

WOMEN'S STRUGGLE FOR WATER

SEWA'S BAREFOOT WATER TECHNICIANS IN SABARKANTHA

The tools are still new to them. They are designed for much stronger men, not for women. Are women capable of taking over the maintenance of handpumps from the men in villages across Gujarat? 'Yes!' says Buelhiben Motibhai Parmar leader of one SEWA's handpump repair teams and secretary of Khedumandal Sabarkantha, SEWA's district association in Sabarkantha. *'Women and water are one. We are proud to be helping other women in overcoming their daily fight for water. And we are proud to be working and contributing to our families' income. We enjoy our work. We get to see new places and we are ready for more work.'*

Handing over the maintenance of handpumps to grass-roots women is one of the initiatives in SEWA's campaign to improve the access to safe drinking water in the rural areas of Gujarat. Grass-roots women now play a leading role in water campaign activities such as the revival of traditional water sources; rainwater harvesting; watershed development; and the maintenance of handpumps by barefoot water technicians. However, it has been a long haul for SEWA's barefoot water technicians in Sabarkantha district, Gujarat.



SEWA
SELF EMPLOYED
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DECENTRALISED MAINTENANCE OF HANDPUMPS

Though involvement of all stakeholders at the lowest feasible level is increasingly recognised as a precondition for a sustainable drinking water supply, many hurdles remain in actively involving poor women in the operation and maintenance of their own drinking water supply.

In many villages in Gujarat, handpumps are the sole source of drinking water. However, due to a number of reasons the Gujarat Water Supply and Sewerage Board (GWSSB) found it increasingly difficult to maintain its 10,000 handpumps. GWSSB's shrinking number of maintenance gangs could no longer cope with an ever-growing number of handpumps. Moreover, these gangs were not affected by the malfunctioning of the handpumps and hence felt little compulsion to react to complaints immediately and/or to maintain high quality standards. Finally, long-winded bureaucratic procedures often led to long delays; complaints had to travel via the local Panchayat (village council) and Zeela Panchayat (block council) offices before reaching the local GWSSB office.

In some cases, it took six months before GWSSB attended to complaints of malfunctioning handpumps. During these periods, women are forced to fetch water from



far off places losing up to six hours a day—time that could have been used for productive activities. Moreover, carrying the heavy loads over such long distances often leads to health problems and exhaustion. Finally, water for alternative sources is often of an inferior quality.

Policy changes at the central government level and the mounting complaints about the handpumps' maintenance resulted in a drastic policy change. Local contractors and NGOs were invited to bid for contracts for the maintenance of handpumps. This system combines the best of two worlds: local

involvement of the communities and the economics of scale i.e. better training and support systems.

Under the current contract, handpumps are overhauled annually, a monthly check is carried out, and if needed, repairs are carried out. GWSSB pays Rs. 582/- per pump and provides spare parts. As contracts are granted by bidding, the actual compensation is around Rs. 463/- per handpump. At the moment, local contractors and NGOs are responsible for the maintenance of 90% of GWSSB's handpumps.

Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA)

SEWA is a membership-based movement and trade union with more than 400,000 poor, self-employed women members. Its primary goals are to organise women workers to obtain full employment and economic self-reliance. For this purpose, SEWA combines four specific strategies:

- ORGANISING WOMEN, since individual poor women have no voice.
- BUILDING NEW SKILLS AND CAPACITIES so that women can become owners and managers and not just producers and labourers.
- encouraging CAPITAL FORMATION, at the household, group and community levels with the income earned.
- INCREASING SOCIAL SECURITY to enhance women's well being and productivity and reduce the impacts of sickness or sudden crises on fragile household economies.

SEWA's Water Campaign

For many of SEWA's rural members, lack of access to safe drinking water is a critical issue, one that affects almost all aspects of their lives. To address this problem SEWA launched its water campaign in 1994, with the main objectives of providing clean drinking water and prevention of migration due to water scarcity through programs that are owned and managed by the women themselves. Currently more than 30,000 women are actively involved in this water campaign through activities such as handpump maintenance, revival of traditional water sources, watershed development, recharging of groundwater, roof rainwater harvesting, and so on.

FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE



Initially, this different approach did not lead to a larger involvement of women in the maintenance of the water supply. The operation and maintenance of the water supply proved to be a male bastion that could be broken into only through a long, hard fought battle.

