



Wells for India

Bringing water and dignity
to the poorest people of rural Rajasthan

Women's Struggle in Rural Rajasthan: Seeking a Life of Dignity

Many factors coalesce dramatically to make the position of women in Rajasthan a desperate one, where, according to our one of our NGO partners in the Thar Desert, Mrs Shashi Tyagi, General Secretary of Gravis, their lives from birth to death are full of suffering. Rajasthan is the second poorest state in India and many of the new economic opportunities enjoyed by middle class Indians do not penetrate to the remote interior villages. Ancient traditions, religion, caste-based patriarchy, the economic effects of global capitalism combine with environmental stress factors to make the way forward extremely complex.

The State Government of Rajasthan itself expressed this starkly in its report of 1999: The status of women in Rajasthan is an international issue. Patriarchy, discriminatory customs and values, caste-based discrimination, high illiteracy and high rates of poverty seem pervasive. Despite all efforts towards social justice, women continue to be perceived as burdens.

Some of the factors contributing to this are:

Sex ratio: there 910 women for every 1000 males in the population of Rajasthan. (Regional differences show Dholpur and Jaisalmer districts to be the worst at 795/810 respectively).

Female infanticide, anaemia, poor nutrition, maternal mortality, (558 per 100,000), child deaths from poor nutrition and water-related diseases are factors. (80% of all women of child-bearing age suffer from anaemia; infant deaths are 79/1000; the maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world - according to UN figures. Women and girl-children are caught in a cycle of malnutrition.

Sati and child marriage are age-old customs in Rajasthan. Incidences of sexual abuse and domestic violence are high. The state has one of the lowest rates for female literacy in India. In some of our project areas the literacy rate among women is nil.

Recognising all this, the state produced a new policy document based on the empowerment of women, conscious that the greatest challenge is to reduce the hiatus between state policies and ground realities. Yet, according to our partners, it fails it to enable the participation and decision-making of women themselves. Nor does it address the underlying misogyny/patriarchy which causes the suffering in the first place.

What do the women of Rajasthan themselves want? One answer was given by the journalist, Vimala Ramchandran, in her article "A life of dignity". Here, she writes, is what rural women themselves long for: almost 10 years ago, a group of Kol tribal women of Banda district of Uttar Pradesh came together for a training workshop under the Government's women empowerment programme. The workshop facilitator asked them if there was anything that they really yearned for. The women were silent for some time. Suddenly, one landless woman answered:

"I want to live in dignity, I do not want to be reduced to a state of helplessness where there is no respect for me as a human being - yes, that's what I want, I want to live in dignity."

To live in dignity means meeting the basic needs such as clean water, toilets, fuel, food and a roof over our head; freedom from violence; justice - a society where right and wrong is recognised; equity between men and women and between people; not be dependent for essentials on the outside world; opportunity to know the world outside - mobility, exposure and information; society where every child experiences childhood, where children go to school; good health; a clean environment and a say in decisions which affect their lives.

Dreams for a life of dignity and flourishing inspire Wells for India's projects for women. First, Wells for India makes the links between water security and a different quality of life for women. Water harvesting has dramatic effects on the lives of women. For example, the presence of water storage

tanks (taankas) means that women do not have to give up huge amounts of the day in search of water. So there is an immense physical benefit. Secondly, she is freed for other work, hopefully income-generating. So her status in the community as wage-earner is improved. Thirdly, when anxiety about water is removed, hygiene improves. There is water for washing and the cleanliness of the whole family becomes possible. Linked with this is the health benefit from drinking clean water - directly affecting the survival rate of young children. But the greatest benefit of the taanka is the psychological dimension. No one can imagine the mental stress laid on a woman over the whole issue of water. The anxiety as to whether there will be any at all casts its spell over her entire day. The fact that water is there, within her eyesight, so that she can rely on its presence, has a really liberating effect.

Water projects for deepening ponds, constructing khadins (field bunds) and anicuts (small check dams), gives work -and women do much of this - which brings a small income. The free time factor has encouraged the growth of Self-Help Groups (SHGs), an integral part of Wells for India's work in the villages. Also, the number of women's committees in this area has grown, and women acquire a collective voice on social issues. If we link this with governmental policies on reservation, and secondly with NGO policies of empowering women, it is possible to see the seeds of slow social change. The water issue, so closely linked with the lives and deaths of women and children, provides a way into other issues, like health and education. Wells for India funds Mother and baby projects, supplying nutrition for pregnant and lactating mothers, and keeping the supplies going till the babies are 18 months old. Where projects have a health worker, maternal health in pregnancy and safe deliveries are a focus. Also, by opening primary schools in remote areas, (too far away from the state school), children are encouraged to get into the education system at a crucial early stage.

Tackling these issues leads to economic areas such as credit banks - and women are acquiring an excellent reputation for saving. At the same time, the fact that women acquire a voice in local government gives an entry into deeper social issues. Drunkenness and wife-beating are increasingly not tolerated in the villages, now that women have representation on village committees and local government. It is also possible, that if the revolution of the household taanka takes hold in a large way, it will become socially acceptable for men to draw water, so the division of labour may begin to shift.

So the whole life-cycle of discrimination against rural women begins to be transformed, as enabling water security the water situation is a major factor in alleviating poverty. When we visit the villages this is the message we hear. ?Now we have water,? the women tell us, ?We have time for earning money for our families; we want our children - especially our daughters to go to school. We hope for better health - look how our fruit trees are growing! We grow better crops, so our men do not have to migrate for work. And most of all, we feel there is a future for our villages and for our children.

Professor Mary Grey 2007