

Celebrating women's leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 Pandemic



The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women more than men in several ways, according to studies. They have had to take care of patients while coping with lock-downs that have restricted access to daily necessities and basic services, including water, sanitation and hygiene. At the same time, however, women have shown great strength and leadership in managing the uncertainties and challenges unleashed by this crisis.

To celebrate the 2021 International Women's Day theme - #ChooseToChallenge – IRC, Water for People, WaterAid and the SuSanA India Chapter brought together stories of women's perseverance and initiative. These illustrate how they leveraged WASH to handle the challenges posed by the pandemic. The women are from diverse backgrounds and several states of India.

The four organizations conducted a webinar in which the women shared their experiences. Additionally, many others shared their stories that have been included in this compendium. These inspirational stories depict how ordinary women have converted the challenges posed by COVID-19 into an opportunity to promote good hygiene practices. The stories are arranged alphabetically.

Anita Devi, Uttar Pradesh

A calendar-full of awareness



Anita Devi lives in the Taikala Gram Panchayat, in Deva block, Barabanki District in Uttar Pradesh. She previously worked as a swachhagrahi under the Swachh Bharat Mission. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, she decided to take things head on. She worked out a calendar of activities to sensitise her community about how to prevent infections and ensure the usage of toilets.

Her strategy included generating awareness of COVID-19 preventions and precautions. She visited at least five families a day, and in sessions with family members, explained how to wash hands. She also organized community 'chaupals'.

She convinced as many as 48 families in the panchayat to use toilets, and all families to follow COVID-19 protocols. She used video clips, flipbooks, posters, etc., that explained the use of masks, social distancing and handwashing. Anita convinced the pradhan to paint all toilets white so they looked better than the grey cement from which they were made.



Babita Padhi, Odisha

Self-help to manage solid waste

Babita Padhi from Berhampur City in Odisha is a self-help group (SHG) leader. She works with the Berhampur Municipal Corporation (BeMC) as a Swachh Supervisor supervising and monitoring solid waste management and faecal sludge and septage management.

In spite of the direct and indirect challenges of the pandemic-induced lockdown, she made sure her SHG continued managing solid waste in her area with support from the municipal corporation.

Babita and her SHG members also tried to ensure the occupational health and safety of the women sanitation workers by telling them about measures to prevent COVID infections. Babita and others were instrumental in communicating accurate information about the pandemic, countering a lot of myths about COVID-19 that were circulating on social media.

Social distancing to collect water

Hemlata shaw is a community worker from West Bengal. When the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, her community faced many issues with the distribution of rations during the lockdown. She approached the local councillor with these issues and asked for help with the distribution of rations. She visited all the families in her neighbourhood to understand their issues. She explained to people that tackling COVID was a joint effort – they should use masks and sanitizers and wash hands, that is also a key hygiene behaviour.

Her area faced water shortages, prompting the local people to agitate. She noticed that while collecting water from common points, people did not observe the COVID norm of social distancing owing to the shortage. She held meetings with the community and local councillor to resolve this. She suggested people form a circle around water points to maintain social distancing and fill their utensils by turn. She took the councillor's help to enforce this and managed to keep her locality free of COVID.



Adding in the toilet



Jayalakshmi, from Tamil Nadu, is a member of the Nondisamy Kalanjiyam group. She had made her house a few years prior but did not construct a toilet.

During the pandemic, she took a house loan from the kalanjiyam saving group to build a toilet in her house in January 2021. The pandemic made her realise that having a toilet added to her safety, and that of her family, since they did not need to venture out to relieve themselves.

When her husband heard of her plans to take a loan to make a toilet, he opposed the idea. But Jayalakshmi went ahead anyway. Once constructed, her husband admitted to its importance and utility. He is now proud she made the toilet and the family's safety and dignity have been enhanced.

Adolescents counter misinformation



Jaya Singh is behaviour and communication officer on a WASH project of the Aga Khan Foundation in Lucknow. When the pandemic struck in 2020, she heard people spreading misinformation and rumours about the disease and its prevention.

She formed a cadre of adolescent girls to counter falsehoods and sensitize community members on COVID-19 precautions. Four adolescent girls Puja, Aradhana, Roshani and Pinki formed a group called “Sarathi” and actively reached out to people living in Asamiya Basti, Lavkush Nagar, Lucknow.

Jaya and the Sarathi girls started a dedicated hygiene campaign. The Sarathi team created a platform where community members, including children, were informed about COVID-19 transmission, prevention, hand hygiene, the proper way of wearing a mask and physical distancing. They, along with anganwadi workers and accredited social health activists, went door to door to speak to families and give them printed materials. They also conducted campaigns and rallies on the daily and regular use of toilets.

As a result, 150 children started washing hands regularly and 25 families who had built toilets, started using them.

