

CHAPTER: 08

WOMEN VOICES IN INTEGRATED WATER, SANITATION, HEALTH AND EDUCATION PROGRAM IN RAJASTHAN DESERT

GOUTAM SADHU
gsadhu@ihmr.edu.in

SHACHI ADESH
shachiadesh@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In rural areas of developing countries, improved access to clean and regular water supply led to reduced workloads, relief from ongoing stress and drudgery related to collection of water, and sanitation facilities, health, and education status. To sustain these benefits, women need to be active participants rather than passive beneficiaries in community owned drinking water projects. It found that involvement of women did more to galvanize their leadership potential, showcase their capabilities and make them more active participants in managing their respective village water facilities than simply including them on water management committees. One assumption that runs through this project, right from its vision to the operationalization is with respect to bringing women's participation at center stage. It was clear to the designers of the project that the benefits of improved health and living conditions from Aapni Yojna water supply can only be achieved with strong and energetic women's participation. These eight case studies applaud the tireless efforts of the community especially women who were the unsung heroes and have been instrumental in the success of the Aapni-Yojna project in three districts of Rajasthan that actively promoted women's involvement in every stage of the project.

Keywords: Aapni Yojna, WASH, Women, Empowerment, Rajasthan

INTRODUCTION

The advantages of engaging women in water management should by now be obvious. Engaging and empowering women to participate in Water User Associations (WUA) and

public water management bodies is important for successful water management efforts. Women's participation is important for effective governance in this sector (Young et al., 2020).

Aapni Yojna, a rural water supply project of unusual size and complexity. The project area covers about 20,000 sq. km. in three districts of northern Rajasthan viz, Churu, Hanumangarh and Jhunjhunu. The Project is co-funded by the Government of Germany through its development bank, *Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau* (KfW). The bulk of the investment is dedicated to the technical works implemented by the Project Management Cell, a special unit of the Public Health Engineering Department of Rajasthan. The project's main objective was to improve the health status and living conditions of the target population. Sustainable water supply is ensured from the Indira Gandhi Canal, as ground water is insufficient and saline. Participation of users in decision-making produces more efficient and more sustainable projects. 'Community participation' has become a catchphrase. When communities influence or control the decisions that affect them, they have a greater stake in the outcomes and are more committed to ensuring success through community participation unit: A consortium of 5 NGOs with IIHMR as a lead organisation helped to break down the cycle of dependence, which characterizes much down-up approach in water supply project (Ojha, 2018).

Aapni Yojna changed various other aspects of life in the villages - their standard of life improved, daily habits changed, their health status became better and there was a general wellbeing among the community. It brought different religion together and wiped out the difference owing to the different castes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. The first objective of the study was to develop a case study for documenting best practices in gender mainstreaming in diverse community dynamics settings in water and sanitation project.
2. A second objective was to add to current knowledge the importance of applying a gender perspective in designing sustainable development interventions in water and sanitation project.
3. The third objective is to validate gender mainstreaming as a useful and important strategy and reveal the processes that make water and Sanitation project successful and sustainable.

METHODOLOGY

To develop the case study, various data collecting methods had been applied. Here following three stages methods were carried out (Punch, 1998):

1. An in-depth interview of the women in the project villages, project staff and other stake holders with a specific focus on women participation in Aapni-Yojna project at Rajasthan Desert.
2. Document analysis of the National Water Policy (NWP)-2012 and the National Policy for Women 2016.
3. Review and Analysis of the documents and records found in the water management of Aapni Yojna project.

Case Study 1: Catalyst for Change

In the project area society was strict and orthodox. The women were compelled to stay within the house and observe *purda*. They were isolated from all the decision-making activities even within their households. Women would not come out of their houses to participate even in all women's meeting held in their own *mohalla*. It was a great achievement when Vimla Devi attended the village meeting of Aapni Yojna. Her inquisitive mind returned with a ton of questions. She participated in the subsequent meetings. The Community Participation Unit (CPU) staff by then had become impressed with her sincerity and interest.

Since many years she is engaged in community mobilization and sensitization activities on issues related to gender equity, education, health, micro credit, environment, etc. Vimla Devi has been a catalyst in the formation of women's self-help group (SHG) in her village. The SHG in her village is one of the oldest running ones, engaged in thrift and credit activities. This has proved to be beneficial for those families during emergency needs, e.g. activities concerned with health, agriculture, domestic problems (marriage, death etc.). Many of the SHG members have been able to free themselves of the debt trap of the local traditional moneylenders. During the SHG meeting these women discuss about issues related to "women's health, domestic problems, education of their girl children, access/availability of government facilities/services etc".

