge.

Now let’s flip the coin!

These is no point of a woman contesting for President that too from one of the most marginalized communities. While campaigning, it was one of the ‘uninvited supports’ a 38 years old Mangamma from the Most Backward Community (MBC) was forced to receive from the villagers. However, it was long back. After her first tenure from 2006 to 2010, she again won the elections; a sign of people’s faith in her determination and ability as a leader.

Mangamma began generating awareness about the need of toilets. However, everybody had a reason to convince her for not having a toilet at their house, she did not lose heart. She campaigned through several methods and her efforts did not stop until most of them had toilets constructed at their houses. Her village has been honored with Nirmal Gram Panchayat Award for maintaining good sanitation in 2008 by the State government.

In addition to improving sanitation facilities in her Panchayat, she also played a critical role in ensuring that safe drinking water is accessible to all. In the past, women had to fetch water from wells miles away. Considering the need of safe water, she started another campaign. This time women were self-motivated and they joined in to take the benefit of the government schemes and they have got three Over Head Tanks in their Panchayat.

Her work, however, is not limited to have provide people water and sanitation. Learning while leading, K.Mangamma has been able to address myriad of issues like education and women’s health. Since people have reposed their faith in her work, she is determined to build a just society in her Panchayat.
Maya Paliwal, in her early forties, a resident of Kesuli Gram Panchayat is an exemplary case of a just and able leader who believes in working tirelessly for the welfare of her people. Her political journey began in 2010 when she was elected as the Sarpanch of Kesuli. Once a homemaker, Maya is now one of those elected women leaders in the state who have given their villages a facelift.

During her tenure, she was successful in obtaining piped water supply to many villages in her Panchayat which had been a long-standing requirement and demand of the people in the region. However what is most significant about her work is that through consistent efforts, she has motivated the community to take part in the planning process of the development of the Panchayat.

As a Sarpanch, Maya has been able to bring clean water nearer to her community which has been an immediate response to the water crisis. In the past, women and adolescent girls had to travel a long distance of two kilometers to fetch water from well for drinking and other household responsibilities as there was no water source close by. They had to make at least three to four trips every day sometimes even in the dark to fetch water which had been affecting not only their health but also it made them vulnerable to assault and sexual violence.

It was one of the biggest crises but Maya took it as a challenge. She says, “I got the opportunity to lead my community but I was not confident that I would be able to work effectively. The thought process changed when I had attended training programmes conducted by The Hunger Project on women’s leadership. Those trainings have proved to be an excellent source of information on various government entitlements and processes.”

Maya then started consulting with community members and called for a village meeting to discuss the answer for water crisis. Through her efforts, they managed to get Vidhayak Fund for the construction of a water tank. Moreover, 12 hand pumps had been constructed to ensure that no woman in her Gram Panchayat would go through the rigour that they were going through earlier in search of water source.

Maya, who got married at the age of 12, is now a leader and a role model for other women in her community. Though a skilled leader, she gives credit to other women for what she has achieved. She says, “I have a list of promises to keep and I am incomplete without my sisters in this journey.”

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It is not a rare picture in several parts of India, both urban and rural, to have open channels carrying waste water along the streets. Here one could hardly think of aesthetic challenges when it poses a great threat to health of people living in such areas. Gram Panchayat Kikia in Kalahandi was one of those settlements. A couple of years back there were more households with a television set than with a toilet or even more than having a source of safe drinking water.

Under these circumstances, Mina, 31, seized the opportunity to contest for the post of Ward Member having in mind the responsibilities she will have to shoulder as an elected representative. She won the contest and began generating awareness for construction of toilets, safe drinking water facility and other sanitation issues. She says, “Until fairly recently, open defecation was not recognized by them as a threat to health. Hence my first challenge was to inform them about the significant health hazards of open defecation.”

Challenges seemed huge but she did not surrender. She had initiated discussion on health problems and informed women about hygienic practices and the impact of sanitation on health. She approached different age groups with different methods to influence them. Her efforts have borne fruits with people caring about what she is saying and simultaneously a group of active women came forward and joined her.

Mina shares, “The formation of Mahila Adhikar Samakhya in my area, training programmes conducted by The Hunger Project and my presence as well as active participation in the village meetings helped me to understand the details about government schemes and I seized the opportunity to ensure that sanitation is accessible to everyone irrespective of their class, caste, age or gender.”

Her pro-activeness offers an example. While trying to convince the community members on good sanitation practices, she met with the government officials and as a result of her initiative drains have been built. Additionally, Mina ensures maintenance of drinking water outlets in her village.

Mina says, “Future can be predicted in a better way if we have a healthy community. Given the fact that most of the villagers follow unhygienic practices, we, as elected representatives, share the duty to ensure a multi-prolonged method to make water and sanitation facilities accessible to all.”
Twenty-four-year-old Nepura still remembers the day when an ideal groom who had good prospects for a job in government sector had been rejected by the bride-to-be as he seemed reluctant to promise a ‘toilet’ to her. This rejection is nothing less than a recognition to Nepura’s efforts who left no stone unturned and became an epitome of sanitation movement in Kuershwar Gram Panchayat.

Kuershwar Panchayat had historically been affected by problems and diseases caused by open defecation. Nepura says, “Earlier, very few families had toilets in their homes and I was among them. But not all women and girls were as fortunate as me. I know of women who went out in the open to defecate and from their experience I know that women without toilets at homes are vulnerable while walking several kilometers in the dark so that they could find a place private enough to relieve themselves. I could well imagine their painful situation particularly during menstruation.”

