

Village Women Lead the Way

Ms. Swapna MAJUMDAR (India)

In 1991, after many of the guests left her wedding reception because of the terrible smell emanating from unhygienic conditions prevailing in her village, Radewadi, Maharashtra, Madhuri Sawant was determined to change things.

14 years later, in 2005, Sawant's village was among the 12 villages from Maharashtra to win the first Nirmal Gram Puraskar, an award instituted by the central government in October 2003 to promote rural sanitation. Village Radewadi in district Sangli beat 443 contenders from 10 states to win the award given to panchayats or local self governments that have ensured that all households have access to toilets; are free of open defecation; and have separate toilets for boys and girls in schools and *Anganwadi* centres.

Says Sawant, "When I saw the guests leave I was shattered. It was then that I realised that the only way to redeem the reputation of my village was to sanitise it," says Sawant. However, this was easier said than done. Since there was very little awareness about the benefits of hygiene, it was difficult for her to convince villagers to stop going to the fields for defecation. In addition, most people would dump their garbage wherever they found empty space. When Sawant found that talking was getting her nowhere, she formed a group of like-minded women and began picking up the garbage themselves. "I belong to a high caste and therefore villagers were surprised to see me do this. But it made them realise that if I could do it so could they. We managed to persuade them to dump garbage in an earmarked place that was later disposed in a pit," says Sawant.

This was to be an important beginning. Her dedication to the village began to be noticed and in 1998 she was nominated by the villagers to contest the *panchayat* elections. Once she won, Sawant adopted a two-pronged strategy to persuade the villagers.

As the village's first woman *pradhan*, she targeted women first. She was able to convince the women of the necessity to construct a toilet in the house after inviting a reputed lady doctor to explain the relation between infections and their unhygienic habits.

The men also came around after the doctor told them they would be able to save a considerable sum of money if their wives remained healthy. Not only would they save on money spent on medicines, but also on bus fares to visit the hospital. In addition, they would not have skip work to take their wives to the doctor and lose their income for the day.

What really swung things in her favour, however, was the announcement that her village could win a sum of INR 200 thousand (approx. US\$5,100) under the state sponsored Sant Gadge Baba sanitation Puraskar. Under this scheme, three best villages in the *taluka* that fulfilled sanitation requirements were given cash incentives. This inspired the village so much that they were willing to take loans to build toilets says Sawant.

It was women once again who also played a crucial role in ensuring many villages in adjoining district of Satara achieved the goal of total sanitation. According to Sangita Chikne, president of the self help group of her village in Satara, when she read out a newspaper report about a young girl who was raped while she had gone to the fields because there was no toilet in her village, the women understood at once. After an announcement that men would be fined INR 1 thousand (approx.US\$26) for open defecation and award INR 1 thousand and 1 to those who reported such cases, the practise stopped automatically.

30 million people suffer from sanitation related diseases in rural areas alone and majority of them are women and children. Since lack of sanitation affects women the most, women *panchayat* leaders are more motivated to ensure total sanitation in their villages. Women in the districts of Sangli and Satara in Maharashtra have proven that where there is a will there is a way. If the government wants to achieve its goal of total sanitation in all villages by the year 2012, it may be a good idea to let the women lead the way.



Photo: Women leading the way for a change in their village.