

Women Political Empowerment Day Celebrations, 2006* :

Feedback from the Field and Recommendations for Future Action

The Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, celebrated women's political empowerment day programme on 24 April 2006. In addition, four state level conventions were also held to celebrate the day. Apart from the various activities commemorating the event, a two-day conference on 'Water and Sanitation, Women and Panchayats' took place in which scholars, activists, academics, functionaries and the delegates themselves participated actively. The delegates who attended the conference gathered knowledge regarding the various schemes of the government on total sanitation, including Swajaldhara. Some of them also suggested concrete steps to improve the situation. In order to get the feedback and gauge the impact of the deliberations during the conference, the Institute took the initiative to distribute six post cards each to more than one thousand elected women representatives of panchayats from all over India. After a lapse of four months, some of the NGO partners who had sponsored the delegates to the national as well as the regional programmes were contacted and asked to send their responses. So far, a few responses have also been received from Orissa, Jammu & Kashmir, Karanataka and Himachal Pradesh, which are given below:

Orissa

Some women representatives from Rayagada District, who attended the conference in Delhi, have given their feedback by writing that the programme was very enlightening. It is only after attending the conference that they learnt the correct approach to take up the issues related to water and sanitation through panchayats. Now they are going from door to door disseminating information with regard to water and sanitation. They organize frequent meetings in their respective villages to create awareness about issues concerning water and sanitation, and the various diseases resulting from polluted water and lack of proper sanitation. Thus they are trying to

* The programmes were conducted in New Delhi, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai and Bhubaneswar on 24-25 April 2006.

achieve universal sanitation. The villagers in some villages are giving their full support in the construction of latrines by contributing financially to the government subsidy, as well as by providing the necessary raw materials and labour. The response from the up-sarapanch of Kolanara Block of Rayagada District indicates that within a span of three months her panchayat has convinced thirtynine families to construct toilets and to use them. Yet another representative (award member) of the Bhajabala village of the same block wrote that her panchayat was able to convince forty families to implement universal sanitation.

Jammu & Kashmir

The Jammu & Kashmir delegates from Rajouri district said that since the state is under the grip of terror they are unable to use the open fields for defecation and hence need toilets immediately. However, they are facing financial constraint in building toilets. They have requested further information on the support being extended by the government for universal sanitation and safe drinking water.

Karnataka

A couple of delegates attending the convention in Bangalore were of the opinion that women in the rural area have a tendency to waste water. Since the world is going to face water shortage the panchayats can take lead role in practicing the water saving measures in their own lives as well as trying to convince the others in the villages.

Some delegates from Uttar Kanada District, Karnataka observed that by attending the conference in New Delhi, they gained access to information on the different models of toilets and their usefulness, including that of Sulabh Souchalaya. A member of the Yadalli Gram Panchayat of Uttar Kanada district mentioned that her panchayat is successful in constructing Sulabh Souchalaya in Schedule Caste, Schedule Tribe and Other Backward Class colonies. Subsequent to the construction of the toilets, the rural people recognized the importance of the roles and duties of the Gram Panchayat members. Some representatives from Hindhlga Gram panchayats of Belgaun District sent a positive response informing that after gathering the necessary information from the conference, their gram panchayat was able to provide cent percent drinking water

facilities in the villages and it also has been victorious in providing 95 % toilets facilities in the village. Further more, they mentioned that their success was due only to the maximum support extended by the villagers. Now the Hindhlga panchayats are aspiring for Nirmal Gram Puraskar next year. The representatives are also keen to learn more about other Governmental Schemes which would help them in the overall development of the panchayats. Incidentally, the World Bank has started a scheme on universal sanitation which is being implemented in the above panchayats.

Himachal Pradesh

Participants from Kasoli District of Himachal Pradesh also sent their feed back. Representatives from this district became very active in achieving universal sanitation after attending the conference. A ward member of Nahari panchayat informed that their panchayat is working for proper sanitation facilities for the villagers as well as taking the necessary steps for ensuring safe drinking water facilities. It has further been informed that the Teheri Gram Panchayat of the same district has made proper drainage system to drain the polluted water and every villager from that district is trying to maintain cleanliness in his /her area.

On the whole, the respondents from the various states have written that participation in women political empowerment day programme is extremely valuable as it is a means of making elected women representatives more responsible. It made them more aware of their rights and duties. They are now working seriously towards providing safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities in their respective villages. They also informed that now they are able to create awareness among the villagers regarding the different water related diseases like skin diseases, diarrhea etc. and other diseases and problems resulting from lack of knowledge of sanitation. Consequently, the people are now more concerned about the safe drinking water and proper sanitation facilities. Moreover, the panchayats have gained community support and hence the measures taken up by them are more sustainable. During process of having gaining knowledge regarding universal sanitation and utility of safe drinking water, women delegates have definitely become more empowered and self-confident.

Tamil Nadu

During the convention, some of the delegates from Tamil Nadu emphasized the role of the panchayats to create awareness among the school children to use the toilets. They also recommended to construct the toilets in the school for the use of the school children in general and girl child in particular. The panchayat Presidents of the Tsunami affected area had to struggle more in persuading the affected people to construct and use the toilets particularly after the disaster to prevent the spread of epidemic. After a lot of persuasion and advocacy they did succeed. Yet another president of the panchayat from Villupuram District reported that in order to install a hand pump she had to motivate the villagers and tried to create an awareness regarding the usefulness of the safe drinking water. After a lot of effort the hand pump could be installed and her panchayat has been chosen as the best panchayat.

Andhra Pradesh

Some elected representatives informed the audience, during the one day meeting that the panchayats don't have untied funds to take measures to get rid of mosquitoes and flies. They also said that the government officials don't cooperate with them in giving information about the existing schemes. People take bath once in a week due to shortage of water in their area. It was also reported that due to lack of awareness food served during mid day meal to the school children contains bacteria. And thereby it leads to stomach disorder. Again it was observed that the school children don't learn about the cleanliness in the school and use the dirty toilets without cleaning those. At best the children are made to clean the toilets in bare hands.

Lessons Learnt for Future Actions (*Inference drawn from studying the various responses*):

- Create awareness among the elected women representatives about the importance of panchayats as agents of development and social change.
- Disseminate information on all the existing schemes of the government and the role of panchayats, at a more desegregated level such as block, districts, state and national level, in carrying them out.

- Use of audiovisual aids to show the impact of polluted drinking water, poor sanitation and hygiene on health.
- Enlighten them on the loss of time and cost involved in health treatments, thereby adversely affecting the economy.
- **A**pprising them with the humiliation that may result from lack of privacy while bathing and from open defecation
- Create awareness regarding loss of time by women and girl child in doing household chores including fetching water from distant places. That time could instead be utilized for formal and informal education.
- Create awareness among the villagers through the panchayats on the above issues of development and mobilize community efforts.
- Create awareness about resource mapping through micro planning.
- The panchayats should be made aware of their role to take a lead in convincing the school teachers and children to observe the personal cleanliness and to feed the bacteria free food.
- Further the members should be told about the linkage between the open defecation, and open drainage and high prevalence of mosquitoes and flies. So that they start looking after the construction of toilets and that of drainage system for which the panchayats have necessary funds from the state governments.
- An awareness should be generated among the panchayat members to have frugal use of water even in the rural areas.