Her courage and boldness too had helped the group from getting disintegrated, when one powerful villager had tried to break it. Since then, this group has been linked with local lead bank. Seeing the regular monetary transaction activities of the group and finding its members to be very active, the manager of the bank personally came to participate in the meeting of the SHG.

Vimla Devi says, "When women negotiate with banks and government officials, they are often ostracised by other men and women in their community for being 'too forward.' Government and bank officials have preconceived ideas of what women are capable of, and stereotypes of what is considered women's work." But now things have changed.

She has been instrumental in organizing awareness generation events on environment. She disseminates her learning on 'water conservation/harvesting, sustainable consumption' among the villagers in general and women in particular. The other tangible impacts of her efforts include increased participation of women in village/community gatherings/meetings and more interaction of the villagers with the government officials, whereas the intangible ones are improved awareness among women about their social, health, economic and political rights & better cooperation as well as attitude of the men folk.

Case Study 2: Small Beginnings

For fourth consecutive year in the summer, the rains had failed again. Villages were living through severe drought. The poorest people were cutting down on meals, some people were selling their land, but they were still paying for water! Witnessing their hardships, the CPU team decided to do something to contribute to the income of the family. As a beginning, 8 families from 6 villages of

Taranagar tehsil were selected and were asked about income generation activity that they could take up and requirement of seed money. Initially men could not appreciate involvement of women in the program. Men would think aloud and say,

“What would the women do? They did not know anything; they would keep fighting among themselves and could never reach a group decision and so many similar statements. Women too were unconvinced about their own involvement. They would say, “Why are you talking to us? Go and talk to the men, as they will do the work.” Neeru adds, “They lacked interest and would wait only long enough to know about our marital status and number of children”.

A total of Rs. 7600 was distributed in units of Rs. 800-1000 per family. With this they set up shops for vegetables, *kirana and manihari* and one person bought a goat. All families started their activities and returned the capital given by the CPU. This was a small initiative to tide over the difficult time. Further help in terms of capital and skill improvement supported these people in setting up long-term income security programmes, thereby also promoting the sustainability of Aapni Yojna as well keep on paying for water.

‘At the beginning of the project one would hardly see women outside their houses, especially higher caste women like Rajput and Brahmin, and Muslims, they observe strict Purdah system. So now they have the possibility to go into these regular women’s groups meetings, savings groups meetings. They meet, sit together, they discuss their own issues, and they develop action plans what they want to achieve. And the resistance on the men side is now going down, and they even appreciate the work women are doing in the project and for the communities.’

Case Study 3: Removing Fences

Nirmala belongs to a backward caste of traditionally conservative and male dominated society. She lives with her husband in village Deogarh of Taranagar tehsil in Churu district. Being a girl, her education was not given any importance. During childhood she used to help her father in agricultural work. She was married at the tender age of 15. After *Gauna* (the time when the girl is allowed to go to her husband's place) she went along with her husband. Since then, like an ideal woman she carried out the major workload of the household – she enabled male members to earn and children to get educated by providing them trouble free home, food and care. She is from a very poor family. Her husband is an alcoholic who does not contribute to the family’s income. Because of the financial crisis, she was facing difficulty in sending her children to school.

One fine day Nirmala happened to attend a village meeting conducted by Aapni Yojna. The team members were interacting with the villagers on the project details & benefits, communities’ roles & responsibilities, women’s participation, health education etc. Intrigued by what she heard in the meeting she walked over to the CPU female team member after the meeting and asked about the self-help group. Basanti Devi welcomed her with open arms. Nirmala became a member of the SHG.

Through her SHG she obtained an Income Generation Activity loan from the CPU. With that she bought a shop for her husband. They sold groceries & other items at the shop. The shop was

paying dividends and Nirmala thought that life was beginning to look good. They had also repaid the loan taken from the CPU. But life was not so easy for her. Soon, the profits began to lessen, people used to take provision on loan & not pay. The shop went into heavy debt. Nirmala and her husband decided to close the shop. They were again at the same crossroads of life. Her hardships remained. Her husband, though had reduced drinking, did not support her properly. Nirmala again took a loan of Rs. 3000 from the SHG and she bought two goats. Within 6 months they gave birth to 4 kids. Then she sold both the goats and all their kids. She raised Rs. 600 from the SHG and added to it some money of her own, and then bought a buffalo. Through sale of milk she, now, earns enough to sustain her family. She does all the household work in the morning, and sends her children to the school. She bears all the expenses of children's education at her own. In this way she has been able to provide for her family.

