

WOMEN FOR WATER



Stories of women connected to earth and water

“

Closing the gender gaps in agriculture can provide multiple development dividends, including gender equality for rural women, food security and poverty reduction, improved climate management and peaceful societies

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Maria Noel Vaeza
Director of Programs at UN Women

**WOMEN
FOR WATER**

FOREWORD

by Sanjiv Mehta



We are no longer immune from facing an imminent water crisis in our lifetime. Water is integral to our lives, whether it be the lifeline for farmers who grow our food, the source of small joys like a morning cup of tea or the catalyst for the use of everyday products like soaps for our consumers.

Our core belief at Hindustan Unilever is to 'Do Well by Doing Good'. Over the last 80 years, we have persevered in trying to reduce our country's environmental footprint and partner in its social progress. About 8 years ago, we set up the Hindustan Unilever Foundation to engage with communities, organisations and the government to contribute towards water security solutions for India. In this endeavour, we have partnered with reputed non-profit organisations around the country to support communities in villages to govern their water resources and adopt judicious water practices.

While carrying out this work, we realized that some of the most innovative, bold and comprehensive work at the intersection of water and agriculture was being carried out by women in our projects. As farm labourers, cultivators, heads of collectives, entrepreneurs and professionals; they have pioneered development in their villages, secured water needs and changed their communities' relationships with water. This realisation seeded the idea of putting together a book to share their incredible stories with others. We wanted many more funders, development organisations and professionals to get to know them like we do and support this neglected space where women are clearly at the forefront of change.

I am pleased to present this book. It would not have come alive without the work put in by our NGO partners and the HUF team. I hope their stories inspire you to start your journey to support women working on water challenges and celebrate their contributions.

Sanjiv Mehta
Chairman and Managing Director, HUL

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Introduction

Water: A global crisis in the making

According to the United Nations, global demand for water is expected to increase nearly one third by 2050¹ ; while pollution of rivers and lakes, urbanization, and over-extraction of groundwater will continue to dwindle its supply. WHO estimates indicate that water scarcity already affects 1 out of every 4 persons globally, and developing countries are most affected by water related disasters² .

India at the frontlines of the crisis:

India is located near the equator which makes it extremely vulnerable to climate change related disasters like flooding and droughts. It also has a growing population, that will add additional demand for water in the future. India receives 4000 billion cubic metres (BCM) of freshwater annually through precipitation. Studies estimate that of this, the viable available supply after accounting for topographic

constraints and an evapo-transpiration rate of 65% is about 650 BCM³ . India's current demand for water stands at 634 BCM which is uncomfortably close to the quantum of water available.

Demand for water is expected to increase by 20% over the next decade due to rapid urbanization, industrialization and a growing population⁴. At the same time, climate change and pollution will continue to impact supply of water by reducing the utilizable quantity of water available – precipitating a water crisis that the country can ill afford.

According to the Water Resource Group, India's demand for water will double to 1498 BCM by 2030, while supply will decline to 744 BCM due to over extraction. This means we will have only half the supply of water for our needs by 2030⁵.

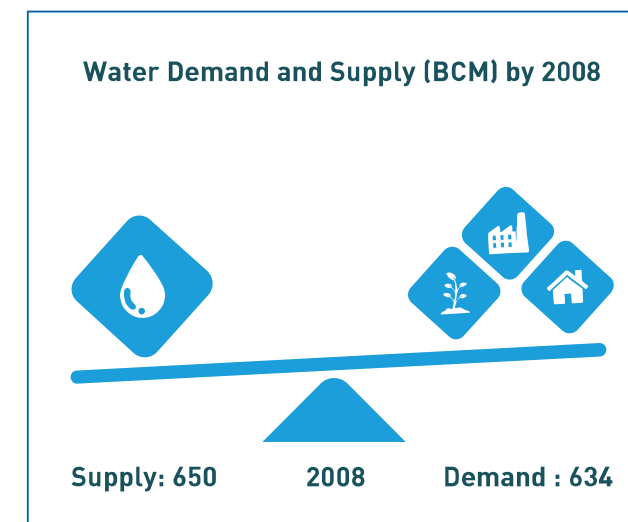


Figure 2 Source : Narasimhan and Gaur 2008

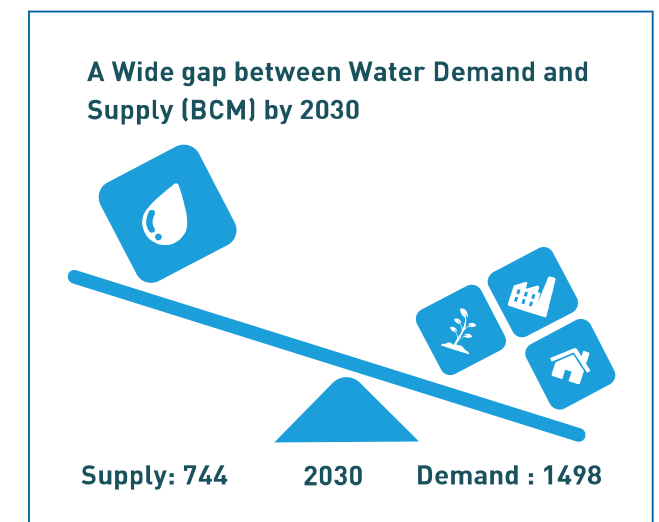


Figure 2 Source : 2030 Water Resources Group

¹ UN News

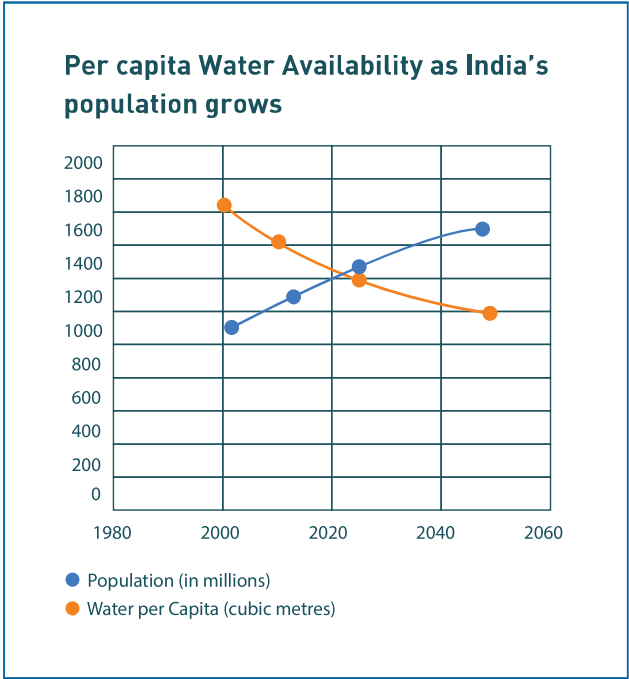
² WHO Drinking Water Factsheet

³ A Framework for India's Water Policy; T N Narasimhan, VK Gaur, 2008

⁴ National Commission on Integrated Water Resources Development (NCIWRD) 2010.

⁵ 2030 Water Resources Group (India)

Per Capita Water Availability in India has decreased steadily from 2209 CM (1991) to 1816 CM (2001) and 1545 CM (2011). As per UN Water norms, a country is termed as water stressed and water scarce if per capita water availability goes under 1700 CM and 1000 CM respectively⁶. Parts of India are water stressed and parts are moving towards water scarcity very quickly.

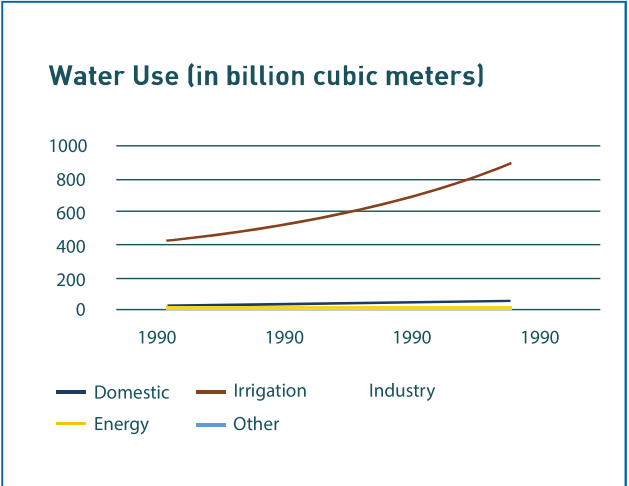


Villages in India are already facing an acute shortage of water for household and agricultural activities with farmers bearing the burnt during cropping seasons. 21 Indian cities and towns are projected to run out of groundwater by 2020.

What drives India's insatiable demand?

Of the current demand for water, irrigation requirements account for 89%, followed by household at 7% and industrial use at 4%⁷. Water use trends across different uses from 1990 projected

upto 2025 indicate that agriculture will continue to dominate and increase in water use over the years⁸.



