

Women's Groups Takes Initiative in Health and Sanitation

Sonankupam village, Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu. A story of a village that traversed the path from apathy to vision of a clean village and a healthier tomorrow.

Sonankupam had women's groups even before the tsunami, but they did not take action after the tsunami. The relief agencies and the NGOs stepped in after the tsunami, did their work and left. As part of reflection exercises, women's groups numbering thirty, decided, "We have to take work forward and rebuild our lives."

The women's groups of Sonankupam analyzed the situation on health and decided to equip themselves for action. Vijayalakshmi, a resident, says,

"We formed a Village Health Group consisting of 12 women leaders from different self-help groups. We were provided with information and training on how to approach primary health centres and interact with the administrative system to meet our demands. Initially, no one was interested in taking part in the women's meetings to address various issues. We as a group were focused on savings and loans. We had never taken part in any village development activity. With my group members, I embarked on a mission to create awareness.

"I went door-to-door and briefed them about the advantages of the group's strengths, and as agency for development in the village. In time, women started attending meetings and spoke of issues that they faced on health, children's education, lack of sanitation, etc.

"As women gained confidence and were better organized, we placed our problems to the municipal authorities - decomposed garbage, mosquito menace, open defecation sites and unused community toilets built by NGOs. We listed issues to be addressed immediately. Negligence on the part of the municipal sanitation staff and apathy from the entire community at the household level.

Self help initiatives

"We submitted a memorandum to the Sanitation Inspector outlining priority actions to be addressed. The official responded positively and this action boosted our confidence. He assured us that in two days time, the Municipal team would come to our village to remove the garbage and spray pesticides. Surprisingly, on the very next day, we saw a government vehicle come into our village to remove the garbage. Every one was watching this with disbelief. When we realised that this was in response to our representation to the sanitary inspector's office the previous day, we quickly swing into action by helping the workers remove the garbage. The same evening, we had another surprise. Two men dressed in *khaki* came with a sprayer (many of us didn't know what it was!) on their shoulders and started spraying in the streets. We asked them, "What are you doing? We learned that they were government workers who had come to drive away the mosquitoes. What quick action!!

This was but an initial step. Kasiammal, a resident said, "We all had these talents within ourselves. We as a group had achieved what the whole community could not do for a long time. Why don't we move ahead and do more good things for our society?"

Looking ahead

Today, AASHA -Women's Initiatives for Health and Action is a self help movement to improve community health water and sanitation through Health Fund contributed by SHGs. Members and families benefit from health guidance, referral services, accountable Primary health care, and low cost accredited service network of doctors, pharmacies and hospitals. *February, 2006.*