First, SEWA had to fight the commercial contractors' lobby, especially since the GWSSB was not willing to grant the contract to SEWA's local association, Khedu Mandal. In 2000, after much pressurising, the GWSSB granted Khedu Mandal a contract for the maintenance of 41 handpumps in 11 villages. Subsequently, the GWSSB did not allow the women to participate in their training program because they did not meet the required education standards. So, SEWA had to call in a NGO of Rajasthan to train the first batch of handpump mechanics.

This was by no means the end of the struggle for the women and SEWA to get involved in the maintenance of their own water supply. The villagers showed even less faith in the women's skills than GWSSB's engineers. The women would not even be

offered water when they visited a village to maintain or repair the handpump. Some of the women were even threatened. Moreover, going to the villages with all their tools was a major problem for the women, as they had to depend on buses. In return, all that the GWSSB was paying was a meagre amount of Rs. 182/- per handpump per year—less than most of the women would earn doing regular farm work.

This difficult first year, however, proved to be a watershed for the barefoot water mechanics as they managed to gain trust of the GWSSB on the basis of their performance alone. In 2001, Khedu Mandal was granted a new contract for 200 handpumps in 51 villages. However, the overhauling of all handpumps had to be finalised within a month, something that was possible only with the continuous support of SEWA.

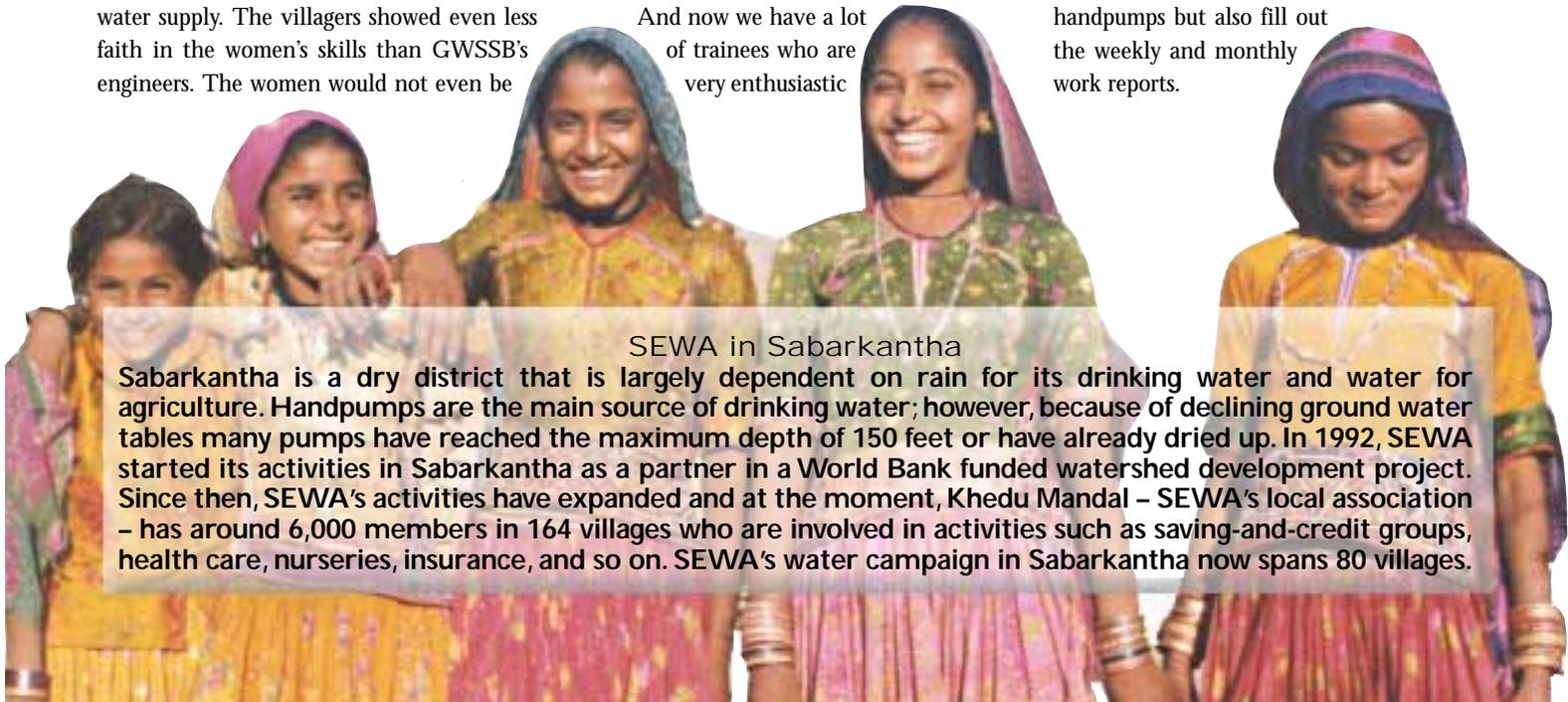
This time, the GWSSB allowed the women to participate in their regular training program. And participate they did, with great enthusiasm, to the delight of the trainers, one of whom had this to say: 'When we started training the local communities to maintain and repair their own handpumps, we would inform the District Development Officer (DDO) and the Sarpanch about our program. Mostly, very few trainees would turn up and they would not be interested in using their skills. Women never attended the programs.