Agriculture - the largest consumer of water:

India's dominant portfolio of water intensive crops coupled with low water use efficiency and unregulated groundwater extraction are key reasons that account for agriculture's lion share of water demand.

Water Intensive Crops: India's crop basket is dominated by rice and wheat. 52.5% of India's 141.4 million hectares of cultivated area is accounted for by rice and wheat. Farmers produce these highly water intensive crops for a secure income promoted by government price systems. This has led to a massive extraction of groundwater for irrigation. Studies show that cutting down on the share of wheat⁹ and rice to other water responsible crops like millets and maize would increase availability of groundwater as they use 45% less water to produce, while providing nutrition rich alternatives to consumers¹⁰.

Inefficiency: Irrigation efficiency refers to the

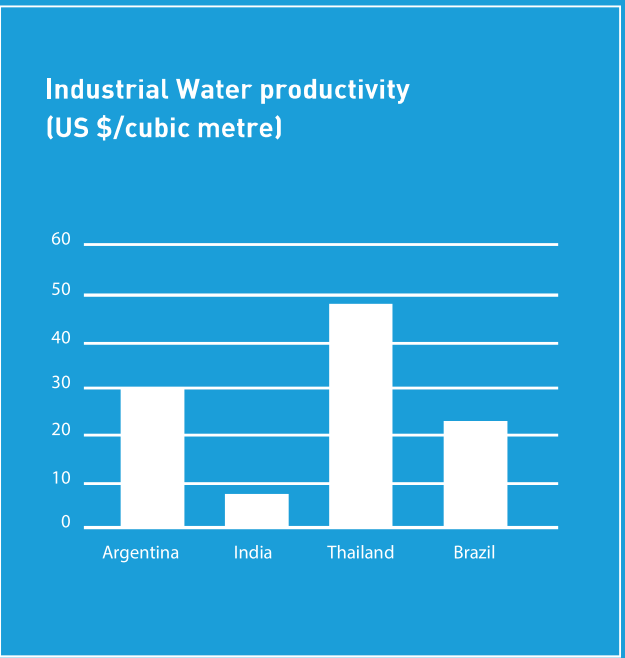
the amount of water supplied. India has a low irrigation water use efficiency at 30% and 55% for surface and groundwater respectively, which means that most crops consume only half of the water supplied while the rest is wasted¹¹. This is mainly because of use of inefficient methods of irrigation such as flood irrigation and cultivation of crops foreign to a geographical region.

Distorted water incentives: Some Indian states provide subsidized electricity to farmers for pumping water out of wells for irrigation. This has led to unregulated, over extraction of groundwater, leading to a depletion of groundwater resources. Tube wells and wells were the source for 65% of irrigation needs in 2011¹². The number of wells increased from 114 lakhs in 1986-87 to 197 lakhs in 2006-07¹³.

Growing industrial demand:

While industry accounts for 4% of water use in India; it's use of water and water management practices need significant improvement. As the industrial sector's contribution to GDP is estimated to be 40% by 2050¹⁴, this growing consumer of water will add to the unsustainable demand for water.

Low industrial water productivity: Pollution and usage of excess water for industrial activities are the key reasons for the sector's inefficient use of water. India ranks lower than its global counterparts in water productivity i.e. water used per unit of production (see graphic below). Low productivity occurs when industries do not invest in recycling or reusing water and do not meter consumption. Improving water productivity is a key area to work on as the supply of water will continue to be limited and constrained.



Industrial Pollution

When industrial waste is dumped without treatment; it pollutes and further declines the supply of usable water¹⁵. According to CSE (2004) in India, every litre of wastewater discharged from industries further pollutes 5-6 litres of usable water. This exponentially reduces the available supply of clean water for other uses.

Industrial Water Price:

The water cess paid to governments for industrial water use is not entirely commensurate with its cost. Pricing is not currently used as a mechanism to promote efficient usage of water, account for the negative externalities of business, or the marginal cost of extracting another unit of water. Low prices have been a large factor in encouraging the increasing unregulated demand for water.

⁶ Falkenmark and Widstrand, 1992; UN-Water, 2006b
⁷ NCIWRD, Ministry of Water Resources India, 2010

⁸ Compendium of Environment Statistics India, 2011
⁹ Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare, India

¹⁰ Alternative cereals can improve water use and nutrient supply in India: Science Advances, 04 Jul 2018: Vol. 4, no. 7
¹¹ Ministry of Water Resources Central Water Commission: Guidelines for Improving Water Use efficiency in Irrigation, Domestic and Industrial Sectors

¹² Water and Related Statistics 2015, Central Water Commission
¹³ Poor State of Irrigation Statistics in India, IWMI -Tata Water Policy program
¹⁴ India's Water Supply and Demand from 2025-2050: (IWMI)
¹⁵ Industrial Water Demand in India

Domestic demand of a large, growing population:

Water for drinking, sanitation and other domestic purposes currently accounts for 7% of total demand and is expected to increase 40% by 2030. NCIWRD estimates that drinking water needs alone will account for 111 BCM of water demanded in India by 2050. In addition, water is required for other household and livestock drinking needs.

A World Bank report estimates that 80% of domestic water in India is sourced from groundwater. A growing population with increasing commitments by government to provide safe drinking water and sanitation to all citizens will increase the pressure on groundwater leading to a further depletion of groundwater resources¹⁶.

Constrained supply; unchecked demand : where to begin?

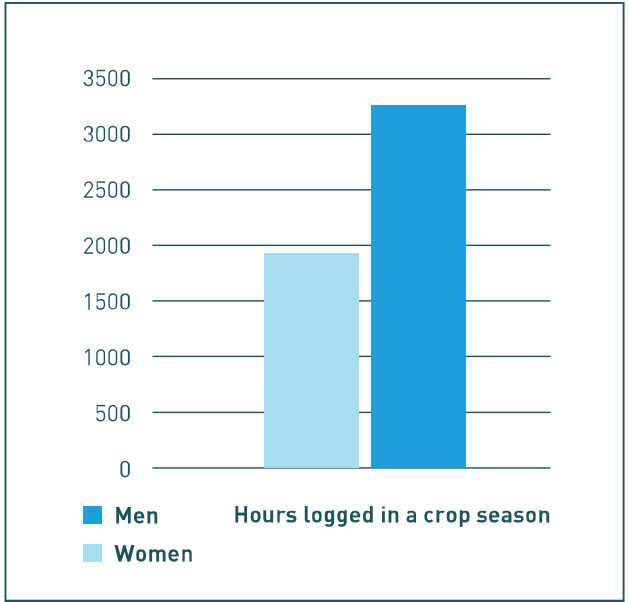
The unchecked usage of water across agriculture, industry and domestic uses has added tremendous pressure on groundwater resources. As India rapidly approaches an acute water crisis; addressing it would need scalable and collaborative solutions that go beyond sectoral segments and regional boundaries. Water impacts people; communities; habitations. The most vulnerable are likely to be affected immediately and the most. They're also the first mile that need to be equipped with tools and solutions for resilient management of crisis.

¹⁶ UNICEF, FAO and SaciWATERS. 2013. Water in India: Situation and Prospects.
¹⁷ Census of India 2011

Women bear the weight of the water crisis:

Women, children and tribal minorities are at the frontline of people affected by the escalating uncertainty and shortage of water. Women are responsible for obtaining water for the drinking and household needs of their families, and for livelihood activities such as irrigation and livestock rearing.

As farmers: The Indian Census indicates that nearly 100 million women are working in the agricultural sector in India¹⁷. High levels of male outmigration in recent years have left women to take on the role of cultivators and farm labourers. A shortage of water affects their ability to irrigate their fields or find work on fields that require irrigation. Women work longer in the fields as they log 3300 hours on agricultural labour during a crop season, compared to the 1860 hours logged by men¹⁸.



As water providers for their families: Rural women in India can end up spending up to 4 hours a day to fetch water for their drinking

¹⁸ Motkuri, Venkatanarayana & Naik, Suresh, (2016). Growth and Structure of Workforce in India: An Analysis of Census Data.

needs¹⁹. The constant pressure to find water takes up many hours of their day, which could be spent going to school in the case of younger girls and working in the case of older women. The long hours walking in the heat also affects them physically. Lack of basic amounts of water for sanitation makes them further susceptible to diseases.

The time and effort spent by women in obtaining water for basic needs is unremunerative and unproductive. They are not paid for it and could better spend this time engaging in income earning activities. The opportunity cost of being water providers and managers is preventing women from embracing opportunities that would lead their own socioeconomic progress.

Why engage women on water?

While women are disproportionately affected by the water crisis, they've also proven to be effective champions of solutions for their families and communities. Evidence from India and the world is unequivocal that women are not just integral to address water challenges. They're probably the only ones who can do it – at scale.

Women pass on water management training to their families and children: A UNICEF study carried out in India in 2013 reported that when trained and taught about the importance of water management, women teach their children and families the importance of the same. This makes them a critical lever to inculcate water awareness in the generations to come²⁰.