Case Study 4: The First Ever

Deogarh village, situated in Taranagar tehsil of Churu, is home to 300 families. Harijans, Jats, Brahmins and Kumhars largely inhabit it. Agriculture, casual labour and livestock are the only source of income. From morning till night women remain occupied in the household chores, cooking, cleaning, working in the field, serving the men, looking after the children etc. Few women of the village wanted to rise above their status quo. They would think about changing the present situation of women. They needed someone to guide them in the right direction, to show them the way. They found their mentor in Aapni Yojna. One of the village women, Basanti Devi, met the CPU team members and shared the sad state of the women along with their desire to contribute to improving the status of women. Thereafter a meeting of the village women was called. The women remained silently at the back and hardly participated because of: a feeling of powerlessness; fear of overstepping customary roles by speaking in group meetings; lack of experience in working with groups; and lack of skills in planning and problem solving.

To deliver the various activities intended for the women it was essential to form self-help groups of women. Through constant persuasion Basanti Devi convinced the women to form the self-help group. But their husbands did not agree to the proposition and women were hesitant in forming the SHG. Basanti Devi spoke to their husbands at length and finally managed to come to an understanding with them. The husbands agreed to let their wives participate in the self-help groups on the condition that their wives would not go out of the village. Thus, in May, the first ever self-help group of 12 women was formed in Deogarh village.

Basanti Devi who presided this Self-Help Group continued to strive to associate other women of the village with the self-help group. In the next six months of the formation of the first SHG, she was able to form three more groups. Now, there are a total of 9 SHGs. Of these 9, two groups are of men who were inspired by women SHGs. The self-help groups saved small amounts every week. Loans were advanced to the needy among them for purchase of sheep, buffalo, goat, cow etc and purchasing seeds, manure, cattle feed, food grains etc.

Apart from easy access to credit the groups also help themselves to start up small enterprises. At first the women took loans to pay off amounts they had borrowed from moneylenders and/or to redeem their ration cards. While the impetus for forming an SHG was economic, women soon realized that the social benefits they derived from group membership were as important as the financial ones. "Without Aapni Yojna, life would not have changed. We wouldn't have the education. We would not have known about employment opportunities. And we would not have any health knowledge. The women have benefited here." - Ratni Bai, SHG member

Case Study 5: Aachhi Raah Dikhai

Thirty-year old Kamlesh lives with her small family in village Chhoti Chanderi of Hanumangarh District. Survival is a constant preoccupation and at its most basic, survival means food. She struggles with lack of basic amenities such as food, water, fuel, fodder and health facilities. Insufficient incomes and the lack of employment were her most pressing concerns.

Soil erosion, water scarcity and poor quality of drinking water because of high salinity and fluoride content are widespread problems in the area. The villagers are largely dependent on agriculture and related activities for their livelihood. Three out of five years, the monsoon rains are not sufficient, and people lived with the constant threat of drought. As a result, availability of drinking water, food, fodder and fuel wood was scarce. To make matters worse, there were no local employment opportunities available.

Kamlesh and her family too were facing a lot of problems because their main occupation & source of income was agriculture and livestock. The irony was that the grains produced in the field were not sufficient to sustain a small family for even four months. She had to walk at least 2.5 kms out of the village to collect fuel wood and water. They were getting along with great difficulty. Kamlesh would constantly think of ways to raise some money. Incidentally at that time she came in contact with a CPU worker. The CPU worker explained to her the concept of Self-help Group, where a group of women would donate a certain amount of money into a pool, and deposit it into a cooperative bank, which would act as a 'revolving credit' fund where whoever needs it can borrow money for a low interest (which is shared among members of the group), and must pay it back as quickly as possible for the next person to borrow it.