Promoting toilets during the pandemic

Neeruben, a field organiser with Mahila Housing Trust in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, saw in the pandemic the opportunity to improve sanitation in her slum community called Rajivnagar. She promoted the construction of 54 individual household latrines when the COVID-19 pandemic started. As a result, now, each household in her community has an individual toilet, making it open-defecation free and hygienic.

The pandemic exacerbated existing health and hygiene issues of informal settlements across the country. In Rajivnagar, 54 of the 300 families did not have toilets at the start of 2020 and defecated in the open. Neeruben realised people were hesitant to venture

out to defecate fearing infection. Women and girls were conflicted between maintaining social distance and ensuring their own safety by not visiting the open defecation site alone.

She had another problem to tackle. Another woman had cheated families of ₹ 1500 with the promise of constructing toilets. But she persevered and convinced the 54 families to build their toilets with contributions of ₹ 2000. MHT provided additional financial support.



Promoting hand-washing to tackle the pandemic

Prashansha Gupta works on drinking water issues in the Banda district, Uttar Pradesh. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, she surveyed households to understand their hand washing behaviour as critical measure to fight COVID-19. She also attempted to understand if they had access to enough water and soap. The study covered 211 people from Delhi, UP and MP and was conducted between 23 and 26 April, 2020.



She found people did not feel it important to wash hands at appropriate times, even though 60 per cent more did practice this behaviour after the pandemic started.

She also found the number of people using hand sanitizers had increased from 29 to 66 per cent; people clearly felt this was a viable alternative to washing hands. But they are not as effective as washing hands with soap and water in preventing infections.

Nearly 40 per cent people spent more than 20 seconds washing hands after the pandemic, compared to just 10 per cent before. As many as 30 per cent washed hands for 10-20 seconds (19 per cent). This indicated people had understood the importance of this behaviour.



Sanitary Napkins for adolescents



Rahita Ghosh Mondol is an ASHA worker in Birbhum district of West Bengal. She saw that the COVID-19 induced lock-down had adversely affected adolescent girls. After schools had been shut, these girls could not get their supply of free sanitary napkins each month. They also did not have any place or person to discuss puberty- and menstrual-hygiene related issues. In school the designated WASH teacher was their contact for such discussions.

She arranged supply of sanitary napkins for these adolescent girls and held awareness sessions with them and their families on menstrual hygiene. She also spoke about hygiene, the need to wash hands with soap as a precaution against infection, the need for cleanliness, keeping toilets clean, and wearing masks for COVID-19 prevention. Rahita promoted several key hygiene practices of WASH during the pandemic.

Focus on hand-hygiene to check the pandemic



Renuka Kotambkar, is the sarpanch of Kotamba, of Wardha district. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she succeeded in getting her community to adopt good hygiene practices, especially hand washing with soap. People in her village comprising of 285 families followed her advice during the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Renuka actively reached out to her community with messages of good hand hygiene practices, distributed sanitizers and masks and made sure people followed COVID prevention guidelines such as social distancing by marking circles in ration shops and water points.

This helped educate people of her village about the disease and guarding against infections.

Paying for rations from government funds

Shobha Devi is the mukhiya of Saran West gram panchayat in Bokaro district, Jharkhand.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, Shobha found her community members could not access rations, soaps and face masks.

She immediately took measure to ensure they had all three by using funds from the 15th Finance Commission and the panchayats own resources.

She set up a group of volunteers to reach out to people in need, ensuring they had supplies of food, soap and masks. She contained the spread of the virus in her panchayat and also motivated other mukhiyas to do the same.



Democratizing hand-hygiene



In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sunita Devi recounted few people in the Asamiya basti that is part of the slum in Lavkush Nagar ward in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh knew what the disease was, precautions and preventive measures, including on hand hygiene. More than 500 people were at risk of getting infected. There were few hand-washing points, exacerbating the problem.

To tackle this issue, Sunita and the local municipal corporation's ward member, organized a series of meetings for the local people. They trained a group of children on handwashing and tasked with monitoring handwashing with soap in the slum. With support from AKF, she set handwashing units near public toilets, market places and other places that drew crowds. She formed a committee to manage these units and persuaded the local people to donate soap.

As all families were familiarised about COVID-19 prevention, they followed the precautions. This helped contain the infection in the Lavkush nagar ward. Sunita successfully promoted the key hygiene practice of handwashing at critical times, provided handwashing units, ensured a steady supply of soap and cleanliness of the units.

Ensuring menstrual health

Winnie Kabintie, Founder of the JustAPad Initiative Kenya is a young female MHM champion from Nairobi, Kenya. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the restrictions on movement had adverse social and economic effects on women.

They could not access reproductive health services and basic products, including sanitary napkins. Winnie, through the JustAPad Initiative, helped more than 500 women and girls from poor families by providing them menstrual hygiene kits containing underwear, soap and sanitary napkins.