¹⁹ United Nations Human Rights, Right to Water, Fact Sheet 35
²⁰ UNICEF, FAO and SaciWATERS. 2013. Water in India: Situation and Prospects.

When women get involved, they address the collective needs of their village

Women mobilize government funds and services to solve for water supply shortages: Outcomes of development programmes in West Bengal indicate that women constructively influence public officials to provide government funds for employment. They use this money to build water supply structures such as ponds and reservoirs that address and ration the water required by fellow community members²¹. Nationally, women generate 47% of MGNREGA person days under the scheme and have mobilized over 53,000 crores from 2006 to 2012 to build structures that address their community's welfare needs²².

Women collectivize to campaign for access to water:

Tribal women collectives in Maharashtra formed water action plans with NGOs to address the water shortage in their region in 2016. They performed tasks at all levels from raising petitions and passing resolutions to demand their rightful share of water from village panchayats, to visiting block offices and making note of all gaps to address supply challenges²³.

Women take control of their community's water structure repair and maintenance: The UN's work with local government institutions run by women in rural India demonstrated this when they launched an initiative in 2010 to establish women as local mechanics. Pump maintenance and repair which earlier took over a month to fix, were fixed by women mechanics in under 24 hours. The absence of operable hand pumps made village members resort to drinking water from unhygienic

²¹ Pradan Annual Report 2016
²² MGNREGA Sameeksha
²³ The Better India.

sources. The women subsequently formed a group with representation of at least 3 poor and marginalized women from every Panchayat, looking after 450 pumps. They ran their village spare stores and met the collective domestic water needs of 130 villages²⁴.

Women improve outcomes when involved in participatory irrigation programs: A research conducted in 2000 to study water supply projects carried out in Gujarat across 900 villages found that including women in the water supply programmes—both in technical and decision-making capacities—increased the efficiency of the project. Women spent more time in cleaning and maintaining the canals, supervising irrigation, collecting water taxes and building water percolating structures than men²⁵.

This dynamic was validated further in studies conducted by the UN in 2004 that looked at women’s participation in water management projects in the mountainous regions of India. They found that the inclusion of women in the decision making and functioning of the programs increased the availability of water within their villages. This involvement also changed the community’s perception about the impact women can have in village development and improved their wellbeing and economic status²⁶.

Women adopt technologies and switch to sustainable farming methods which improve soil and water productivity:

A report published in 2017 studied the role of women farmers in attaining Sustainable Development Goals relating to agriculture in India. The authors studied 39 sources and found evidence that indicates that the presence of women is crucial to changing

agricultural practices in rural areas of India. With the right knowledge and technical training, women lead collectives that drove changes in cropping practices. They promoted efficient water use technologies like System of Rice Intensification (SRI) where younger rice seedlings are planted, spaced, and hand weeded with special tools. They have found solutions to crop diseases in places where scientists did not. Women also showed greater willingness to switch to organic inputs and grow climate resistant crops like traditional varieties of millets, etc which reduce their water consumption.

Other cases show women learning new, sustainable methods of farming and then using internet tools to impart this knowledge to large groups of women. These cases are just some of the noted examples in this paper which highlight how women have been instrumental in the progress towards meeting sustainable development goals (SDGs) in India²⁷.

Women take on entrepreneurial roles to provide affordable and clean drinking water for their communities:

Women in multiple towns and rural villages in India learned water management techniques and started businesses that provided potable, cheap water for their communities. They ensured fair prices, collected water fees, and used this revenue to grow the scope of their business²⁸. This had a positive impact on their village’s relationship to water as well as their own economic wellbeing.

Global Evidence:

Global evidence also indicates that women have improved reliability and outcomes when recruited into water management programs.

When women are involved with water management work, their communities get measurably better outcomes—including better-functioning water systems, expanded access, and economic and environmental benefits.

44 water governance projects across Asia and Africa show that when both men and women engage in shaping water policies and institutions, communities use water services more and sustain them for longer²⁹.

Historically, women in Indonesia have been involved in all stages of irrigation and management of water supply. They monitored water conditions in the fields to check illegal intake and outlet of irrigation water. They also controlled animals who damaged canals and used tertiary irrigation water for household purposes.

In Uganda, when Maria Mutagamba was elected Minister of State for Water in 2006, she created water programs with a gender sensitive lens to increase people’s access to water. By promoting 5-year gender strategies that put women in leadership positions of decision-making committees— they improved urban Ugandan citizens access to water by 10% within 3 years.

How can women’s participation in India’s water movement be catalysed at scale?

1. **Quality, reliable data:** Investing in good quality data will help understand women and men’s roles, resources, and decision-making regarding water management. While anecdotal data points to women’s potential in water management, collection of reliable and comprehensive data on women’s work will enable policy makers to value the effects of women’s participation and better understand how they can help solve water related conflicts.

2. **Representation in decision making:** In 2014, women made up less than 17% of the WASH labour force in developing countries. They were particularly underrepresented in technical jobs such as engineers and hydro-geologists, and in leadership roles such as policymakers, regulators and managers (World Resources Institute). Addressing this gap will yield sustained results as women have an innate understanding of water management at the primary household level, their expertise and opinion will have a lasting impact on formulating successful water management policies at the government level.

3. **Skills, Knowledge and Networks:** Women need access to information, skills and resources on improved water management practices. Encouraging women to form collective models around water governance and entrepreneurship will help address water usage at the community level. Equipping women to take charge of the water needs of their community will help ensure the judicious and equitable usage of water.

²⁴ UNICEF India; Sugata Roy

²⁵ MAINSTREAMING GENDER CONCERNS IN PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT: A CASE OF AKRSP (II); Shilpa Vasavada

²⁶ UNICEF, FAO and SiciWATERS, 2013. Water in India: Situation and

Prospects.

²⁷ Knowledge Intensive Agriculture for Attaining Sustainable Development Goals: Role of Indian Women

²⁸ India Water Portal

²⁹ Voice and Choice for Women - Linkages on Demand, Gender and Poverty from 44 Water Schemes in Asia and Africa, 2001 (UNDP)

Call to Action: Start with women farmers

In the space of water use and management; the syncretic relationship of agriculture with water will benefit immensely from women’s productive participation as farmers. Data from our existing projects shows that women led community institutions and women farmers themselves have achieved significant results in water savings while promoting sustainable agriculture within their communities.

Time and again, our interactions with women in our projects have left us feeling inspired by their commitment and optimistic about the future of water in our country. The evidence of women’s water management successes suggests that they’re pivotal to addressing the country’s water challenges.

Maria Noel Vaeza, the Director of Programs at UN Women said, “Closing the gender gaps in agriculture can provide multiple development dividends, including gender equality for rural women, food security and poverty reduction, improved climate management and peaceful societies”³⁰.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization estimated that if women farmers had the same access to resources and support as men, they could increase yields by 20%-30% causing a 2.5 to 4% increase in global agricultural output and feeding at least 100-150 million additional people³¹.

Women farmers, professionals, managers and leaders across different parts of the country have come together and managed water as a common resource that affects their lives and the communities they live in. They’ve often done so by collectivizing and working together with their village communities, government functionaries and experts.

This book chronicles stories of resilient and adaptive women who are making strides in the field of agriculture and water practices. From agricultural labourers and farmers, to community professionals and entrepreneurs; they have taken the leap to adopt and evangelise solutions that have created a more harmonious relationship between nature and man (!). By sharing their stories, we hope to invite support and strength to their individual and collective efforts. Not because they are women; but because they can lead our generation’s movement for a more secure and water conflict- free society

Stories of women connected to earth and water

³⁰ FAO UN: Women hold the key to building a world free from hunger and poverty
³¹ The State of Food and Agriculture 2011-12 – Women in Agriculture:



YELLAMMA

40 YEARS
HALEBARAGURU, KARNATAKA

Yellamma is a landless migrant farm worker, who started working as a labourer from the age of 8. She realized that a group of workers have a better chance at finding farm work and formed her first group 15 years ago. This improved their incomes and reduced the time they spent finding work. Her group has grown to 60 women today who have learnt new techniques of planting rice that makes them highly sought after by landowners. Despite being landless, she educated land owners on the benefits of using less water and has ensured that her group's farming skills are a highly demanded asset.

I was born in Kattagihalli village of Yelburuga taluk in Karnataka. We were a family of 13 children and moved to Halabaraguru when I was five years old in search of a better life. As we didn't have any land, everyone in the family had to contribute to our family's earnings. In Halabaraguru, the government donated land to my family to build a house. Marriage happened when I was eight years old. My husband was a 16-year old alcoholic who often beat me. Twenty days after my marriage, I decided to leave him as I was unable to tolerate his torture. Since then, I have been living in my parent's home.

We did not own any land for farming. My family had a flock of 40 sheep. We earned 1500-2000 rupees from each of them by rearing wool. One day, someone stole 8 sheep. Angered and worried, my father decided to sell all the sheep. As a result, my siblings and I started working as farm labourers. These conditions forced me to stay away from school and education.