The CPU worker had paved the way for Kamlesh and neighbouring women for how they could do group saving to meet their immediate financial needs. A self-help group was formed. As she participated in training programmes Kamlesh came to know how women from other villages were moving out of the confines of the homes to take part in community work. The discussions made her aware of the latent potential in her and she was inspired to do something about her economic situation. Through the SHG she applied for a loan. The State Bank of India granted her a loan of Rs. 9000 that she utilized it to open a *manihari* shop in front of her house. Her group members helped her out by becoming her permanent customers.

She has been running the shop for a year. The financial condition of her family improved gradually and even her husband started helping her with her work in the house so that she could give more time and attention to her shop.

Recollecting her story in her group she says “*aapni yojna ro bhala ho jaka mhane aachi raah dikhayi, mane lage jia andhere mai mhare hath pe deyo rakhee jio*”. She feels as though she was in a dark room, and somebody placed a lighted lamp in her hand.

Case Study 6: The Road Ahead

In village Jigsana Tal, a Women’s Group was constituted which formed a platform for voicing the views of the village women and for implementing women’s activities in the village. Among its members were the women’s representative (WR) of the Water and Health Committee, along with three other WHC members. This group participated actively in making a social map of the village, selecting sites for public stand posts and selecting beneficiaries of sanitation units. After 3 months this group was motivated to form a Self-Help Group and the Dhan Laxmi SHG came into existence.

At present this group has 18 members representing different castes, such as Harijan, Brahmin, Suthar and Jat. The members come from low-income families with annual earnings of about Rs. 20,000 to 30,000. The members decided to deposit Rs. 20 every month. They use part of their monthly deposit for internal loans – loans given to SHG members for meeting their needs. These internal loans have been used for various purposes like purchasing a buffalo calf, medical expenses and buying goods for the family shop.

The members were told that if they conducted meetings regularly and maintained records properly for six months then the bank might sanction them a loan of 4 times their savings. The women were very happy and in that very meeting they decided to obtain a bank loan and divide it between two members, one of who wanted to open a shop and the other wanted to buy a goat. However, when the loan was sanctioned in June, the members came to know that one of their member’s sons who was studying in Hissar and who had stood first in graduation had now been selected in a veterinary college. This student had been a source of pride for this village for his illustrious academic record. The parents, being poor, could not afford higher education for him and were feeling depressed because of this. When the SHG members realized this, they decided to switch their beneficiary and gave the loan to Mrs. Vimla Devi for admitting her son to the veterinary college.

The SHG was awarded a revolving fund of Rs. 2000 by the CPU that has been used for medical expenses and for buying goods for their shop. Since the commissioning of water supply, these women get free time of 4-5 hours a day. This free time has been used by Mrs. Kamli Devi to train the group members in dari weaving. They are turning out exquisite creations with geometrical patterns as well as scenes of peacocks and other wildlife.

The women have been guided to the path of development for empowerment. They have built up their capacity in saving, financial management and weaving. They have participated actively in implementing the project in their village. This is the first generation of women who have participated in the public sphere. The women have won over the doubters through their dependability, determination and skill. By tapping into women’s experience and wisdom, communities have gained access to safe water and the women have gained stature and self- esteem.

Case study 7: When Women Unite

When the WHC was being formed in the village Jawanipura of Taranagar Tehsil, the name of her husband was selected for the committee, but Mrs. Rama Kanwar stood up and volunteered to work for the community. She was ultimately selected as Sanitation Representative, a post normally held by men. She has been involved in the distribution of application forms, selection of beneficiaries and record keeping for materials like cement, reti, pipe, chauka, murga etc. provided to beneficiaries. Besides her duties as SR, Mrs. Rama Kanwar is also actively involved in the collection of money for water bills and in maintenance of Public Stand Post (PSP).

She is the chairperson of a self-help group and formed and trained another SHG of 18 women. A medicine kit was provided to her SHG and another woman was made in-charge of the kit.

Decisions made at community level are made by men, and they never ask women's opinions. Even if a woman like me tries to make decisions, the men take it very negatively; they criticize me, they say I've got no character. They put a lot of pressure on you to give up. But if you stay strong, you'll persuade society.

The person in-charge was illiterate and so she could not maintain the records accurately. When the project team offered to take back the kit, Mrs. Rama Kanwar volunteered to take charge, because she felt the women needed it. Now she provides 24-hour service for medicines for common ailments, maintains a record of sales and medicines, and buys stocks for the medicine kit.

