

Pakistan: From Purdah to Participation

This case illustrates that:

- Women can sometimes offer more practical solutions in water management.
- Involvement by women can dynamise community development.
- Traditional leaders can be won over through patient effort to include women.
- Success based on women's involvement can lead to changes in attitudes in both women and men.

Women follow a strict form of purdah in Hoto village, Baltistan. They are not allowed to meet with people, especially men, from outside the community. Though they are largely responsible for domestic water work and some irrigation work, men have traditionally been responsible for making decisions that affect the management of water resources.

In Hoto, the water is owned and managed by the community itself. Till 1994, village elders were responsible for its management and for ensuring that all members of the community received an equal allotment. However, this traditional organisation was ill-equipped to deal with the management of new technologies and the institutional structures required for improving the water supply.

A participatory Action Research team went to the village in 1994 and offered to help improve its water management system. For one year, the men of Hoto would not give permission for them to meet the women. However, after a long process of dialogue, the female PAR team member was allowed to meet them. Women were finally brought into the dialogue on drinking water.

'We did not know any information about the meeting,' they said. 'The men didn't tell us about the meeting, other than that we were free to come. Anyway, what are we supposed to do in the meeting? What concern is it of ours? This is the men's duty and not ours.'

There were many other difficulties. Hoto is spread out and has many internal divisions. It is a large village of 180 households divided into five *mohallahs*, based on family or clan membership. Eventually, the traditional leaders of each *mohallah* started organising *mohallah*-based water committees, which would be responsible for communicating with individual households. Separate women's committees were also structured on the bases of the *mohallahs*.

The younger and more educated members of the community eventually became the leaders of these committees –since the traditional leadership came to recognise that people with an education would be better prepared to take on these responsibilities.

This marked the beginning of the traditional leadership giving power to other people; something which was not easy for them to do. Two members from each committee were then appointed to be members of a wider *Pani Ki Committee* (Urdu for Water Committee) to co-ordinate the activities of the *mohallah* organisations.

The men accept the women's proposal

Eventually, the men allowed their women to participate in a joint meeting to develop strategies to solve the drinking water problem. The men suggested extending the distribution pipes of an old government water supply scheme to all of the households in the unserved area.

The women put up a counter-proposal. What they felt was needed was a new water tank built on unused land, which would first provide water to the presently non-functioning public standpipes. 'What is the point of a new pipe if the present pipe is not already being used?' they asked. Theirs was a far more cost-effective solution, and the community adopted it.

This marked a major change in thinking in the village. Before, women had been passive in their attitudes towards improving the drinking water situation, while men had been uninterested since domestic water work was not 'their' problem. The women have now become active participants, and have observed that significant changes have been made in their lives.

'We do not have the burden of bringing water now,' one of them said recently. 'We can stay home and take care of our children.' They also feel that they are able to spend more time paying attention to personal hygiene. 'We are washing our clothes in the water now that the water is available from the *nulka* (water) system,' states one of the women members of the *Pani Ki* Committee.

These female members are making new demands on behalf of the women in the community, such as asking for hygiene education, and are themselves selecting the subjects that they are most interested in learning about. They are paying attention to the storage of water, they are taking care of personal hygiene, and they feel their knowledge and understanding about disease transmission has increased.

The women of the *Pani Ki* Committee later took it upon themselves to begin collecting money for an operation and maintenance fund for their water system. They went from house to house collecting Rs. 10. This money provided the basis of the fund. Today, the *Pani Ki* Committee members are exploring other ways to sustain the fund rather than collecting money from each household. They feel strongly that households in Hoto are too poor and will not be able to make monetary contributions on a regular basis.

'We are going to collect one kilogram of apricot kernels from each household,' the Committee President explains. 'This will be easy for every house to give because every house has apricots. We (the Committee members) will sell the kernels and the money will go to the fund '.

Probably the most significant effect is the demand by women for the education of their daughters.

'I wish my daughters could have got an education,' one of the *Pani Ki* members says. 'But there were no schools in the village when they were young. We know that the older girls cannot go to the school now so we are sending our young daughters to schools. We don't want them to live like us but much better than us'.

In 1998, a new school was opened in Hoto, to which girls are being sent.

Taking the approach to other villages

Local traditional leaders have been very impressed by the results. Sheikh Ali Ahmad, the traditional leader of Hoto, commented: ‘The PAR project has helped the community in solving the biggest problem, which was once impossible to think about. We have learned how to organise our resources and bring them together to put them to use’.

When Sheikh Agha Saheb, another traditional leader living outside of the village, visited Hoto and discovered that households were using tap water, and that the people themselves had solved their water problem, he formed the Al-Muntazeer Organisation aimed at taking the same approach to other villages and applying it to other issues of community development.

Source: Unknown. If you the reader know the source of this case study, please do let us know.