As a daily wage labourer, it was hard to find work in the villages and on a good day I would make about 25 rupees. A few women in my village worked on farms as a group of labourers. They travelled together and negotiated their salaries as one unit. Inspired by them, I formed a labour group as well. We started as a group of twelve and took up anything - from working in the fields to constructing houses and canals. As a group, we started making 40-45 rupees each. It became cheaper and easier to find transport to farms. It also gave us bargaining power to secure our rights and prevent harassment from farm owners. Having emotional and social support from my group members improved my self-confidence and esteem as well.

"As our group grew bigger, we spent lesser time finding work. This gave me more time to watch television and speak to people in my village".

It has been 15 years since I formed this group. We are now 60 members strong. I limited this group to 60 members, as it would have been hard to manage a larger group. On a good day, especially during the harvesting season, I make 500 rupees. Large land owners come home regularly to enquire if I could send my group for farm activity. I work as the bridge between them and our labour group. Often, the land owners reward me with rice for this reason. After the success of our group, the number of groups in our village has increased significantly.

Four years ago, an organisation* introduced our group to new farming techniques. They told us about the benefits of planting seedlings in lines, as opposed to using conventional methods. This technique is called line planting. Initially, our group members found it hard to adapt to this technique. At the same time, farm owners started hiring cheaper labour from other states. This was a worrying trend and I convened several meetings to convince my group to learn line planting. In the first year, we covered only 10 acres of land. This year, we used line planting on 270 acres of farm land.

"Nowadays, I have started educating farm owners. I never imagined I would have this sort of power. Wherever I go for weeding, I tell the farmer to put less water, to reduce pest problems. I never forget to add that the saved water would help other farmers too"

As a group, we are happy with a steady increase in demand for our skills. Every farm owner in the area wants us to work for them. They get a better yield through line planting. They face lesser problems from pests as well. Our group earns 500 rupees more per acre using line planting, as against conventional methods. Moreover, we cover 30% more land using this technique every day.



*SAMUHA, a non-profit organisation based in Karnataka

“

Today, our labour group is always busy. We look out for each other. Our incomes have significantly increased. Our work has helped us garner more respect, value and time. I live alone in my house but never feel lonely. Previously, I never found time to do anything except work. Today, I enjoy my time in solitude, cooking, speaking to my friends and watching television

”



PRIYA SHARMA

35 YEARS

KIRTARPUR, BALRAMPUR DISTRICT, UTTAR PRADESH

As a young girl, Priya's father encouraged her to study and have the same aspirations as her brother. Life changed when she was married into a conservative family. Her in-laws could not accept her working on their fields. She persisted to convince them and negotiated patiently - first to buy a tractor instead of renovating the house; then to join group to learn improved farming practices till finally they relented and let her farm. Seeing her success as a farmer, Priya's father-in law and husband consult her on all key farming decisions. She's also sought after as a speaker at local fairs to present her progressive solutions with farmers from across the state.

I was born and raised in Gonda with six sisters and a brother. My father has always been my biggest support system. He never differentiated between his son and daughters, and always spoke of the importance of education. Through his support, I passed twelfth grade, scoring 85%. My mother worked in a dairy, and my father was the secretary of a co-operative godown. Our primary source of income was from three and a half acres of agricultural land which we owned and cultivated. The entire family worked on it and we had enough water to grow 3-4 crops every year.

I got married in the year 2000 in Kirtarpur village, Balmrampur district. The initial five-seven years of my marriage were spent in depression, as I did not align with my family's lifestyle. The men of the house did not manage family income responsibly. My husband ran a mobile repair shop which was very low on profits. He rarely spent time on our farm.

At my maiden home, we planted 3-4 crops in a year. At my in-laws, we harvested only one crop every year. **I wanted to work on the acre of land we owned to help increase our income. But, my family thought it was unacceptable that their daughter-in-law work on the field.** During these trying times, I would reach out to my father who would reinstate my confidence. He would always say, "Have patience, things will change".

One day, my father-in-law and husband decided to spend all our savings on renovating the house. I opposed this decision as I wanted to invest to generate more income for the family. Alarmed, my father-in-law asked- "If we construct a good house, people will look up to our family. We will be able to find good matches for my grandchildren. What else do you want to do with the money we save?"

I wanted to invest in a tractor instead of renting them every season. By doing so, we could add to our income by renting it to other farmers as well. Surprisingly, my father-in-law was impressed, and we ended up buying a tractor. Our services were

used by many families of my village, and our incomes started rising gradually.

After a few years of persisting with my in-laws, I could finally start working on our farm. I started by growing two crops every year. As land was our only major asset, I wanted to figure out how we could get the most from it. **There was no one to help me in my quest.** It was clear to me that water was a major cost for us as we needed diesel pumps to draw it for our field. I often watched Kisan TV (shows related to agriculture) and participated in agriculture themed events to learn more about modern techniques of agriculture. It was during that time that I met officials from an organisation*, who introduced me to different practices of reducing water consumption. We were trained in groups of 15 people. My group had 5 men and 10 women. From this training, I adopted several water friendly practices on our farm. I observed that our costs for water started going down and our production started improving. Saving water was no longer restricted to the farm. Just outside our home, we prepared 'sokhtas'. A sokhta is a soak pit which stores the residual water collected after performing all the household chores. This sokhta helped us grow a kitchen garden in our backyard.

It has been only two years since our group of fifteen members was formed. The farmers have benefited so much from these meetings that we have at least 25-30 participants. They realise the value of discussions around input procurement and innovative farm practices. I spoke to all the farmers of my village and motivated them to keep records of ground water tables. Around 40 farmers in my village have updated records for ground water usage.

I was also very keen to talk about my farm practices outside my gram panchayat. With the help of the organisation, I have participated in Kisan Melas* and agricultural fairs and have interacted with farmers - imparting my experiences and learning from theirs.

From the additional income I have been a genera over

the past two years, I have purchased cement poles and barbed wires to protect our farms from wild animals. More importantly, I am sending my children to an English-medium school.

“Today, I can proudly say that my husband and father-in-law support me in all my work. No decision in the house is taken without my opinion”

My father often spoke about the importance of patience. His words were the motivation that supported my journey- from improving our financial condition to shifting perceptions about women working in my village. Society’s conservative thinking often hinders the growth of incomes, mindsets, and women. I will always challenge this thinking whenever it inhibits a woman’s progress.



*PANI: People’s Action for National Integration, a non-profit organisation based in Uttar Pradesh

“

I feel proud to be known as a successful woman farmer. Difficult times have come and gone, but I have learnt to stay strong. I am my own role model. To all women, I would stress on the importance of grit and patience to bring about a change in their families and communities.

”



SUGANJIJI

40 YEARS
SITAPURI, DEWAS REGION, MADHYA PRADESH

When she was all of 11 years old, Suganji had to drop out of school to provide for her family. She worked as a daily labourer digging wells. Hardship continued as she was married at 18 to a man addicted to alcohol. Never letting the lack of education hold her back, Suganji encouraged women in her village to join savings groups, participated in setting up a cooperative of farmers and trained them to grow more water efficient crops. Suganji is now a board member of a farmer producer company in Sitapuri. She addresses thousands of farmers at their annual district meetings and is fondly known as the one to ask the toughest of questions. Her days of gruelling labour are behind her.

I was born into the Barela tribe in Sembli village, the oldest of 9 siblings. Life with them was chaotic, but it taught me to shoulder responsibility early on in life. Even though my family owned 7.5 acres of land, most of it was unproductive and we could cultivate only a small portion of it. This was not enough to feed a large family. **By the age of 11, I had to start working as a daily wage labourer digging wells for ten rupees a day.** For additional income, we reared animals. Looking after the animals and travelling for work took up most of my day and I was never able to attend school.

At the age of 18, I got married and moved to the village of Sitapuri. Adjusting to a new life was difficult. My husband was a lazy man who was addicted to alcohol. He owned more land than my father, but I had to work on it alone. As I had grown up farming, I knew what to grow. The days were long and filled with hard labour. I would start at dawn, complete household chores and then work in the fields till late evening. **Despite my efforts, we didn't have enough produce from our land to fill our own stomach. Erratic rainfall was the bane of my life.**

During those hard times; a local organisation that worked in nearby villages came to us to help us dig wells and reduce our dependence on rain water. They suggested that the women come together to form a savings group so that we could reduce our dependence on local money lenders who charged us exorbitant rates of interest. They also suggested that I lead a group! In 2003; I set up our group where each of us saved twenty rupees every month. **Over the years; our savings grew and our local bank started giving our group loans for seeds, fertilizers and equipment for our farms. The group became a support system for each of us as we discussed our problems – grinding labour on our farms, families to feed, alcoholic husbands.**

Over time, we were able to form many such groups in my village. We then decided to group them together as a federation. At the federation, we could discuss larger issues of water scarcity, challenges of organic farming and the absence of a good market system. I was responsible for registering the federation and served on its Executive Council.

