

**Source:** MAHARAJ, N.(2000). *Gender 21 : women's recommendations to the 2nd Ministerial Conference on Water*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV). Available in [http://www.iiav.nl/eng/ic/water/water\\_recommendations-en.html](http://www.iiav.nl/eng/ic/water/water_recommendations-en.html)

### **Women and the Handpump Revolution - India**

**In November 1999, a three day women's handpump 'mela' (carnival) took place in Karvi in the Bundelkand region in India. Some 50 women handpump mechanics and masons from around the country, who had played a 'hands on ' role in 10 projects involving rural water supply and sanitation, gathered to offer their insights to representatives from donor agencies, NGOs, bilateral and multilateral organisations. UNICEF, the Water and Sanitation Programme-South Asia, and Vanagana, an all women-NGO, were the hosts.**

"It was a humbling experience. Just talking to these women. Most of them were low-caste and without education. They had faced awesome challenges. It was not easy getting the community to accept the idea that they should be trained in handpump repair, masonry, and more so if they were getting money for it. But against all odds, they had done it and proved that they were better than the government mechanics. Today they have social acceptability and economic leverage - the women get paid for the work they do," says Fiona Fanthome, one of those who was in Karvi. Fanthome works with the UNDP Water and Sanitation Program office in Delhi.

The idea of training rural Indian women in masonry and repair of handpumps was originally a donor-driven one. But as the experiences from the field show, it has triggered a mini-revolution in many parts of India.

Women mechanics have triggered a handpump revolution in Kamrup district in Assam. The Northeast Indian state of Assam has abundant rainfall but ironically drinking water continues to be a scarce commodity. About 90,000 handpumps and suction type water lifting pumps were installed in Assam during the water and sanitation decade (1980-90) but as Jalvani, a newsletter on rural water and sanitation in India, notes in its April-June 1999 issue, only 65 percent are in working condition. The main reason is the sloth and inefficiency associated with most government schemes in India. There are bureaucratic delays in sanctioning repairs. However, the Assam Public Health Engineering department recently decided to change tack. With support from UNICEF, it launched village level operation and management, a novel trial cum demonstration project that trained rural women in maintenance and repair of handpumps installed in their village.

UNICEF modified the design of the handpump to facilitate easy servicing as well as to reduce repair. The women mechanics can repair the pumps using only small tools. Under the VLOM scheme, two caretakers are trained for each installed handpump and are provided with a regular tool kit. Currently the women are in charge of 2500 pumps in two blocks of Kamrup district. The success of the VLOM project has encouraged the Assam PHED to extend the scope of the project. If that happens drinking water would be as easily available in the state as rain water.

Women in some parts of Lakhimpur Kheri and Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh state in northern India have been trained as handpump mechanics with assistance from the Indo-Dutch Water and Sanitation Programme. Uttar Pradesh is one of India's most socially backward states. But despite cultural inhibitions and social resistance, the women have acquired a new role in society. While the benefit for the community is functional, for the women themselves, it has been a heightened sense of self-confidence, both in terms of the community's acknowledgement of their ability and income.

Field reports from similar projects in other parts of India suggest that in many cases women masons and mechanics have used their newly acquired skills to explore a diverse range of work opportunities. Low-cost housing and sanitation systems are two areas that have used the services of women masons and mechanics.

In a few cases, good intentions have gone awry. The 73rd amendment of the Indian Constitution aimed at devolving power to local bodies has strengthened village councils, on the face of it. But village councils in many parts of India are bankrupt and when the responsibility of paying the women handpump mechanics for repair work passed from the water board to the village councils, the women stopped getting money. The village councils pleaded they were bankrupt. Donor agencies and NGOs in India are exploring other options to ensure that the women handpump mechanics do not suffer. One option is to popularise the idea of 'user fees' which could go towards a maintenance fund.