In 2012, with very little exposure to public life but with a deep dedication to the community which came from what she had seen, Nepura contested the elections from a Schedule Tribe (ST) women-reserved seat and won.

Qualified up to 12th standard, Nepura began by equipping the community members with information on diseases caused by open defecation and shared the solutions. Her direct interaction with people helped them to understand how access to toilets will improve their lives. Being an enabled leader, she ensured democratic participation by involving all in the discussion and decision making process. She also advocated strongly with others, especially members of Alibha Federation, to participate in discussion in order to have basic sanitation facilities.

Nepura says, “I got their full support in whatever I wanted to do as a Sarpanch, when they understood the necessity of ‘toilet at home’ and more importantly the ill-effect of practicing open defecation. However the way to sanitation was not an easy one and we even had to file Right to Information (RTI) application in order to know about fund allocation for water and sanitation in our Panchayat.”

After repeated application to the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS), an organization under the Government of Odisha, her efforts yielded results. Now 45 households in Khaibhadi village have toilets and 177 work orders have already been sanctioned for construction of toilets in her Panchayat. Additionally, dysfunctional hand pumps have been repaired. Buoyed by this success, she is firm to take forward the work initiated by her as a Sarpanch.
It was not a cakewalk, however, Pooja Rajpurohit made
determined efforts to mine out and eradicate the
misconceptions villagers had, be it on hygiene or sanitation.
Since she was born and brought up in Mumbai, initially it
was difficult for her to accept the hamlet that lacked basic
sanitation facilities and where good health was a luxury
owned by a few. Her exposure to metropolitan life has
eventually proved to be fortunate for the villagers as it gave
her a dream of making her village like any other big city with
adequate safe drinking water and sanitation facilities.

Her first task was to encourage people to identify and discuss the
consequences of open defecation and to encourage them to approach
concerned authorities for construction of toilets in their villages. The key focus
was on behavior change of the villagers in order to create supportive
environment before building the infrastructure to accommodate the change.

In the past, they were out in the open and apart from health hazards,
especially women were vulnerable to many other problems such as sexual
violence. Initially when Pooja started talking about dangers of open
defecation, they responded bitterly. This practice was so entrenched in the
Panchayat that it had never been questioned earlier.

When initial discussion failed, she then used her training given by The Hunger
Project as a tool to start campaigning on issues. This time, she talked with
people with examples. For example, diseases like diarrhea is caused by lack of
sanitation. Finally she succeeded. She has utilized the government scheme for
construction of toilets.

Her vision is to modernize her village by bringing practice and facilities there
in line. Pooja is well aware of the hurdles ahead but it only makes her more
determined. She says, “I feel my contribution has been that I have brought a
sense of dignity to them which eventually culminates at empowerment.”

As a leader, Pooja has planted her dreams in others; the dream now is shared
and thus growing and glowing.
“We live in a world where so much appears to be out of reach. Yet, there is something that can be achieved which is equality,” says Rekha Devi, 45, a Ward Member of Gram Panchayat Patsanda in Bihar. With great zeal, she steps out every day to encourage others to contribute in development activities in their village.

In the past, Rekha was dependent on Beedi making (hand-rolled cigarette) as a source of livelihood and had no inclination of joining politics. Encouraged by the family, she decided to contest for the Panchayat elections for the post of Ward Member in 2011 and won it. During her tenure, though hesitant at first, she took her responsibilities sincerely by prioritising the issues and started a sanitation campaign in her village. Thus began the journey.

Rekha recalls, “I won the election but initially I did not have enough information about the working in the Panchayat. I was not fully aware about the schemes and entitlements and I used to hesitate a lot while speaking to people. I was dependent on others to take any decision. But my determination made me attend all the training programmes conducted by The Hunger Project which motivated me to bring in the change in my community by enhancing my knowledge, communication and community mobilisation skills.”

Rekha started with a small step which was to organise a ward level meeting to discuss the cleaning of open drains. The Mukhiya, though invited, refused to support her and did not come to the meeting. Despite this silent protest from the Mukhiya, she continued by having follow-up meetings and drafted an application for cleaning and cementing the drains. It was submitted again to the Mukhiya but he paid no heed.

When talks failed, she decided to take it to the local print media articulating their need. The media stepped in to support them and the cleanliness issue became headline grabber. After the news was published, the Mukhiya called Rekha and immediately issued her a sum of Rs. 10,000/- from the Village Untied Fund for cleaning up of the drains in the village. Now, in order to ensure that the cleanliness is being maintained, she regularly conducts meetings.

Rekha has now set her eyes towards ensuring that clean water is accessible to all in her village as she envisions a future where everyone in her community has access to safe drinking water.
Glossary

**THP** - The Hunger Project

**EWR** - Elected Women Representative

**GP** - Gram Panchayat

**PRI** - Panchayati Raj Institutions

**WLW** - Women’s Leadership Workshop

**MGNREGA** - Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act

**IAY** - Indira Awaas Yojana

**PHC** - Primary Health Centre

**BRGF** - Backward Regions Grant Fund

**BPL** - Below Poverty Line

**WCC** - Water Conservation Committee

**NBW** - Need Based Workshop

**SWEEP** - Strengthening Women’s Empowerment through Electoral Process

**GSM** - Gram Sabha Mobilization

**FBW** - Federation Building Workshop

**VAW** - Violence against Women

**RTI** - Right to Information

**WHO** - World Health Organization

**NGP** - Nirmal Gram Puraskar

**MBC** - Most Backward Community

**RWSS** - Rural Water Supply and Sanitation