I understood that our wells were drying because our crops used a lot of water. We started promoting division of fields for various crops. Some farmers would grow channa (gram) that requires less water and others wheat that was water-intensive but highly profitable. Working collectively not only helped us secure our ground water but fetched better prices for our produce since we took larger quantities to the market. In 2008, we started our company, called the Ram Rahim Pragati Producer Company.

Through our producer company, we promote organic inputs, which lowers our costs and results in tastier, chemical-free vegetables for our consumption and sale. Farmers are encouraged to use vermicompost and paanch patti to help increase the moisture content in their soil so that we use less water. We also procure good quality seeds for members and find buyers to sell our produce. This company by farmers earned us a collective profit of Rs 2 lakhs last year.

For the last three years, there was no rain in our village, and yet some farmers grew water intensive crops like paddy. **Last year, I was trained to conduct water games in our village to help farmers realise the impact of their crop choices on our ground water. Farmers quickly learnt as they played the games that when they insist on growing water intensive crops like paddy, the overall groundwater supply reduces.** This deprives other farmers of adequate water for

their crops and affects their yield. Farmers are gradually beginning to understand that growing water intensive crops is not sustainable. This is an important learning for our entire community. I recently spoke at the Annual General Meeting of Dewas district which was attended by over 3000 farmers about the importance of sustainable agriculture. Experience has taught me that it is imperative that we collectively use less water and

pesticides to deal with the changing climate.

Throughout my life, I have worked hard and a lot of times, late into the nights. This provoked my husband and also some others to question my whereabouts and intentions. I calmly reminded them that neither did they work nor did they help me when I was working for our land, children and people.



*Samaj Pragati Sahayog, a non-profit organisation based in Madhya Pradesh

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Water is crucial and there is no life without it. The times are never right, the people never available to work with you, even the clouds deceive you when you want their support the most, but you must forge ahead. You must move on.

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MADHUBEN

62 YEARS

LOLASAN, HIMMATNAGAR, GUJARAT

Madhuben has lived with water scarcity throughout her life. She stood in queues for hours to source drinking water when she was a child, borrowed money for a borewell that never yielded water and could cultivate only one acre of her total landholding. When she had grandchildren, she realised that agriculture could no longer sustain her family. The canal in their village gave four months of erratic supply. She mobilised women farmers to petition to the canal authorities to get longer access to canal water. She then motivated a group of enterprising women to start a vermicompost business. It helped famers cut down the water required while adding to their earnings. Madhuben believes that her village is her family. Working together is the only way to surmount their challenges.

I was born and raised in Himmatnagar with two brothers and sisters. We went to school as my parents saw education as the means to a secure future. Our village faced acute water scarcity. Our water requirements at the time were smaller as compared to today, yet getting water was not easy. There were 7 wells in my village and **one family member was always at the well to fetch water for the family's water needs.**

I was married when I was in my eleventh grade and moved to Lolasan. My in-laws were against my education, so I had to discontinue my studies. They wanted me to learn more about farming and cattle-herding. I didn't even know how to cut fodder and would engage a labourer, paying him a small amount to cut it for me.

Soon, I realised that this was an unsustainable way of living. I was spending money to collect fodder without learning anything. I also feared that my in-laws would find out about my scheme. All these factors compelled me to learn more about farming. At Lolasan as well, water was scarce and sourcing water for irrigating our ten acres of land was hard. So, we often irrigated only one out of the ten acres we owned. **I asked my parents for money to construct a bore-well. They helped but we didn't get water even after digging 500 feet. We had to continue to depend on rains to irrigate our fields.**

Our village came under the canal command area and water supply was controlled by the district water board. We got the canal water only for four months during the Rabi season from November to February. Even during these months, the water supply was erratic. To source drinking water, I had to walk long distances to source it from the nearby well. We spent a large part of our time and money securing water for irrigation and drinking.

In 2004, I joined a group set up by an organisation* that came to our village to work on improving water access in our area. Excited, I motivated the women of

my village to join this group as well. In these meetings, each of us discussed how we could solve our water problems. The men in our village also did nothing to solve our water issues. Several of them were alcoholics, who never engaged with the administration to fight for access to water. It was upto us women to do something.

We held meetings with several government officials and pushed the administration to extend availability of the canal water. **After repeated visits, we forced government officials to come to our village and understand our situation. Soon, we had canal water for eight months of the year.** Even though this was a small win, the unpredictable nature of water supply and rainfall did not solve our problems forever.

In 2008, I joined a women's saving group. It was hard convincing fifty members of my village to join this group. We started with twenty, and slowly had all the women join our group. Meetings were held on the fourth of every month. We started by saving 25 rupees every month.

I encouraged our group to start vermicomposting. This way we could avoid sourcing manure from the market and earn by selling our excess produce. Using vermicompost on my field reduced the amount of water needed for farming and improved my yield. Many village members started using vermicompost after I spoke to them about its benefits. We decided to turn it into a venture. We visited groups in different villages to look at their compost pits. The organisation helped us procure nets and design a shed for this setup. We packaged and sold our excess produce. **Through this work, my income has increased threefold over the past four years.** As household expenses rise, I feel it is very important for both women and men to earn for the family as equals. We should contribute alike for the growth of our villages and our homes.

When we started as a savings group, I remember how it was very hard for us to understand procedures in a bank. I didn't even know how to sign under my name. But through training, we soon started calculating

interest and maintaining our passbooks. Today, we have four and a half lakhs in the bank. We give loans for education and marriages through our group and have always received money back on time.



*Development Support Center, a non-profit organisation based in Gujarat

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Our experience in a group has made us more self-reliant and aware. The group has become one unit, and we think of our growth as a village, never as an individual or a family. The village benefits from our values of trust, honesty and togetherness. Whenever, any young woman joins our group, that's the first lesson I speak about. Without our values, no one will ever help others in times of need

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K. SELVI

33 YEARS
KALLUPATTI, MADURAI, TAMIL NADU

Selvi had to discontinue her education after 8th grade when her father suffered severe financial losses and worked as a farm labourer to support the family. She didn't want her children to face financial hardships, so she joined a savings group to secure their future. Selvi's earnings as a small farmer depended on access to water from a village water tank whose supply channel had been encroached by rich farmers. She mobilised a group of small farmers like her to prevail upon the rich farmers. Despite political pressure and threats, she succeeded in convincing them to release water. Selvi has powered on to become the treasurer of a federation of 3000 small farmers in Kallupatti.

While growing up, we had three acres of land and relied on rainfall for farming. My father suffered huge financial losses when I was in eighth grade. My younger sisters and I had to discontinue our studies and work as farm labourers to make sure we had food to eat.

I got married at the age of 16 and was fortunate to have a supportive husband. We raised a family with two sons. Our financial condition wasn't comfortable and local money lenders demanded high interest rates. Yet, I was determined to ensure a good education for my children. I came across women's groups* in my village who would save each month and give each other small loans. I then joined a group of 15 women.

I never missed a group meeting as we would discuss our household and agricultural problems. Some of us took loans for our children's education, while others borrowed to buy agricultural inputs or water. We would get invited to federation level meetings at the block town. A federation is a body comprising of all group members in a block. My husband pushed me to attend these meetings regularly. At these larger meetings, we discussed ways in which we could ensure access to water on all our farms. Water was a luxury available only to the rich of the village. They used it for both agricultural and domestic use, while people like me had no water even for our crops.

Our village was suffering from drought conditions for many years. People were resigned to their fate, but I really wanted to do something. Persuading my village members to fight for access to water from the village water tank was a challenge that I took upon myself. Some of the supply channels from this pond were encroached upon by a few rich farmers. At one of the federation level meets, I met an executive council member, Palamiraj. He helped us draft a petition and put our case across to the district administration. Enraged, the rich farmers approached a local politician. Palamiraj motivated us to go and speak to this politician as well. The

politician decided to call all of us to his house for a meeting. After several hours of discussion, he asked the rich farmers to clear the channels.

"This was the day that I realised the power of being united. When all of us put pressure, the rich farmers were forced to clear the pond channels. As a result, over two hundred families in my village now have perennial access to water"

The meetings at the block and the district level have been very helpful in improving my knowledge of agriculture and banking systems. I spoke to several women in nearby villages about the value of being in a group. In 2008, I was appointed as an executive council member in the federation, as the office bearer for Kallupatti, one of the nine clusters in our federation. Our cluster now has 30 groups and 500 members.

In the executive council of my federation, I was the only woman among ten men. I was a little reluctant to participate, but my husband encouraged me to take the opportunity. Through this position, I gained more knowledge about low cost agriculture practices and life insurance.

By 2014, the number of groups under our federation across clusters rose to 142. Towards the end of 2014, the federation members asked me to become their treasurer. I was hesitant to take this responsibility for over 3,000 farmer members! But the federation members and my husband convinced me to take on this opportunity- they told me about how I could help several others small farmers in my block who didn't have access to water, quality education and healthcare.