She always had the desire to do something different. She has shown exceptional creativity, courage, and perseverance in improving the quality of life in rural communities. When she was asked how much time she was devoting to all these activities, she replied that "medicines are sold anytime they are needed, but the rest of the work for collecting money and conducting meetings and reminding the women about meetings takes up at least seven days a month." All this work is being done without payment, yet she is willing to take up any other work for the empowerment of women of her village.

Commenting on any problems from the community for taking part in the project, she says, "they make up many stories, but I work because I want to improve the lives of the women of my village".

She feels that many women of her village have come a long way by stepping out of their houses and taking part in the public life. But she is also concerned that "now these women only come to the meetings, they are not doing any more productive work. Even by saving money they cannot make any progress because there are no industries, no factories in this area, what will the women do?" She rightly demands, "There should be some economic activity so that the women can keep themselves busy and also make progress."

Case study 8: The Lost Opportunity

'She sends me to fetch water very early in the morning,

Oh! Grandfather it is very difficult for me,

My pot never fills up fully
The water is so deep that my rope hardly reaches it.
The sun rises and also sets by the time I return.
Unable to collect even a pot full of water'

- **A folk song of Rajasthan**

This is the situation most women and girl children find themselves in for much of the year. The trudge barefoot in the hot sun for hours over wastelands, across thorny fields, or rough terrain in search of water, often the colour of mud and brackish, but still welcome for the parched throats back home. On an average a rural woman walks 14,00 km a year just to fetch water. In every household, particularly in the rural areas, women and girl child bear the responsibility of collecting, transporting, storing, providing and managing water.

Sapna is a thirteen-year-old girl from the village of Billu Rampura of Sardarshahar Tehsil. Her father is a laborer, and her mother stays at home and works in the fields. She has one younger sister and abrother.

'I go to collect water four times a day, in a 20-litre clay jar. It's hard work! When I first started collecting water, I was about seven years old. We have to walk for over a mile to fetch water. I've never been to school, as I have to help my mother with her work so we can earn enough money. [...] Our house doesn't have a bathroom. I wash myself in the kitchen once a week, on Sunday. At the same time, I change my clothes and wash the dirty ones. When I need the toilet, I have to go in open. I usually go with my friends as we're only supposed to go after dark when people can't see us. If I could alter my life, I would really like to go to school and have more clothes.'

In the project villages that accepted the Aapni Yojna the quality of life significantly improved for the women. Freed up from the drudgery of walking kilometers to fetch water, women had more time and energy to spend on priorities such as health and childcare. Female children, no longer needed to help their mothers at home, began to go to school.

Billu Rampura is one of the villages that partially associated with Aapni Yojna and later withdrew. It was amongst the first set of villages selected for the supply of drinking water. Life could have been different in this village as well but for the decision made by the community.

From the Diary of Field Team and Community Based Organisations

a. Women's voices

"Extreme water scarcity in the village had given it a bad name... People from other villages were reluctant to get their daughters married to our boys... We wondered if young men in our village would remain bachelors for life - But the situation has changed now. We have Aapni Yojna - water year-round!!"

"The drudgery of fetching water from far away sources had taken away all joy from our life – even the joy of having a beautiful daughter-in-law! She too had to spend long hours in scorching heat to fetch water... water supply was scarce and erratic. The smile on her face had gradually turned into a chronic frown. What wrenched my heart was that she too had started having the mark on her head from carrying heavy pots over long distances. But today all this is over – Aapni Yojna has given us filtered drinking water at our door step!"

- **Village Godas, Block Taranagar:** In the earlier phase of Aapni Yojna, 'When women were invited to join in the activity of making a village map, I was very inhibited. Really speaking, it was only the presence of Bhuri Kaki which helped me gain confidence. We were approx. 15-16 women who sat huddled together in one corner of the meeting place'.

I was with my face covered and in the 2-hour meeting, I was soaked in perspiration – more out of nervousness. None of us spoke. Then Neelu Bahenji from Aapni Yojna said – "You should also speak – It is not going to help if you keep quiet. After all you are going to bring the water." We told her that the men folk were all some kind of senior relatives. Uncles or fathers-in-law etc. We just could not speak in their presence. Later, it was decided that the meetings should be separate for women so that they could speak freely.

