

## **India:**

### **From Alienation to an Empowered Community - Applying a Gender Mainstreaming Approach to a Sanitation Project, Tamil Nadu**

#### **Challenges**

In India, only 43 per cent of the urban population has access to basic sanitation. In the low-income slum settlements, 15 per cent of the households have their own toilets and another 21 per cent have access to community toilets. This case study documents a community sanitation project in eight slums in the Tiruchirapalli district of Tamil Nadu State, in southern India. The slums in the study had six community dry latrines in which the human waste fell into an open pit and was collected manually and two latrines with septic tanks constructed by the municipal corporation. However, the structures had all become unserviceable due to the poor maintenance of any municipal infrastructures created before April 1999.

The women in Viragupettai reported that “the non-maintenance of the latrines caused faecal worms to generate and reproduce, and they could be found nearby the water taps, and even inside the walls of their houses.” Poor sanitation and contaminated water affected all families with disease, increasing their medical expenses.

Male community leaders did not take any steps to provide improved facilities. Requests to the government for better services were of no avail until the people joined forces with Gramalaya, an NGO that works with communities on water and sanitation projects.

#### **Programme/Projects**

To address this situation, in 2000 the state authorities for urban affairs in the Tiruchirapalli district proposed involving NGOs to encourage people’s participation and empower women under the Namakku Name Thittam (We for Ourselves) programme. Gramalaya and two other NGOs formulated the project with funding from Water Aid. The funding enabled the project to serve a total of 25 local slums in various communities, with guidance from the district collector and the Commissioner of the City Corporation. In Gramalaya, 8 slums in total benefited from the project.

Gramalaya had prior experience in water, sanitation and hygiene projects in rural areas, and in working with women’s groups as the focal point for dissemination and change. The project design called for the installation of drinking water facilities and individual toilets, as well as community mobilization with a focus on gender mainstreaming. Water Aid covered the equipment and installation costs, while Gramalaya covered the capacity building and community mobilization components. The government provided the land sites, electricity, water supply, and loans to community members.

#### **Outcomes**

- Women’s empowerment;
- Men’s involvement;
- Income from ‘pay and use’ toilets;
- Community development by women;
- Vermicomposting - sanitation and income;
- Creation of innovative child-friendly toilet (CFT) complex for children;
- Improved sanitation facilities; and
- Changes in key hygiene behaviour.

### **Key Factors for Success**

The key reasons for this integrated water and sanitation project's success were:

- The project's focus on women's empowerment, including the formation of women's self-help groups and the related savings and credit scheme run by the women;
- Open discussions with male community members regarding the benefits to themselves, their families and the community of women's empowerment;
- Capacity-building of the women's groups in the areas of accounting, and accessing government services;
- Provision of family counseling on domestic violence and communal problems;
- Development of communal sanitation facilities managed by the community;
- Adoption of a pay and use system that supported both facility maintenance and community development activities; and
- Collaboration between the government, NGOs and the community.

### **Main Obstacles**

- Hesitancy from within the community: The project staff's initial work was slow and difficult. As a result of having been let down in the past community members were reluctant to trust the efforts of government, politicians and NGOs. Gramalaya worked with the community to change this situation by forming women's self-help groups, convincing men to support the women in their new roles and cleaning up garbage and waste.
- Lack of meaningful aid from the government: The usual government practice was to contract companies to do waste and sanitation-related construction work without any consultations with community members. A lack of supervision led to unfinished work and, in one instance, the contractors simply locked the new toilets and did not open them for two years. For Gramalaya's project the government gave land, electricity, water supply and loans to the community but was not expected to provide the services themselves.

### **Looking Ahead - Sustainability and Transferability**

- Success of gender mainstreaming in development programmes: The development of water and sanitation facilities using a model based on women's empowerment will bring success to a country where the majority of the population currently still defecates in the open. This project's impact clearly demonstrates that a gender mainstreaming approach should be included in all development programmes to address major concerns more effectively and obtain the maximum benefits.
- Respect for women spreads from the community to the government to the world: In Tiruchirapalli, not only is the community benefiting from improved water and sanitation facilities, improved health and increased resources to support community development initiatives, but the women have also gained enormous self-confidence. Women who were once treated shabbily by officials are now given respect and invited to sit on chairs when they visit government offices. Not only their men, but the world also now admires them, and they receive a stream of visitors from all over. Their life has a new meaning filled with hope.

### **Further Information**

- Contact the researcher:

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- For information about Gramalaya: <http://www.gramalaya.org>
- To read about Gramalaya's work in Tiruchirapalli:  
<http://www.gramalaya.org/sanitisedslums.html>

**Source**

Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, Gender, water and sanitation; case studies on best practices. New York, United Nations (in press).