



## Challenges and Concerns for Toilets Access among Adolescent Girls in an Urban Slum –A Viewpoint

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### ABSTRACT

Indian cities are experiencing rapid population growth and expansion of urban poor. Many of these people live in informal settlements which are areas of high density, poor quality housing-the 'poverty pockets' with inadequate provision of basic water and sanitation services. Sanitation in slums poses the dual risk of increased disease incidence, on one hand, and it raises the issue of personal safety, security, and dignity of women and girls on the other hand. A community toilets (CT) facility is a shared facility provided for a defined group of residents or an entire settlement/community. Women, despite having a high demand for safe toilet facilities, continue to practice unsafe sanitation. In response to the shame and fear associated with open defecations, women restrict their mobility. To ensure safe, accessible and long-term usability of community toilets, it is critical to select the most appropriate location and community toilet design

**Key words:** Sanitation, Slums, Community Toilets, Personal Safety, Dignity of Women

Indian cities are experiencing rapid population growth and expansion of urban poor. Many of these people live in informal settlements which are areas of high density, poor quality housing-the 'poverty pockets' with inadequate provision of basic water and sanitation services.<sup>1</sup>

Sanitation is a daily need, and expedient responses are the only way to ensure healthy liveable cities in the short and long run. It is well-known that sanitary facilities for each household, that is, individual toilets, when constructed, used and maintained, and cleaned properly, are the ideal solution from a public health point of view. Inadequate sanitation is a major cause of disease world-wide and improving sanitation is known to have a significant beneficial impact on health both in households and across communities<sup>1</sup>. But in slums, it may not be possible to construct individual household toilets due to the non-availability of space.

Sanitation in slums poses the dual risk of increased disease incidence, on one hand, and it raises the

issue of personal safety, security, and dignity of women and girls on the other hand. The problem of inadequate provision and unsatisfactory Operations and Maintenance of sanitation facilities is acute in the urban centres of India. This is likely to aggravate in the coming years; given the rapid urban growth rates (Census, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. The safe collection, treatment, and disposal of human excreta are woefully inadequate and pose major challenges to the health and environment of urban India. Toilets are a basic necessity but often taken for granted by those who have regular access. Poor public and community toilet services are one of the most visible symptoms of inadequate urban sanitation services in India

Community toilets are specifically important for slums, especially where it may not be possible to construct individual household toilets due to the non-availability of space. A community toilets (CT) facility is a shared facility provided for a defined group of residents or an entire settlement/ community. It is the daily toilet access for many who

lack a toilet facility at home. It is normally located in or near the community area and used by almost community members, whereas public toilets (PT) facilities are provided for the floating population / general public in places such as markets, train stations or other public areas and used mostly undefined users<sup>3</sup>.

In 2015-16, 10.5% of urban households in India practiced open defecation; 14.9% used toilets where waste comes into contact with humans and 6.1% used shared facilities, according to the National Family Health Survey data of 2015-16 households with improved sanitation in the urban area in India is 79.7%<sup>4</sup>. More than 35% of the households living in slums defecate in the open/or use shared toilets or CT or PT and are exposed to various health hazards. This is more so for women-folk and the girls who go for nature call after evening sets in or during night hours<sup>5</sup>. In rapidly growing urban slums where there is no planning and a few facilities, the number of people living without access to basic water and sanitation services is increasing. This growth has led to an increase in the demand for water and better sanitation facilities. This is of particular concern considering that the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) sector is fundamental to the achievement of any broader goals (SDGs) of poverty reduction or social progress because it impacts economic growth and health (almost immediately), as also people productivity, in the long-term.

The provision of communal sanitation blocks is a means of providing sanitation to the urban poor and has been implemented widely in several Indian cities. However, the provision of communal sanitation facilities is not a guarantee of access and use. Provision of communal sanitation facilities is to be a key strategy in sanitation provision for the urban poor, this should be informed by a sound understanding of their potential for ending open defecation and particularly the barriers and facilitating factors associated with their use

Community toilets, thus, are the tools for bringing about behavioral changes among the public residing in the slum areas as well as in generating a demand for the use of individual toilets. Sizeable investment has been made for the construction of community toilets but they have become either hazardous, unhygienic or abandoned due to poor construction and planning or lack of water supply and poor maintenance. What are the reasons for this? So we try to assess the challenges to it.

However the situation is not as grim as it seems according to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, as of the end of 2017, the urban component has seen the construction of over 4 million individual toilets and 234,000 community and public

toilets and has declared 1,678 cities to be free of open defecation<sup>6</sup>.

### Challenges for toilet access amongst adolescent girls

Sanitation issues for women and girls are compounded by inequitable gender norms that put them at greater risk of experiencing violence and multiple health vulnerabilities. Women, despite having a high demand for safe toilet facilities, continue to practice unsafe sanitation. In response to the shame and fear associated with open defecations, women restrict their mobility and also adopt risky practices such as inadequate food and water intake for long hours to avoid the need to urinate or defecate. They tend to hold their bladders for an average of 13 hours, raising the likelihood of urinary infections, constipation, and mental stress<sup>7</sup>. This lack of adequate nutrition along with poor sanitation and hygiene practices can worsen the situation for pregnant women and lead to poor pregnancy outcomes leading to maternal and child under-nutrition<sup>8</sup>.

- Non-availability of toilets,
- It can be individual, public or community toilets locations of the public toilets /community toilets which may be far from home, access road in bad shape, guys loitering around the access road
- Poor maintenance of toilets resulting in unclean, overflowing, full of odor with inadequate or no water supply along with non-functional flush
- Scared fear to go to community toilets because of what others may say about them using the facility repeatedly
- Experience of physically abused when they were on the way to use toilets
- Peer pressure not to use toilets and go into open
- Cultural/social practice
- Sanitation services are necessary to support urban stability, enable social balance, economic growth and development and are imperative for the improvement of urban public services.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Poor planning and design choices are one of the most common reasons for community toilets facilities and services to fail. To ensure the safe, accessible and long-term usability of community toilets, it is critical to select the most appropriate location and community toilet design (both being contingent on the users' needs). Equally, the most suitable maintenance approach and mode of operation need to be selected carefully. Its also important to give ownership of sanitation to the community itself by including a community member (preferably

female member) for maintenance and caretaking. Developing the area as a community space to shatter the image of a “dingy dirty place” to a place where you can visit without any fear or discomfort.

Institutional strengthening, conducive policy framework and capacity building of decision-makers, planners and implementers are the driving factors to ensure the sustainability of community /public toilet management and the up-scaling and replication of successful community toilets interventions like Sulabh complex, Project Sammaanin Orissa.

Results suggest improving facility convenience strengthening of institutions, efficient monitoring, and evaluation for improved accountability and innovations in design and implementation will have to mark the final sanitation journey that India is going to embark upon and access and modifying fee structures could lead to increased rates of usage. Attention to possible barriers to usage at the community level associated particularly not only the construction but devising measures for strengthening the operational and maintenance aspect of the community toilets becomes all the more important. Sanitation is an issue that starts from individual and spreads to the community, therefore interpersonal communication measures with strong interactive mode will facilitate effective communication to bring desired behavioral changes. This will include enhancing knowledge regarding hygiene and sanitation and encouraging conversion of the knowledge into practice.

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