As a federation leader, I wanted to support our farmer members with better water saving practices. I visited several villages to learn about their water management practices. During a visit to a nearby block, I saw farm bunds. This structure helped farmers store rain water on fields. They even told me

that the bunds increased water levels in their wells. At that time, constructing ponds was the only way I knew to capture rain water. As there was a government subsidy to construct farm bunds, I promoted the construction of bunds through the federation.

My journey as a group and federation member has provided financial support for my sons' education. Both my sons have now completed a diploma in

engineering. I'm happy that almost all women in my village have joined a group. I seek a lot of inspiration from the stories of Chinnapillai who empowered over 60,000 women farmers in Madurai by starting a successful banking system to solve their debt issues. In the future, I want to get the different federation leaders of my district to work together. This will give us more leverage to advocate people's needs to the administration.



*Dhan Foundation, a non-profit organisation based in Tamil Nadu

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I believe that integrity and transparency have helped me grow as a leader. I make sure that the disadvantaged women of our federation get loans based on their need. Bye-laws are strictly followed. This ensures that the federation members see me as a law-abiding leader. I feel that women should work together to boost confidence and bring about change in their villages. Our strong value systems will be the reason that our communities will look up to us.

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LAICHI BAI

55 YEARS

UMARWADA, MANDLA DISTRICT, MADHYA PRADESH

Water woes in her village compelled Laichibai to work as a daily farm labourer in Jabalpur, away from her home in Umarwada village. As her children grew older, she wanted to settle back in her village permanently to be with her grandchildren. Returning to her village meant that she would need water to irrigate her land. The MGNREGS marked the beginning of a grandmother's incredible journey. She started with construction of water structures to earn a living. The experience of corruption in her on payments prompted her to become a Panch in her panchayat. She is now the President of an institution that manages water, forests and other natural resources of her tribal village.

I was raised with a sister and two brothers in Bomanibanjar, Mandla, Madhya Pradesh. I had to quit school when I was six years old as my parents had to save money for the marriages of their two daughters. We had two acres of farm land. My siblings and I worked on the farm and at home to support our family. At the age of fourteen, I was married in a family in Umarwada, a tribal village in Mandla.

I live with my five children and thirteen grandchildren. While I can support my family through farming on our six-acre land, our conditions were not always the same. From a childhood where water was in abundance; Umarwada had acute scarcity. In the 1980s, we didn't have enough water to irrigate our farms. There was one well in the village for drinking water where all of us would queue up for long hours to get a few pots of water. No efforts were made to store rainwater in the village at that time. Farming was unsustainable to support our family, so my husband and I would travel to Jabalpur and work as farm labourers.

After the children grew up, got married and settled down; I was keen to come back to Umarwada for good. At that time, I came to know of an opportunity to work with MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme). The panchayat chose me to lead the scheme's implementation in our villages. Under MGNREGS, we were keen to construct boribunds that would benefit the entire village by holding back flowing water from the village stream. Boribunds are built using sandbags on riverbanks and across river beds. Members of our village were reluctant to work as they often didn't receive compensation for their days of work. Sometimes, their payments were delayed because of corruption in payment processing. **As my village had little motivation to participate in water conservation works, I took the initiative to build boribunds on the stream near my plot. I was paid 4,600 rupees for my work. As soon as I got the payment for the work, people in my village expressed their willingness to work.**

My village's suspicions regarding work compensation

were unfortunately for real. Although I received my payments on time, many people had problems procuring their compensation. Despite interactions with the local administration, our requests for timely payments didn't yield results. To address these challenges, the farmers of my village motivated me to join the village Panchayat. I decided to stand for elections myself and was appointed as a Panch in 2009.

Even as a Panch, I was deeply disturbed to witness the extent of corruption. Only rich families benefitted from government schemes. I wanted to change this situation but faced immense resistance from other village officials when I would refuse to sign documents. It was upsetting to see how people turned hostile towards me for being transparent. But, I was wanted to make sure that the benefits of the schemes reached the people who needed them the most. Working honestly and putting the needs of the people before my own safety strengthened my resolve to keep working.

In 2016, an organisation* came to our village to setup a Gram Pariyavarn Samithi. Under the Panchayat Extension to Schedule Areas act (PESA), Gram Sabhas have the provision to set up a Gram Pariyavarn Samithi to manage water, forests and other natural resources of the village, in tribal areas. The villagers were sceptical about the working of this committee. I saw this as an opportunity to improve our lives and stood for the election of the post of its Vice President.

I was elected as the Vice President of the samithi with resounding support from the village as people had appreciation for my work as a panch. At the samithi, we took on the role to construct boribunds to arrest rainwater again. I went door to door to educate families on the benefits of boribunds to save water and convinced them to donate their efforts (shramdaan). Families were unwilling to let women participate in these initiatives. I would often share my life experiences of working as a panch and a samithi vice president. **After persistent efforts, we have boribunds throughout our village today. We have easy access to water for our**

household needs and cattle even in summer. The days of walking for long hours to fetch water are behind us.

Though I am a school dropout; I represent my village in meetings at the block and district levels in discussions on water conservation. My village that once showed little interest in working together has

started listening intently to ideas to secure water for their future. We now take decisions as one collective village. I'm learning so much from the power of groups. I hope that in the future, every village comes together to take decisions for their own progress and development.



**Foundation for Ecological Security, a non-profit organisation based in Gujarat*

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My work has deeply impacted my personal and family life. My husband and I distribute all our household work equally and there are hardly any fights at home. My family does not stop me from going anywhere. They handle things at home in my absence. Personally, I have become more confident to speak up whenever it can benefit my village members. I am happy to see many more people of my village voice their opinions and speak against any injustice in public hearings. They now realise the importance of honesty and encourage such values in their children.

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IMARTI DEVI

30 YEARS

MOTO VILLAGE, LALITPUR, UTTAR PRADESH

For a long time, Imarti Devi accepted the diktats of powerful upper-caste men and served unpaid labor to access water for her family from their wells. It was a compromise she was no longer willing to make. She went up against feudal norms to dig a well that would secure water for many families like hers. The threat of violence from powerful men, dissuasion by her own husband and ridicule from villagers did not deter her. Eventually she dug the well and brought dignity to many like her who now had a source of clean water. Her fearlessness earned her the respect of her village and even the Forest Department that gave permission for a check dam that eventually brought water to farms across her village.

I was born in Silgan village in Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh. I grew up with three brothers and two sisters. My family owned 4 acres of land where we grew wheat, pulses, corn and sesame. My siblings and I would work on the farm to support our family. Our village had 6 wells and 7 handpumps. Availability of water was never a problem.

Growing up, I was very close to my father. Despite being poor, he realized the importance of education. He sent all his children to school but I found it hard to concentrate on studies. I dropped out of school and focused on learning farming and household chores instead. I sometimes regret this decision.

I got married at the age of 15 and moved to Moto village. My father-in-law owned 3 acres of land. My husband worked in Mumbai and would visit us once a year. He sent money for household expenses, but it wasn't enough. I worked on my father-in-law's field and he gave us grains for our consumption. As my husband was not around, I shouldered complete responsibility for my children. I wondered how they would progress in life till their basic needs are met. Basic needs began with water. This thought worried me as I would fetch muddy water to drink after doing unpaid labour for the upper castes, who controlled the only drinking water well in the village. I wish that there was some way out for us; someone who could guide me.

In 2011, an organisation came to our village to help us with our water needs. When they called for a meeting, I went for it. In the meeting, we told them about our water related problems. The organisation told us that they were planning to set up a Paani Panchayat to train us on water conservation. They encouraged women to take the lead with water projects.

Our village was feudal and women were either shy or scared to step out of their homes. I saw this as an opportunity to address our problems and became one of the project leads. We were called Jal sahelis.

In one of the meetings, we identified a well in the village that had gone dry because of excessive extraction of water for farming. We decided to dig it again. The organisation said they will provide the material needed for digging if the villagers agreed to donate labour (shramdaan). This development angered the upper-caste families. They feared that if we got a source of water apart from the sole well in their control, we will stop doing unpaid labour for them. They threatened our lives and people started to drop out. My husband was scared too and asked me to stop work on the well. I told him that I was doing it for our children and couldn't stop now. Soon, there were only three women left digging the well.

The villagers made fun of us. They taunted us by saying "what will you women do alone?" But I didn't quit. If I would have quit, my life would have been a mockery. When we continued with the digging, members of the upper caste families threatened my husband. They mocked him because of his lack of control over his wife. My husband told me to stop and beat me up too. I still went and dug every day till he finally gave up.

As we went deeper, it became increasingly hard. The soil was slippery, and it was difficult to balance ourselves but after excavating for four months we finally dug the well. Several families benefitted from the well. Families who mocked my husband and me, now congratulated us for our efforts.

Even members of the upper caste families acknowledged me. My biggest reward was the clean water available for my children and for my village to drink – without any conditions of unpaid labour.