- **Field Voices**

b. Women's participation in decision making

There are 9 stand posts and 2 water collection points. The location of the standposts were decided through participatory appraisal, where all the women of the village had participated. The location map was then shared with all the men of village. A strong objection regarding the location of one stand post was raised by the menfolk. There was debate and dialogue for changing the location. But the women refused to change the location of the standpost. The menfolk realized that as women do most of the water collection, the location suited their convenience. The stand post was ultimately constructed in the desired location.

- **Karyakarta's diary**

c. Dairy activities

The dairy activities emerged as one of the significant and viable income generation activity during the experience with different SHGs in the local region. CPU also tried to organise some support of starting of the income generation activities by active SHG members of the Aapni Yojna Project region. The time save in collection of drinking water and other awareness programmes for the women SHGs, made the background to link them with the dairy activity. In last 1 year of the phase-1 CPU, provides significant support to the dairy works in the local region.

d. D. Profile of a Leader – Smt. Rama Kanwar

When the WHC was being formed, the name of her husband was selected for the committee, but Mrs. Rama Kanwar stood up and volunteered to work for the community. She was ultimately selected as Sanitation Representative, a post normally held by men.

She has been involved in the distribution of applications, selection of beneficiaries and record keeping for materials like cement, reti, pipe, chauka, murga etc. provided to beneficiaries. Besides her duties as SR, Rama Kanwar is also actively involved in the collection of money for water bill and in maintenance of PSPs.

She is the chairperson of a self-help group and has formed and trained another SHG of 18 women. A medicine kit was provided to her SHG, and another woman was made in-charge of the kit. The person in-charge was illiterate and so she could not maintain the records accurately. When the project team offered to take back the kit, Mrs. Rama Kanwar volunteered to take charge, because she felt the women needed it. Now she provides 24-hour service for medicines for common ailments, maintains a record of sales and medicines, and buys stocks for the medicine kit.

When she was asked how much time she was devoting to all these activities, she replied that medicines are sold anytime they are needed, but the rest of the work for collecting money and conducting meetings and reminding the women about meetings takes up at least seven days a month. All this work is being done without payment, yet she is willing to take up any other work for the empowerment of women of her village. When asked if she faces any problems from the community for taking part in the project, she says “they make up many stories, but I work because I want to improve the lives of the women of my village”. She feels that many women of her village have come a long way by stepping out of their houses and taking part in the public life. But she is also concerned that “now these women only come to the meetings, they are not doing any more productive work. Even by saving money they cannot make any progress because there are no industries, no factories in this area, what will the women do?” She rightly demands that “There should be some economic activity so that the women can keep themselves busy and also make progress.”

After my marriage I came to my Sasural (in-laws-house) and drank the stored water from the Tanka. It was very smelly. There was fungus at the bottom of the storage Tanka. In my parental village, I was accustomed to drink water from a well which had sweet water. Very soon after coming to this (in-laws-village) house I became ill. My condition gradually got worse and I had to be admitted to the hospital in the city. It took almost three months to get over my stomach infection.

Later, I took part in the trainings organized by Aapni Yojna. Then I realized the importance of cleanliness and care of drinking water. Now I am particular about keeping the water clean and covered.

- **Dhapu Bai, Kojharia, Churu**

CONCLUSIONS

Local level power dynamics are intricately woven in the very fabric of villages. These are largely function of social political and economic factors. None of the earlier water supply projects, had taken into consideration the existing social dynamics of the village with the active involvement of women. There were no concerted efforts to evolve a participatory approach in the project implementation at the ground level. All the earlier projects thus had remained 'theirs' instead of becoming 'ours', in the minds of the villagers.

These issues were taken into cognizance from the very inception of Aapni Yojna. Concerted efforts were made for establishing effective community linkages. The CPU workers of Aapni Yojna intensively interacted with the villagers shared their joys and sorrows. The approach was to be a part of them, share their sorrows, celebrate their joys. In-between all these there were intermittent dialogues to spread the understanding that water supply would be beneficial for all. Slowly the air of mistrust and disbelief gave way to trust and some bonding. The sincerity of the field functionaries struck a positive note in the heart of the villagers. It took some time, for the women and villagers to realize that the success of the programme lay in their hands only if they could set aside their personal caste and creed differences and join hands for a larger cause.

