

Role of Women Led Small Water Enterprises in Public Health

Background

Women's role in water resource management is critical and recognized, yet the implementation of methods and strategies to get beyond gender-based obstacles to women's equal participation in water resource management remain a challenging task. Thus, empowerment of women in managing water assumes high priority. In India 600 million people suffer from moderate to severe water stress, more than 140,000 children under the age of five die every year due to diarrhea and about two lakh people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water. The crisis is worsening and women and especially the girl child are typically disproportionately burdened not only with water collection spending four to six hours but also caring for sick family. To mitigate this problem increasingly small water enterprises are being set up. Rapid, cost effective decentralized water purification systems owned and operated locally by women social entrepreneurs provide affordable safe drinking water. Usually they are managed by men as they are considered more skilled and better at financial management. There exists a myth that women have a technology barrier and lack business skills, especially at the unskilled grass root level. Safe Water Network India (SWNI) has imparted skill training to women entrepreneurs and Self Help Groups (SHGs) who manage iJal Stations that provide affordable, reliable access to safe water.

India Water Partnership (IWP) collaborated with its network partner; SWNI for an activity under the Global Water Partnership's strategic Goal 1 – Catalyze change in policy and practice of its core program-2019 to “assess operations and sustainability of Small Water Enterprises (SWEs) managed by Self Help Groups or women social entrepreneurs in Medak district of Telangana State, India for their managerial excellence and make a case for expansion”. The purpose of this project was to assess how women from SHGs managing SWEs can be mainstreamed to own and operate safe water treatment plant for improving public health and increasing their livelihood. Through the study this project assessed the capability of 28 women from SHGs who are operating and maintaining SWEs.



Objective

Objectives of this activity was to develop an evidence base that SWEs run by SHGs are sustainable and make a case for accessing funds to them to set up such safe water facility and expand, thus, bringing livelihood and dignity to them as well as reduction in water borne diseases and public health improvement.



Knowledge & Capacity building

The SHG members were earlier engaged in their traditional occupation, however, from the past 2 years, the iJal Women' Empowerment Program initiated by SWNI helped the SHGs not only in building capacity but also with new sources of income, provided them insight and opportunity to educate the village community on the relationship between safe water and health. SWNI team attracted these women to attend an extensive training on the technical and operational aspects of running and maintaining the iJal station; financial management, etc. Income of women running SWE has increased ranging between INR 3000/- to 4000/- per month. Livelihood generation improved public health of the community through safe water access.

Recommendations

- Identification of policy gaps and hurdles to mainstream women SHGs in SWE business
- Developing policy recommendations to include more women in SWEs
- Invest in women education and literacy by engaging more women in capacity building and skill development trainings
- Promote skills and education for women to undertake engineering and technical roles
- Inclusion of women in governance and leadership roles
- Provide guidance to women in balancing family and work responsibilities
- Promote and run Information Education and Communication (IEC) campaigns designed to mobilize women in running the business
- Provide a forum for dialogue on social and political issues, such as women's rights and community problems
- Promote gender equality from early childhood at family and societal level
- Educate men to accept role of women, set platforms that allow women to leverage available microfinance options
- Remove social stigma

Outcomes

- The program proved that rural women/SHG/semi-literate women can be skilled in technology and finance to manage micro-enterprises, generate income and improve their livelihoods. The SWE initiative has empowered SHG women as water entrepreneurs to change their livelihoods in a more significant manner than those in cottage industry, art craft production and agriculture labour, etc.
- This has enhanced their social stature and they have decision powers in family decisions as well have demonstrated enhanced confidence. It also improved their access to economic resources and drudgery reduction with men assisting them in collecting water from SWEs on their bicycles/two wheelers.
- The iJal stations run by SWEs have provided livelihood opportunity to the rural poor women and helped them improve their financial condition. Also, it has provided safe drinking water to the poor rural women who otherwise were travelling long distances to fetch water which was not potable.
- This program provides evidence for policy recommendation to mainstream women in local safe water supply through SWEs and thus contribute towards the UN SDGs 2030 – Goal 6.5.1-safe drinking water for all; Goal 5-gender equality and Goal 8-sustainable growth and indirectly contribute towards Goal 1-reduction of poverty.



Interview with SHG group members at Podchenpalleijal station, Medak district, Telangana State (India)



Executive Secretary-cum-Country Coordinator, IWP interacting with SHG women at Podchenpalleijal station, Medak district, Telangana State (India)



Coordinator from SWNI team corresponding with and collecting data from the iJal station workers and villagers

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