After all the hard work, I didn't want the well to go dry again. I raised this concern in one of our Pani Panchayat meetings. We decided to build a check-dam to collect rain water so that the water of the well could be recharged during monsoons. The land where we wanted to construct the dam was

owned by the Forest Department. Initially, they refused permission but after hearing the story of how I had dug a well, they were impressed and allowed us to build it. This time the entire village came forward to

help. The dam now provides water for irrigating over 1000 acres of land.



*Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan, a non-profit organisation based in Uttar Pradesh

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When I went against the diktat of powerful members of the village, people told me I will lose my life but I felt no fear. I was tired of the life we were leading. I am proud of the well I dug as my whole village got access to water from it. The work I did strengthened the position of women in our village. Now, even men seek my advice on new projects relating to our village.

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PARESHAMMA

29 YEARS

THAMBALLAPALLE, CHITTOOR, ANDHRA PRADESH

Pareshamma came from a dalit family and fell in love with an upper-caste man. Their parents disapproved and denied them of any support or inheritance. Villagers shunned them. Even so, she and her husband rebuilt their lives. Pareshamma chose to stay back and work to improve access to water and adoption of responsible farming in her village. She helped her village members get their due wages on water conservation work from the government. With support from her husband, she is changing cultivation habits of water intensive, chemically infested paddy to nutritious millets. A village that once ignored her today acknowledges her work and recognises her beyond her caste.

I was born to a dalit family in Gopedinne village of Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh. We were five siblings. Our source of income was from two and half acres of farm land where we cultivated groundnut and occasionally paddy as well. As the eldest among my siblings, I often helped my parents on the field. To support our family, my parents also worked as labourers making hay huts in Gopedinne. My father and his brothers fought over the farm because of which we shifted to Thamballapalle when I was in my fifth grade. My father enrolled me into Andhra Pradesh Social Welfare Residential School (APSWRS) in Durakayalakote. I completed my matriculation in this school, and this experience made me more confident.

“My parents always wanted us to have the best education possible. My mother sent me to an English medium school until my fifth grade so that I could learn English and get a respectable job in the future”

After my matriculation, I joined Indian Technical Institute (ITI) from 2006 to 2008. I didn't want to be a financial burden on my parents during this period. I worked in a dairy where I made 1500 rupees every month. During this time, I fell in love with a boy who belonged to an upper caste. Our parents didn't approve of our relationship, but we still got married in 2008. Unfortunately, both our parents stopped speaking to us after that. Wherever we went, people maintained a distance from us because of the “crime” we had committed. I realised that my husband and I had to find ways to support each other as there was no support from anyone around us. We had our first child in 2009 and another two years later. Until 2013, I took care of my two children, the household chores, and worked as an agricultural and construction labourer for money.

“Sometimes, I felt sad that I had to work as a labourer even after I had graduated from ITI, all because of my decision to marry someone from a different caste. But, I was determined to be an example of how it was fine to have an inter-caste marriage”

In 2015, a friend told me about an organisation* who worked on securing paid work for villagers through government schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). There was no discrimination based on caste or religion in this organisation. This motivated me to join their team as a community resource person.

In the first few months of my work, I was asked to monitor tank construction in a few villages of my Panchayat as we were in a water scarce area. I travelled to sixteen villages across the panchayat to monitor activities which included road and drainage construction. Previously, MGNREGS contractors were involved in corrupt practises and would cheat the villagers. They would collect work cards from the village members, get work done and pay them a fraction of their due wages. Village members grew wary of not receiving payments on time for their work, so they were very reluctant to work for this scheme. When I started working on these projects, I first ensured the villagers that everyone would get their money on time through regular meetings. During these meetings, I explained how their work would ensure better road connectivity, access to water and food apart from the income from labour. Soon, there was a surge in people working for the scheme.

After a year, I shifted my focus to agriculture in Thamballapalle. Tomato and paddy were the main crops growing in our region. Growing water intensive crops in a drought prone region had severely affected the groundwater table in my village. In 2016, I attended several programs on millet cultivation. We discussed the disappearance of millets from our diet over the past forty years. Millets also required lesser water than paddy or tomato. I wanted to work on making millets an important part of our agriculture and food again. But, I faced several challenges to bring this change. Millets didn't have a strong market to sell. Families were unwilling to shift from paddy, which had become the core of their diet. I started by educating my village members about the benefits of eating millets. To convince them, I said-

“We are not eating paddy, but pesticides. All our food has been chemically treated. The main reason for the higher occurrence of high blood pressure and sugar is the food we consume. Our elders stayed fit for so long because they ate healthy food. We should listen to our elders and go back to our traditional diet”

Soon, a few families started consuming millets. We then incentivised farmers by giving them seeds free of cost. There was one incident in the village where a well had dried mid-season putting farmers in huge debts. I told the other farmers to start adopting millets to avoid such incidents, as it required much

lesser water. Today, about 50 farmer families in the village Thamballapalle grow millets. Around 200 families out of 700 have made millets a part of their diet. There’s still a long way to go, but I feel we are on the right path.

The past two and a half years have earned me respect from my village members. People now look beyond my caste because of my work. I would like to go back to my village, Gopedinne. I want to grow millets on my farm and promote its consumption. I want my children to study whatever they feel like. They should always think through any decision but eventually should do what they feel is right.



*Foundation for Ecological Security, a non-profit organisation based in Gujarat

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If you tell someone they can’t do something, their ability and motivation dies. Time and again, I have thrived through challenges because of the support of people in my life. It was first my mother, then my husband, who constantly pushed me to achieve heights I never imagined I would have. I hope everyone finds the same love and affection in their lives

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LILABATI MAHATO

29 YEARS
DALKATI, WEST BENGAL

T rue grit and fearless persistence define Lilabati. She pursued her education despite no support from her family. When times were tough, she got going to secure her family's financial security. Her experience of hardship inspired her to take on development work in her village that would help other women. She inspired women to come together to build a pond that would secure their water needs despite immense political resistance and threat to her life.

My name is Lilabati Mahato and I grew up in Dalkati, West Bengal with a brother and a sister. Our family was poor and my parents required us to work on our field. I was a curious child with a keen interest in school. I knew that education would help me make something of myself and end our family's cycle of hardship. When I was in the 5th standard, my parents just couldn't spend on my school fees anymore. As I was the best student in my class, my principal chose to fund my education till the 10th standard. Unfortunately, I was made to withdraw from school at 16 as my parents wanted me to get married.

Post marriage, I moved to my husband's village in Dhobopuria. I settled into my new life reassured that my in-laws were supportive of my education. But as soon as I had my first daughter, the pressure to drop out of school started. I was driven to appear for my 11th standard exams, so I would cook and clean the house; put my little girl to sleep and cycle to school even as I was pregnant with my second daughter. I went on to study till the first year of college when my in-laws finally refused to take care of my little ones. They told me categorically that education would not help me raise my daughters and run the house.

2011 was the year that my pursuit of education came to an end. It was also the year when my in-laws told my husband that they couldn't support our family anymore. We had to separate from them and find a house of our own. Without many options for survival, we became farm labourers. Our lives were hand to mouth, and there was no financial security.

A year later, my husband moved to Tatanagar for work. Our financial condition was so exhausting that I started a savings group (self-help group) with other women. Our savings increased gradually over the next few years. My husband would also send money every month. I then took a small loan from my savings group to rent land in the village for cultivation. We could now grow our own food and filling our stomachs stopped

being a constant source of worry for me and my girls.

In 2014, a local organisation* came to recruit people from our village, who worked to promote new farming practices amongst farmers that save water. I was nominated for this position because I was the most educated in the village. I enjoyed learning how to prepare a field before sowing, how to keep moisture in the soil through applying mulch on top of the soil, how to nourish our soils with vermicompost and how to preserve groundwater

I would demonstrate these techniques on my own land and then teach women in my group and in my village. Soon, even the male farmers started to come to me to inquire about how to transplant seedlings and make vermicompost so that less water is needed for cultivation. We were making progress in saving water as a village.

I also took up the position of getting women together to demand their right to work under the government employment guarantee scheme. This scheme (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) MNREGA entitled us to 100 days of paid labour from the Panchayat to build water structures of our choice. Since the water levels in our village were declining, we needed to build a pond that would store water and allow it to gradually replenish the ground water table.

Due to vested interests, the Panchayat refused to fund our village pond. They started to threaten village members who petitioned to them, but this did not deter me. I organised a march with 500 women from Gopalpur village till the Panchayat of Shahu Piur. I held meetings for women from various villages where I would convince them of the importance of demanding their rights. We met twice a month for over two years before they were ready to march. The Panchayat initially tried to intimidate us but then in the face of our resolve they had no option but to hear us out. This show of courage and endurance

motivated other villages to demand their right to work from their respective Panchayats.

There was not a second where I felt scared about the challenges we were taking on as I had the support of women from my village. The Panchayat officials were quite agitated. They asked the women -

Who is this Lilabati, who had sent you on this march? We will root her out and take her head. The women calmly told them, “Forget her head, if you touch so much as the aanchal of her saree, you will see what we will do to you”.