And now we have a lot of trainees who are very enthusiastic

to learn new things.' Today, 210 women have been trained by the GWSSB in the Sabarkantha district. In addition, 450 women have been trained in the districts of Baroda and Kheda.

SEWA had also learned from the first year and had come up with schemes to deal with some concomitant problems. SEWA pays the women a daily wage of Rs. 35/- and provides them with a vehicle to travel to the villages with their tools and spare parts. Still, women leave their homes around 7.30 in the morning to return only at eight in the evening. Next day, they get up at four, cook for their families and leave for work. Despite these long days, the women are unanimous about their work: 'When we went for the first time to overhaul a handpump, we were not sure whether we would be able to do it. We took almost the whole day for one single pump. We had to overcome so many problems and the villagers wanted perfect work. They thought that this was men's work. But now things have changed, we do three handpumps in one day and the village people have accepted us.'

For the overhauling, the handpump needs to be taken apart completely and the valve needs to be inspected. For this inspection women need to lift up to 150 feet of pipe that are filled with water – something they manage to do only with great effort. The women not only maintain the handpumps but also fill out the weekly and monthly work reports.



SEWA in Sabarkantha

Sabarkantha is a dry district that is largely dependent on rain for its drinking water and water for agriculture. Handpumps are the main source of drinking water; however, because of declining ground water tables many pumps have reached the maximum depth of 150 feet or have already dried up. In 1992, SEWA started its activities in Sabarkantha as a partner in a World Bank funded watershed development project. Since then, SEWA's activities have expanded and at the moment, Khedu Mandal – SEWA's local association – has around 6,000 members in 164 villages who are involved in activities such as saving-and-credit groups, health care, nurseries, insurance, and so on. SEWA's water campaign in Sabarkantha now spans 80 villages.

THE IMPACTS AT THE GROUND LEVEL

GWSSB, the local communities, the women themselves, all agree that SEWA's handpump technicians have led to a major improvement of the handpumps. When, the GWSSB mechanics were doing the maintenance, it took 45 days on the average for a malfunctioning handpump to be repaired. Now it takes 2-3 days. Moreover, many villagers believe that the handpumps are functioning better and are giving 'better water'. As a result, the villagers have fully accepted the women as 'barefoot water mechanics' (see Figure 1).

The women have also gained from their maintenance work. They are earning around Rs. 5,000/- annually, an important supplement to the highly volatile incomes from agricultural activities. Equally important, they have gained in confidence and have become aware of the importance of their role in society.