Ensuring participation of women was another challenging and uphill task, in the villages where Aapni Yojna was implemented. As the workers strengthened their relations with the villagers, women started attending the meetings of Aapni Yojna. However, the strict norms of *purdah* existent in social fabric prohibited a free participation and free expression of their opinion, in the meetings. To overcome this hurdle, the workers decided to organise separate meetings for women. It was thought that this would enable the women to assume a more prominent role in decision making.

Finally in March 2000, the impossible, improbable idea finally turned into a reality, water supply was established through Aapni Yojna. Taps in the villages had drinking water. The days of trekking considerable distance of 6-8 km to and from in hot scorching sun, seemed to be a distant and unreal apprehension for women and girls. The attitude of the villagers changed overnight.

20 years after my marriage, I was able to bathe with one full bucket of sweet water from the Aapni Yojna water. The salt from saline water used to stick on our skin and corrode it.

- **Vimla bai, village women**

Similar feelings were echoed by other village women, after the water supply was established. There was a perceptible increase in attendance of women in the meetings. A prominent change was also visible in the personal hygiene and sanitation practices of the villagers. Daily bathing, cleaning clothes, brushing of teeth and other practices relating to personal hygiene were slowly being absorbed in the daily routine of women particularly.

Finally, there was no more slurry and dirt near the soak pits as the place remained dry. These points acted as demonstration units for construction of soak pits in other points as well. CPU workers did not have to motivate any further for construction of soak pits. The community had accepted and adopted ways and means to maintain cleanliness and hygiene in their village. The demonstration effect was not confined to one village. Community linkages between the villages served as a bridge for spreading the effectiveness of the soak pits.

Another area in which Aapni Yojna made a significant dent was 'Health issues'. The health awareness related activities and sensitization efforts in Aapni Yojna enhanced the understanding of health-related issues to the villagers. The availability of potable water sharply reduced incidences of water borne diseases, which were prevalent earlier. All these factors were largely responsible for the dwindling

practices of quack doctors' present in the village. The inexperienced medical practitioners and quack doctors had to close their outlets.

Once the 24 hours water supply of Aapni Yojna started, this existent tertiary industry faced a deep slump. Soon many people had to give up their business. The vested interest of many people was affected. They collectively joined hands to launch a negative propaganda about the Yojna, which were woven around the following –

- The natural water conservation system in the villages would be becoming defunct due to Aapni Yojna water supply system.
- Once the people become habitual of sweet drinking water, Aapni Yojna would then start charging high rates from its users. The ratio of water would be increased every year.
- Instead of quenching one's thirst, the sweet water increases the thirst in a person, cattle and livestock die after drinking such water.

Over 350 villages in "water stressed" Churu district have no water woes. The Aapni Yojna project drawing water from Indira Gandhi Canal is providing potable drinking water to a population of 9 lakh for 7 to 8 hours a day in this parched region. The project has been demonstrating the concept of community participation with distribution and maintenance of potable water supply system is being done by the villagers. Each villager has a water meter and the water consumed in a month is billed to the village water and health committee. This committee collected the water tariff on the principal of self-governance through the concept of Anga (Unit) System.

Women who were the most affected by water shortage, had been affectively involved in this project starting from map designing, site selection of water points, sanitation, management of water system, personal and domestic hygiene.

As they were involved from the preplanning stage of the project to every cycle of the project hence, they feel that it's their project hence been the instrumental in making the project success and sustainable.

Recommendations based on learning from the Case Studies

1. During the project preparation and appraisal stage, analyze gender disparities and its impact on men and women.
2. Make sure that women are included in community involvement along with men and communication initiatives from the outset and include considerations of gender in all of the studies and assessments that are conducted to frame the strategy of the project.
3. More legislation is desperately needed to aggressively uphold women's rights to participate in society at large and in the management of water resources. This can be accomplished via enhancing women's roles, boosting confidence, and developing capacity and greater involvement in the project.
4. More work needs to be done to lower the illiteracy rate and promote education for women and girls. This calls for examining and changing ingrained socioeconomic and cultural barriers that prevent girls from attending school.

5. Water professionals should be well-versed in gender issues. Gender integration into water management is made easier as a result. As a result, it is necessary to provide education and training to increase their understanding of gender concepts.
6. There is a need to create a dialogue between all stakeholders to raise awareness of gender issues and women's situation. Building capacity and fostering an environment that encourages women to speak up and voice their opinions in community-based organizations are necessary. This will lay the groundwork for long-lasting transformation and sustainability of the project.

Conflict of interest: None

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