

The Women in Sanitation campaign: Celebrating women sanitation professionals

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Urban Sanitation Support Programme



Figure 1 – Source: IIHS.

Summary

Women's participation in the workforce is often under-represented in both informal and formal roles, which is a serious concern. In the sanitation sector, women are often seen as users, participants, or beneficiaries. However, several women professionals work across the full cycle of sanitation in various roles. They face myriad challenges throughout their careers, and their contributions to the sanitation sector are seldom recognized.

To change this perspective and create awareness about the contributions of women to the sanitation sector, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS)-led Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Programme (TNUSSP) initiated the Women in Sanitation (WIS) campaign in

2020. The campaign uses basic tools to capture and augment the contribution of women sanitation professionals.

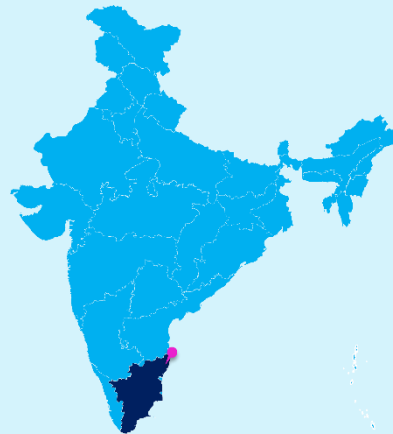
Overview

Geographical information

Country: India

City: Chennai, Tamil Nadu

City population: 10,000,000



Problem

- Non-recognition of women sanitation professionals.

Solution

- Implementation of public events such as the Women in Sanitation (WIS) campaign which seeks to amplify the work and stories of women sanitation professionals.

Problem

Over the years, the world has seen numerous movements that have been instrumental in redefining the role of women in society. Inspiring stories of women breaking biases and creating a difference have been sources of encouragement and confidence for many. However, there is much to be done. Globally, the labour force participation is around 63% for women, compared to 94% for men; and fewer than 1 in 5 water workers are women (World Bank, 2019).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the more informal the work in sanitation, the more women are involved; this is in line with other trends, e.g., UN Women, 2021 data reports that women are increasingly engaged in informal work. Women in the sanitation sector also face challenges across their career trajectories. Additionally, their contributions have seldom been recognized. Stigma and ostracization continue to haunt grassroots workers in the sector, most of whom are women.

Solution

The Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS)-led Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Programme (TNUSSP) initiated the Women in Sanitation (WIS) campaign in 2020 with the intention of:

- Creating a platform for cisgender/transwomen professionals to share their stories.
- Recognizing and celebrating their work.
- Inspiring other women to pursue a career in the field.

Designed to align with the themes of International Women's Day, the campaign adopts a simple approach to capture the lived perspectives of the women through participatory and unstructured interviews to highlight their journey, struggles and successes. While the campaign initially featured professionals from Tamil Nadu, it later expanded to include stories from other parts of India, and Africa.

So far, the campaign has featured women community toilet caretakers and cleaners, desludging operators, treatment plant operators, solid waste workers, entrepreneurs, community workers, engineers and administrators. T. Saranya (Figure 2) had this to say *“I am the first woman working in this Faecal Sludge Treatment Plant. Earlier there used to be a lot of problems with the truck drivers. I have figured things out now, but it was not easy.”*



Figure 2 – T. Saranya, Faecal Sludge Treatment Plant Operator in Karunguzhi town, Tamil Nadu.

Their videos were shared on multiple digital platforms, disseminated in conferences and film festivals, and amplified through sector professionals, partners, sanitation workers and non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations networks. The campaign also includes various collaborations to get diverse stories. Since its launch, the campaign has been well-received, with a proportional increase in views and online interest. The WIS stories have garnered over 100,000 views on YouTube, and have attracted more than 2000 followers across various social media platforms. The campaign's concept has also inspired many organizations to further the cause with their own initiatives. Stories of selected participants from the WIS campaign were featured in a storytelling session, "Women in Sanitation: Glimpses from Across the Chain" at World Water Week, 2021, which was attended by over 250 participants from across the world. The emerging lessons and recommendations from the campaign are being mainstreamed into state and city-level gender initiatives.

