

Does sanitation really matter to us?

By Arti Manchanda Grover

Social media has brought the world to our desktop where information is available at a click of a button. The issues now are not just related to a particular community, region, state, or country; they are global. We attach to them directly or indirectly and share our opinions on them, which is an easy and powerful way to contribute toward addressing issues we care about.

The much-celebrated *Swachh Bharat* Mission, a three-year-old flagship program aimed at improving sanitation in our country, has been one topic that has attracted everyone's attention. A recent newsletter of *India Water Portal*, a special issue focusing on the World Toilet Day, November 19, talked about facts related to sanitation and featured interesting articles and blogs on how poor sanitation adversely impacts health, coupled with some hard-hitting photo essays. Articles reveal the terrible plight of people forced to scavenge to survive in India, and how they continue to suffer due to deep-rooted inequities that cut across Indian society. One article, titled "Sanitation must go beyond shame and stigma" by Seetha Gopalakrishnan, featured the author's perspectives from a conference held in 2016 at S M Sehgal Foundation, the nonprofit organization where I work. This inspired me to pen down some of the other initiatives we have taken since then. Two key initiatives include a series of radio programs on the theme aiming at behavior change, and the other on preparing citizens to be sanitation ambassadors to provide strength to sanitation drives in their villages.

World Toilet Day, what's this?

World Toilet Day is an international day officially observed by the United Nations to address the global sanitation crisis. Each year the day is marked by worldwide public education campaigns and events to raise awareness. According to the UN report card, close to 946 million people in the world have little or no access to sanitation and continue to practice open defecation. According to the 2011 census, 53.1 percent (63.6 percent in 2001) of households in India do not have a toilet, with a percentage being as high as 69.3 percent (78.1 percent in 2001) in rural areas, and 18.6 percent (26.3 percent in 2001) in urban areas. Regardless of the specific percentages, clearly, a large chunk of our population still heads to the fields to relieve themselves, some at dawn, some at dusk, and some in the still of the day or night where not many are around, to fulfill nature's call.

A special initiative of Sehgal Foundation utilizes community media, i.e. community radio, which is considered to be one of oldest forms of oral media, also understood to be local, cost-effective, and easy-to-access grassroots forms of communication. Community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, operational since 2012, broadcasts thirteen hours daily to over 200 villages of Nuh district, Haryana, sharing information and awareness about sanitation issues as well as other community concerns.

Does gender have anything to do with sanitation?

A Swachh Bharat Mission mass media campaign shows actress Vidya Balan promoting the sanitation message. Women are in the greatest need for toilets because of their biological formation (menstruation, child bearing) and the societal stigma attached to the female gender that renders them more vulnerable to harassment. Women (celebrities especially) can usually attract audiences and persuade more effectively.

Toilets: ease or ordeal?

Thinking back to a community radio series broadcast a year ago titled "Shochalay Mere Angana" (toilet in my backyard) that explored the gender and sanitation link, I was reminded of the mid-sized village of Bhadas in Nuh district, Haryana, where we, a bunch of community radio workers, gathered to meet a small group of rural women basking in the sun, to understand how important toilets were to them. The discussion taught us a lesser-known fact that each one of them realized the importance of sanitation, but there was more to their stories—the ordeals these women faced each day to relieve themselves and the failure of processes and systems that could have enabled the dream of a clean India to come true.

The first few meetings and discussions propelled conversations to know each other better, establish that rapport (trust came much later), then to learn about difficulties and health impacts they faced due to lack of toilets. Simple yet astonishing, heartfelt yet disheartening, eager but hopeless narratives surrounded us. And we were being watched, watched by the husbands of some of the women present in the group who wanted to see what conversations were going on.

The women's pain was vivid. They shared that when they are not able to relieve themselves in the wee hours, they had to control it for the whole day, waiting for darkness. Some reported that male decision-makers of the family said they would only construct toilets when the government subsidy is received, and some have toilets constructed but don't use them. An incident shared by a woman from a *Balmiki* household showed how gender roles influence access to sanitation. She said in a subdued voice, "I should not be sharing this with joy but, what repeated reminders to male members of the family about constructing toilets could not do, a small accident that left my husband immobile did: His leg was fractured and he could not go out to defecate, which translated into toilet construction at home. We were really happy."

That radio programming was one of our first attempts by Alfaz-e-Mewat to see our government's program on Mission Clean India through a gender lens. And the message rings loud in my memory because it remains true. Just as charity begins at home, sanitation and hygiene starts with you and me—and the effort goes hand in hand with the goal of gender equity and equality.

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