

VOICES WOMEN AND SANITATION



“Agreeing to construct a toilet was the best gift that our father could give us.”

Farida Ben is a 15-year-old girl with six sisters and a brother. She has lived in Nagalpur, a village near Bhuj, in the Kutch region of Gujarat, from the time she was born. The family is supported by her four sisters, who are engaged in occupations such as teaching, giving tuition and embroidery. The family lives in a “*pucca*” house, which has two rooms.

Farida has studied up to the 10th standard in a local school. The school did not have toilets when she studied there. According to her, “If we wanted to relieve ourselves, we had to find a secluded spot outside the school premises, and then rush back. It was embarrassing and took time, therefore we did so only when the urgency could not be ignored.”

Thankfully, Farida’s home boasted of both, a toilet and a bathroom. She is very clear that a personal toilet is an absolute necessity and cannot imagine living in a house without one. When asked what she would have done if there was no toilet at home, her reply is emphatic, “In that case I would have forced my parents to construct one.”

The earthquake that struck Gujarat in 2001, however, destroyed her home, along with the village. Unlike

many others who had to make do with temporary structures, Farida’s family moved to her uncle’s farmhouse in a neighbouring village that was only superficially damaged by the earthquake, until their house was rebuilt. Her uncle’s house had no toilet and Farida and her family had to resort to using open fields to relieve themselves. This was inconvenient and awkward. When reminded that she used the outdoors to relieve herself when in school, Farida felt that was an unfair comparison, since there is both, a psychological and physical difference between not having a toilet at home and not having one in school. The former, she feels, is more empowering and emancipating.

Farida and her sisters avoided going to the toilet as much as possible or did so only when they had to. The discomfort was often acute and eventually led to complications like constipation and stomach cramps. Convenience and privacy are two very important issues affecting the younger generation, and Farida emphatically reinforces that sentiment when she says that for girls like her, having access to a toilet at home is essential especially when menstruating. Sensitive to the problems and risks women face due



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The **Multi-sector Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Programme**, is working to assist rural communities affected by the earthquake that struck Gujarat in 2001. Interventions have included the provision of disaster resistant housing, education centres and sanitation infrastructure (drinking water supply systems, toilets and bathrooms). Water harvesting structures have been introduced and primary health care services are operational. Savings and credit schemes are helping the poor regain their livelihoods. Disaster preparedness and management training is also provided.

The **Aga Khan Foundation (AKF)** is a private, non-denominational, development agency, established by His Highness the Aga Khan in Switzerland in 1967. The Foundation seeks sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty through an integrated, community based, participatory approach that reinforces civil society and respects local culture. AKF, although formally a funding agency, involves itself actively in the planning and execution of its projects. In India, AKF works essentially in three thematic areas: Health, Education, Rural Development. It also works to strengthen civil society institutions.

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to lack of access to sanitation facilities, she says, "My mother's friend told me of several instances when young girls were molested or raped by men who picked them up from the fields when they were relieving themselves. Some of them then became pregnant." Because she enjoys access to a toilet at home, incidents like these do not alarm her and her sisters much, but when she lived at her uncle's farm, she avoided going to the fields alone and usually did so in a group or with her sisters.

Although the need for the toilet and bathroom was articulated primarily by Farida and her sisters, it was their father whose decision was final. Once construction was complete, the family moved back into their new home with its new toilet and bath facilities. "It was like old times again," says a visibly excited Farida. The sisters take turns to clean the toilet and bathroom, to ensure they are hygienic at all times.

Community toilets that had earlier been constructed in the village were not used by Farida's family since they were a considerable distance away. She says the villagers used the toilets for barely a couple of weeks before a complete lack of maintenance rendered them unusable. The villagers subsequently abandoned the structures and the earthquake took care of the rest. This is a pointer, Farida says; to the fact that people do not care about common sanitation infrastructure and would much rather prefer having private ones. Looking back, Farida and her sisters think that allowing a toilet to be built was the best gift their father could have given them.

The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. Its agencies work in over 30 countries for the common good of all citizens, regardless of their gender, origin or religion. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

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