The campaign results revealed that the Faecal Sludge Management sector could be a good platform for empowering and providing opportunities to marginalized communities. Similar behaviour change campaigns could be vital in addressing several misconceptions related to sanitation job profiles and the role of women. Initiatives like the WIS campaign help participants feel empowered and recognized while inspiring fellow workers and creating awareness in society. Sustained communication efforts can reorient perspectives and improve the working conditions of women sanitation workers through better interactions with the public, a clearer understanding of their issues among policymakers and fostering a sense of solidarity among the workers. As the campaign enters its fourth edition, it hopes to strengthen national and global partnerships to systematically document diverse stories and support advocacy efforts.

Lessons learned

The key lessons from this intervention are:

- **Space to share stories:** Many cis/trans women in water and sanitation sectors reported that they were given the opportunity to speak for themselves as professionals for the first time.
- **Challenges:** While experiences differed, all women spoke of challenges they faced on account of their gender, e.g., lack of ergonomic personal protective equipment, vehicles and tools, the need to balance between caregiving and professional roles, societal outlook on pursuing occupations traditionally held by men, biases faced in promotions/progression, among others. The campaign acted as a space to identify

nuanced challenges for women professionals, not just in the informal/unpaid pursuits but also for administrators, entrepreneurs and leaders.

- **Intersectionality:** The campaign also brought out significant perspectives on intersectionality in the context of gender and sanitation. These stories highlighted the issues of caste, gender identity, disability, and their impact on their professional roles.
- **Instilling a sense of pride:** Many roles in sanitation are traditionally stigmatized, further so when there is a layer of gender, identity, caste or disability added to it. The stories from the WIS campaign are consciously positioned to change these narratives and valorize the professionals, recognizing and celebrating their roles and contribution to the sector, public health and environment.
- **Targeting systematic change:** With every edition of the campaign, the response – quantitative and qualitative – indicated a significant interest among the public in listening to what women sanitation workers have to say. Sustained efforts such as the WIS campaign, can draw attention to sanitation as a topic while positioning women's role in the same.

Useful links

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLX_a5TgJt9iri_CR15fR6FdkNn6dp3Oy4

<https://www.worldwaterweek.org/event/10072-women-in-sanitation-glimpses-from-across-the-chain>

Further reading and references

- TNUSSP, 2019. Gender and Social Inclusion across Sanitation Chain in Tamil Nadu: Assessment and Strategy.
- K Wankhade, 2021. Invisible Sanitation, Invisible Women. Published in The Wire. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/women/invisible-sanitation-invisible-women>

About the author

Kavita Wankhade is the Associate Dean – School of Systems and Infrastructure, and the Head – Practice at IIHS. She currently leads the TNUSSP project. With training in urban design and planning, she has worked in multiple cities in India, with a focus on service delivery. She is a strong advocate of inclusive planning with a focus on sanitation workers and women in sanitation.

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About the institution / organisation

Since 2016, the **Tamil Nadu Urban Sanitation Support Programme**, a consortium led by the **Indian Institute for Human Settlements**, has been proactively supporting the Government of Tamil Nadu in making improvements along the entire urban sanitation chain in cities. We work towards strengthening septage management as an economical and sustainable complement to network-based sewerage systems and aim to scale Faecal Sludge Management across 649 towns in the state, covering a total urban population of 30 million.

<https://tnussp.co.in/>

<https://iihs.co.in/>



About the IWA Inclusive Urban Sanitation Initiative

IWA's Inclusive Urban Sanitation initiative responds to a huge and growing public need - safe sanitation in combination with access to safe drinking water and hygiene underpins good health. The aim of this initiative is reshaping the global urban sanitation agenda by focusing on inclusive sanitation service goals--and the service systems required to achieve them - rather than the traditional singular focus on expanding sewer networks and treatment works. This forms part of IWA's larger agenda to promote inclusive, resilient, water-wise, and sanitation-secure cities.

About the Inclusive Urban Sanitation Stories

The Inclusive Urban Sanitation stories are documenting some of the policies, practices, and approaches that demonstrate how stakeholders especially those in urban areas (e.g., public sector, operators, academics, regulators, and other key actors) are taking part or contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which require water and sanitation concepts and norms to look beyond technology and the usual focus on building infrastructure. Increased focus is on safety, inclusion, environment, public health, and multiple technology solutions tailored to different geographies and socio-economic contexts for building climate-resilient cities. The stories aim to inspire urban stakeholders to discuss ways for advancing inclusive urban sanitation, especially in low- and middle-income countries.