

Water is woman's power, how she gets it is her challenge

VITAL ISSUE Providing access to clean drinking water and improving inadequate sanitation facilities are important issues that need to be addressed

EMPOWERMENT



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This Women's Day, we will have varied issues to celebrate. Women empowerment, though, remains a vital issue.

Exactly two weeks on, we will be celebrating the World Water Day (March 22). Have we ever thought that providing access to clean drinking water and improving inadequate sanitation facilities are some important issues for women's empowerment?

Women and girls continue to be affected by the lack of access to water and sanitation facilities. They bear the primary responsibility for collection of water, especially in rural communities. They walk miles, carry heavy burden and wait for hours to fulfil their need of water for drinking,

washing, cooking, cleaning, animal husbandry etc. This is time not spent in income-generation activities or girls attending school. Therefore, there is loss of opportunity in availing education, skills and knowledge outside their traditional roles. This contributes to their weaker economic status.

INADEQUATE SANITATION

Women also suffer from lack of adequate sanitation facilities. This impinges not just on their health but also on 'dignity' and 'safety'. In our villages, there are schools that have toilets but girls come back home during lunch as there is no water in these. Non-availability of clean water at child-birth has often resulted in child and maternal mortality.

Access to clean and nearby sources of water, thus, empowers women to become self-reliant, save their future, take care of their families and help improve the country's economy. Jal Shakti (Water Power) is the basis of Nari Shakti (Women

Empowerment).

This premise is what marked Navjyoti India Foundation's celebrations to mark Women's Day as part of its rural development programme.

More than 250 women from 40 villages of Sohna Block, district Gurgaon, assembled at Navjyoti's Naya Gaon campus and conducted 'Pani Panchayat' (a water council). The agenda was to prepare their action plan, be ready for the monsoon and empower themselves.

PANI POLICE: WOMEN'S WATER LITERACY INITIATIVE

"Imagine that your children go to school without bathing everyday and they take shower only once a month," asked Rahul Gupta, head of the rural development programme, of the women. Another scenario was given, "What if we assemble here in five years and all smell filthy as we did not have water to bathe."

The women laughed, initially

Yet another example was quoted, "Today the rate of gold is ₹30,000 per few grams, what if one bottle of water costs ₹15,000 in 2020?" Immediately, a woman responded "Sona nahi, pani chahiye (...we do not need gold but need water). By this time, the women had realised the value of water is more than gold.

One of the women said that 25,000 litres of water was being wasted everyday in their village as the taps leak profusely, when electricity comes in i.e. approximately 90 lakh litres of water in an year goes unused. They calculated that if the cost of 1 litre of bottle is ₹15, they were wasting ₹3.75 lakh every day. The women decided to form 'Pani Police' (water police)

WOMEN WALK MILES TO COLLECT WATER, ESPECIALLY IN RURAL AREAS. THIS TIME COULD BE SPENT LEARNING SKILLS. ACCESS TO CLEAN AND NEARBY SOURCES OF WATER, THUS, HELPS THEM BECOME SELF-RELIANT

and start a helpline number. Anyone can call on the number if they notice wastage of water, whether during construction of houses, or because of taps running at homes. The women will together visit that area and start Bhakti, i.e. sing spiritual songs. Twenty five women leaders were elected by them who would lead the initiative of Pani Police and also generate awareness through distribution of handbills.

WOMEN BRAINSTORM

The women brainstormed and exchanged the good practices being implemented at their homes. An action plan emerged, ranging from water awareness programmes, optimal utilisation of water, reuse

of water for plants and mopping, rooftop harvesting at home and saving every drop of water. They were taught to prepare their land ready for rainwater harvesting, so that the underground water was recharged.

The women pledged that they will not let drought come in Gurgaon, which is heading towards one in years ahead!

HOPE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

All NGOs must take such initiatives to mobilise women to come together and address their specific needs for water and sanitation. Women have the strength and courage to transform their families and communities. Banks can provide special loans to women encourage roof-top harvesting and construction of toilets. Special loans for women, at easier rates, can be provided. The government has schemes targeting water, but these officers must tie-up with local NGOs and participate for effective implementation.

Schemes such as MGNREGA can be linked with construction of check-dams and other watershed management projects. Projects on water can be successful and sustainable only if women are actively involved to voice concerns and help themselves. These concerted efforts can take us a step closer to end the water crisis and provide hope for future generations. Providing water for women will result in improved literacy level among them, better health facilities, and improved socio-economic opportunity.

Soon after the event I recall tweeting, "What we did in Navjyoti is the primary work of local government officials. However, they neither work on Sundays nor do they bring people together on other days."

Woman power is enhanced by right to water! The challenge is how does she get it?