

CASE STUDIES ON WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

WOMEN TAKE LEAD IN DISASTER PREPAREDNESS – THE CASE OF BARISHAL, BANGLADESH

Barishal, on the Kirtonkhola River in Bangladesh, is predominantly slum-populated. The high levels of poverty in the city are worsened by the weather conditions – cyclones and monsoons flood the riverbanks, overwhelming the city's infrastructure and clogging it with waste. This means the spread of disease is always a threat. In 2007, more than 10,000 people died when Cyclone Sidr smashed its way through the city. Climate change means that the situation here will only get worse. And most of the time, there are few men around to help them deal with disaster; it is the women who are left to pick up the pieces.

But these women are made of sterner stuff. Josna and her friend Mahmuda, along with other local women, have formed a Women's Squad – the Hatkhola community disaster management committee, with help of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. The squads were created to give women a platform to speak about the issues that matter to them the most. The team focused on developing the area; improving roads, drains, washrooms and toilet systems, as well as training people in disaster preparedness. But they have moved way and beyond. They received disaster management training and were ready in November 2019 when Cyclone Bulbul hit the area.

Josna and Mahmuda's squad responded to an emergency. The squad made sure that children, the elderly, pregnant women and disabled people were taken to an evacuation centre. One of the them was Kobita, 18 and eight months pregnant when Cyclone Bulbul hit. As the water levels started to rise and swept under the tin doors of her hut, Kobita began to panic. Ankle-deep in water, she suddenly heard the mic from the local mosque crackle. But instead of the usual adhan – the Muslim call to prayer – a loud, echoey voice declared a state of emergency. Luckily, the Hatkhola Squad soon arrived and slowly escorted Kobita to the emergency shelter. "We keep a list of the most vulnerable," says Josna. "Kobita was a priority, so we got to her as soon as we could." The Hatkhola Women's Squad worked tirelessly through the night, making sure everyone in the slum reached the shelter. They carried small children for those who were struggling and provided regular reassurance to terrified families.

Once the worst of the cyclone was over, the squad made sure the shelters were safe, clearing up debris and arranging for food donations to be delivered to families in need. After the cyclone had passed, the women helped clear the debris and return families back to their homes. They also arranged for local donations of dry food for the needy and vulnerable.

The women also received praise from the local police. Officer Abu Bakar Siddik says, "The Hatkhola Squad was critical in getting the early warning alerts to the community. We hope this will inspire more women in Barishal to get involved with future search and rescue missions."

CASE STUDIES ON WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

WOMEN-LED FOREST MANAGEMENT IN NEPAL

In Nepal, as in other parts of South Asia, women are responsible for the collection and management of forest products essential to the daily lives of their household. However, women are often neglected in the decision-making process within community level institutions devoted to the management of natural resources. WWF and its many partners work with government and local communities to help improve lives and restore forests as part of overall strategies to conserve large-scale landscapes and wildlife in Nepal. The focus is on empowering women to participate in local decision-making processes and stand up for their rights to forest resources and the benefits they provide. The projects also include introducing clean energy approaches to reduce the time women spend collecting firewood and ease the pressure on forests. Such approaches include biogas (gas produced from raw materials such as agricultural waste and manure), solar power, small hydropower plants, and fuel-efficient cook stoves. All of these improve lives and conserve nature – and women are strong custodians of their local forests.

This recognition of the essential role that women play in forest management can make a difference in terms of forest conservation. This happens mainly because women have different and complementary interests relative to men within a forest committee that stem from the differences in concerns and nature of dependence on the forest that women have relative to men. Better forest conditions directly affect the livelihood and the welfare of a large part of rural populations who rely on forest resources.