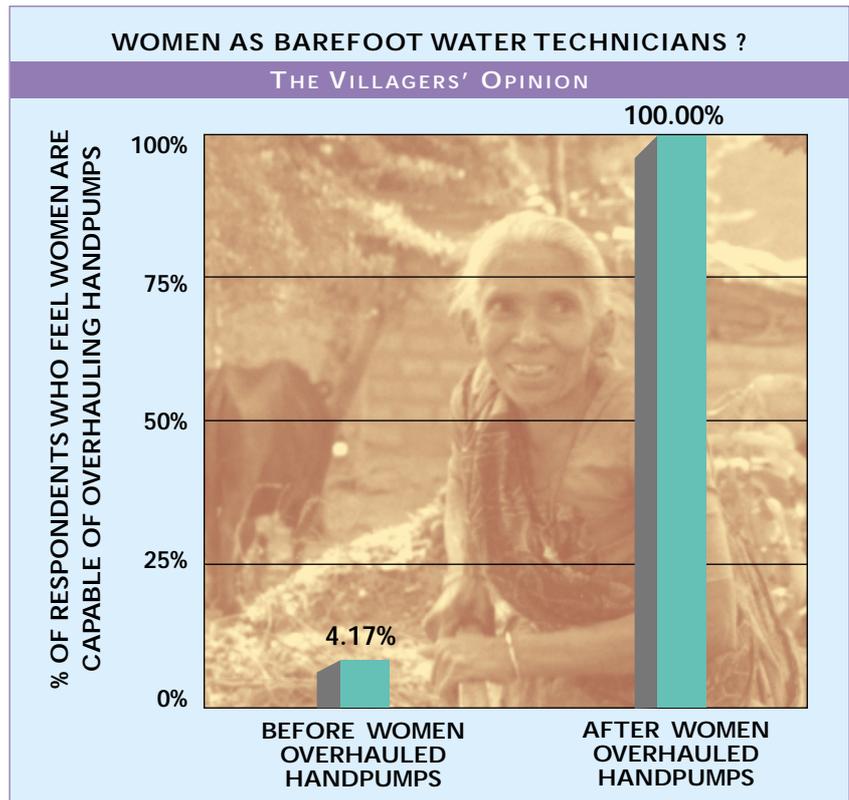


Figure 1: The changing attitude of the of the village communities (N = 48)

WHAT REMAINS TO BE RESOLVED ?



The present rates are simply insufficient to fulfil all contract obligations. In SEWA's case, additional funding for this purpose was generated. In other cases, NGOs and contractors have to sacrifice on the quality of their services to make them financially viable.

Handpumps need daily care and a clean environment. SEWA has started to educate the villagers but a local caretaker, preferably female, is needed. She should ensure that the pump's surroundings are kept clean, that livestock is allowed next to the pump, and that the chain is greased whenever needed.

Finally, the team leader, Buelhiben, adds: *'We want uniforms so people recognise us, and we want a better name than 'handpump women' because we are proud of our jobs'*. Many villagers in Sabarkantha would agree with her.

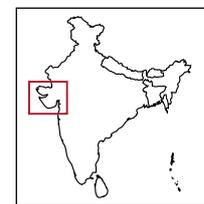
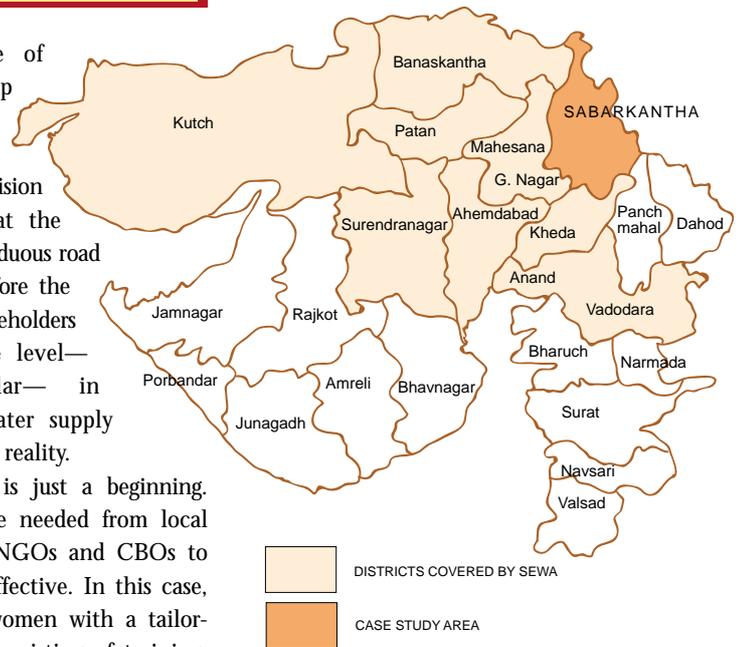
KEY ISSUES AND LESSONS



The experience of the handpump mechanics vividly demonstrates the distance between vision and concrete action at the ground level. A long, arduous road had to be traversed before the vision of involving stakeholders at the lowest possible level—women in particular—in managing drinking water supply could be translated into reality.

Changing policies is just a beginning. Action and struggle are needed from local organisations such as NGOs and CBOs to make policy changes effective. In this case, SEWA provided the women with a tailor-made support system consisting of training, administrative support, transportation; it guaranteed regular payments and negotiated with GWSSB on behalf of the women.

The message from Sabarkantha is clear: village women can be very able and dedicated managers of drinking water supply if they are provided the necessary supportive framework.



LOCATOR

DATA SOURCES

A survey covering 25 women and 23 men; semi-structure interviews with Mr. R.V. Zinzuvadia (Superintending Engineer, GWSSB); Mahima Thakar (SEWA District Co-ordinator Sabarkantha) and staff of the local GWSSB office in Sabarkantha.

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COLOPHON

This field note is part of a series published by the Self Employed Women's Association on 'best practices' for community based water supply.

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6. SEWA's Water Campaign In Gujarat

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