Radha Wagle, Nepal's first woman Joint-Secretary and Chief at the REDD Implementation Centre under the Ministry of Forests and Environment, is also working to make the forestry sector more inclusive for women and marginalized groups. They have finalized a Gender Action Plan that identifies ways to make forestry programs more responsive to the needs of women and encourages women's participation at all levels of government, civil society and the private sector, with support from the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. When Wagle was a young forest ranger in the eastern region of Nepal, she became aware of a stark paradox in the land use sector. With the significant amount of time women spent gathering fuelwood for energy use, fodder for livestock, medicinal plants and herbs, she saw the essential role women play in agriculture, livelihoods and natural resources management. Yet, she also observed – and experienced herself – how women were marginalized time and time again in this male-dominated field. "Some clients would request a male ranger for the service they sought, such as making a forest management plan, providing technical support or writing a letter. Even if I told them that I could do it, they would deny it and wait for a male ranger to become available," Wagle recalls. If this was happening in this region, Wagle became convinced it was happening across the country, and she was determined to do something about it. In 2015, she became the first woman Joint-Secretary at the Ministry of Forests and Environment in Nepal. In this role, she is focusing her efforts on increasing the engagement of Nepalese women in forest management.

CASE STUDIES ON WOMEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE

SWaCH MODEL OF LIVELIHOODS FOR WOMEN WITH WASTE MANAGEMENT IN PUNE, INDIA

Pune is not the only city that struggles to contain its waste. It is a common problem in most Asian cities, where increasing waste being dumped into landfills is becoming a major environment and climate concern. In 2000, India's national government issued its first Municipal Solid Waste Management Rules, requiring local governments to collect garbage door to door, separate recyclables from wet waste and put a stop to indiscriminate dumping. Like most Indian cities, Pune was ill-equipped to comply. However, rather than go for a contractor-based model or common waste treatment plant, the city opted for a livelihood promotion for poor model.

The idea grew from the fact that in Pune, as in most Asian cities, women formed a major constituent of waste pickers in the city. But Pune was different because the waste pickers in the city had unionized as Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), and had been advocating for the rights of this previously fragmented and disempowered workforce since 1993. SWaCH thus grew as a pilot program of KKPKP and the Pune Municipality in 2005.

In SWaCH, each waste picker purchases shares in the cooperative. Waste pickers work in pairs to collect garbage directly from 150 to 400 households. They sort it and drop off non-recyclables at city-run feeder points, and make a living from charging customers a fee and selling recyclables to local scrap dealers. Those who service slum households also receive a per-household subsidy from the city to make up for the fact that fewer recyclables are usually thrown out in low-income areas. A council advocates for workers' rights and negotiates with the city for occupational health and safety standards, workers' benefits, equipment, sorting facilities and access to health care. To date, they have negotiated two long-term contracts with the Pune Municipal Corporation, and, for a time between contracts, SWaCH was able to maintain operations solely on user fees.

Pune looks different today than it did in the 1990s. More than 3,500 waste pickers have joined SWaCH's ranks, mainly lower caste women and "Dalits," previously known as "untouchables." They handle 1,000 tons of waste every day and recycle more than 70,000 metric tonnes of materials a year.

"Everybody has become more aware of the waste pickers," said Mini Shrinivasan, a SWaCH customer. "Their lives have become like a little more familiar for us, and now people have started thinking of them as working women." Beyond earning a more respected place in society, SWaCH workers are making more than ever before. Sonawane said she earns a monthly income of 13,000 rupees (US\$188) – more than her husband – and receives an additional 300-350 rupees per week from selling the recyclables she collects. "I have built my house with my own savings," she said. "I have bought the appliances that I need and also saved money for my children's education." "A waste picker today in SWaCH is the owner of an enterprise that offers her a dignified livelihood," said Lakshmi Narayan, SWaCH's co-founder. "It makes for an inclusive city in many ways."

The arrangement also benefits the city economically. SWaCH estimates that the user fee model saved the Pune Municipal Corporation US\$ 13 million last year, compared to a traditional tax-funded trash collection system. What's more, residents now separate dry and wet waste in their homes, a big change in behaviour from previous habits of roadside dumping. The result is a more efficient waste system as a whole.