*Professional Assistance for Development Action, a non-profit organisation based in Delhi

The women got their pond and adequate compensation for their work.

I have been getting people from my village to come together to work on different projects for 6 years now. Earlier, I was too scared to demand for my rights. Guilt and shame were often used to put me down and discourage me from working. Today, no one says anything even if I come home after 9 pm.

“

I want to put an end to the deprivation and indignity that women are made to go through. I want to help women earn a better living and emphasize the fact that women are strong and capable. They can achieve a lot if encouraged to do so. All I needed was some support, and this is all other women need too

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NEETU SINGH

24 YEARS

BASAWANPUR, SIDDHARTH NAGAR, UTTAR PRADESH

Neetu draws inspiration from her mother, a single parent who raised her family. She has fought societal norms to become the first girl in her village to get a bachelor's degree. When she got an opportunity to work as an agriculture professional; she broke another male bastion. Facing opposition from politicians and her village members did not stop her from working to improve the incomes of small farmers in her village. Today, she is financially independent, and, respected by women and men alike in her village. She has single-handedly transformed the way farmers in her village use water. Inspired by her, people have started sending their daughters to school.

I hail from Basawanpur, a village in Siddharthnagar (a flood-prone region in Eastern UP). I was only two years old when I lost my father, who worked as an assistant to the deputy director of agriculture. My mother is an Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker and that's how she supported our family of four. She always spoke of the importance of education. Rarely did girls from my village study after matriculation, but I wanted to continue my education after completing school. I walked eight kilometres to the nearest college every day to complete my Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Hindi in 2014. Although people questioned my mother's decisions, she persisted and ensured that I was the first girl from my village to complete a college degree.

While other friends from my college wanted to move to cities for better prospects, I wanted to stay back at Basawanpur to solve the many problems we faced - water being at the core of them. All the water bodies in my village were in extremely poor condition. Over the years, temperatures during the summer months had increased. The 7 ground bore wells in my village started drying up during these months. Farmers were compelled to draw water from a river which was very far from the village. The brunt of this shift was borne by women who had to now spend a lot of time sourcing water for family needs. Serendipitously as I finished college; I met an organisation* working on water issues in my village. I decided to join their team as a community resource person (CRP).

As a CRP, I was given extensive training on farming and water use practices. When I started, I wanted to focus on two issues: How could I improve the conditions of water and farming in my village and How could I empower women to become equal partners in decision-making?

I started by giving farmers suggestions to improve their rice cultivation methods. But I was often turned away as they thought – what can a girl teach us about farming? I realised that experienced farmers would change only if they saw the results for themselves. I

started practicing what I had learnt during my trainings on my own farm. I kept the soil moist instead of flooding my farm with water and planted seedlings ensuring that there was the right spacing between them. This set of practices is called SRI (system of rice intensification). It increased my farm yield and reduced the amount of water and fertilizers needed. Soon, a few farmers saw value in these practices and adopted SRI.

Women often spent more time than men on the fields but were not involved in farming related decisions. I started gathering women in groups of 15 in my village. They felt empowered to be in a social group where we discussed ways to improve our livelihoods. Simultaneously, I learnt how to shoot and edit films. I would show films on SRI during our group meetings. These films also helped me reach a larger group of women. In three months, 60 women adopted the practices I showed in the films on their farms. Through these experiences, I learnt how changing age-old beliefs and behaviour requires a lot of patience.

Today, 266 out of 310 women in my village are part of farmer groups. They are building consciousness on water use in their families. They have reduced the amount of ground water and use bio-fertilizers instead of chemicals on their farms. Farmers now grow crops in the summers too, which was extremely difficult earlier, by using techniques which require much lesser water. They have started measuring ground water levels and discuss them at village meetings. This shift has been a milestone in raising awareness about ground water depletion.

Despite the progress made in my village, challenges remain. I was the first girl of my village to step out of the house for work. As my influence grew, the male dominant society started rejecting my work. They were sceptical of my influence on other girls in my village as they opposed women working outside of their homes. Local political leaders also claimed that SRI was ineffective and provoked people against me. But after seeing the result of my work, my village members rejected the views of these politicians. This

filled my heart with hope and gratitude.

For my work, the block officials, the district administration, the agriculture department and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, have presented me with awards and appreciation. I now mentor 5 women professionals like me in seven Gram

Panchayats across my block. In the future, I would like to start my own organisation so that there can be more like us in my village, state and the country. I feel that it is very important to realise that no one is alone in their life. With grit and determination, the universe always finds ways to support one's dreams.



*PANI: People's Action for National Integration, a non-profit organisation based in Uttar Pradesh

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The most important change is that now girls are free from their societal restrictions. Looking at my story, they are now looking forward to studies and professional careers
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GEETA DEVI

39 YEARS
MANPUR, JHANSI, UTTAR PRADESH

Geeta Devi fought against feudal norms in her village that dictated that upper caste men would have control over access to water. With her husband's support, she took on the role of a Jal Saheli to help address the water challenges of her village. Geeta Devi organized women from her village to petition to the Water Board, the District Collector and right upto the Chief Minister's office to build new pipelines and taps. With her persistence, regular water supply for all communities in her village is now a reality. Lack of education did not hold her back as she worked with the belief that her children and her village deserved a water secure future. Someone had to step up.

I was born in Madora village near Orchha (Jhansi). My parents passed away when I was a child and my brother and I were raised by my uncle and his wife. I was very close to my brother and we cared deeply for each other. My uncle owned five acres of farmland where he cultivated groundnut, black gram, pulses and mustard. My brother and I did not attend school as we also worked on the farm. Not being able to go to school remains my biggest disappointment.

I got married at the age of 16 and moved to Manpur village with my husband. My husband was still studying when we got married. His family owned an acre of land and they cultivated mustard and seasonal vegetables. After sometime, my father-in-law passed away and my husband had to discontinue his studies to take care of his younger brothers. I ran the household and worked on the field too. Over a period of time, I gave birth to four children. I wanted my children to go to school and make something of themselves. I didn't want them to be farm labourers.

Manpur had severe water scarcity. There was only one pond in the village, which was usually dry because of low rainfall. **The Water Board had installed three handpumps; one was defunct and two were across the national highway. Due to heavy traffic on the highway, some women had met with accidents while trying to cross over and a few had died too.**

Only the upper-caste area in the village had water supplied through taps. They would sell water for upto Rs.100 a month. For several years we stayed under these dire circumstances.

In December 2016, an organisation* came to our village to work on water. I attended the meeting to know what I could do for relief from the water crisis in my village. The organization told us that they planned to make Paani Panchayats, where they would train us on water conservation methods. They would also choose some women to lead water projects in the

village. They called the women Jal Sahelis (water friends). My husband was in the meeting too and he motivated me work on water projects. I had always wanted the water situation in my village to improve for my children and others. I decided to become a Jal Saheli.

The organisation had sent applications to the Water Board office in Jhansi to improve the water condition of our village but never got a reply. In one meeting, we decided to organize a sit-in protest at the Water Board office in Jhansi. Along with some Jal Sahelis, I visited homes in our village and convinced people to join us in the protest. We mobilized a group of 50 women and went to Jhansi in 2017 to protest. When there was no response, we organized 250 women to protest outside the DM's office 7 times! Finally, we decided to file a report under the 'Jan Sunvai', which is an application to register complaints through a mobile phone. We used a colleague's phone to send our application to the CM's office in June 2018.

Within 9 days, people from the DM's office visited our village and the Water Board constituted a committee to start work. They came to survey the area. I was present with other Jal Sahelis and we helped draw the map where planned ponds, wells and handpumps were marked. We were ecstatic when the first pipeline was laid! Later, borewells were dug, water tanks were built and groups of 5 families were given 1 tap for their water supply.

When we started this work, people from our village would make fun of us. They said "what will you women achieve? This problem of water has existed from our forefather's times and nothing has changed till now."

When we went to Jhansi to submit applications or for protests, some villagers even tried to malign our character by spreading false rumors; but my husband always supported me and helped me carry on the work. Through our work, 4000 people have secure access to water through borewells and taps today.

When I got the opportunity to become a Jal Saheli, I remember thinking that if someone before us had considered doing something for the water crisis, our position wouldn't have been so dire today. I wanted to make things better for my children and for the

villagers. My eldest son works with a firm and the other three are in school. People recognize the work carried out by us Jal Sahelis. Ultimately, someone had to step-up and do something.



*Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan, a non-profit organisation based in Uttar Pradesh

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I am happy with the work we have completed but I also understand that there is a lot to be done. I don't shy away from hard-work. Going forward, I want to train more women on water management techniques. Women are the worst hit by a water crisis. I will do anything for water - even train people from far away villages, so they are aware of how to conserve and manage it.

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HEMALATHA REDDY

39 YEARS
MADANAPALLE, ANDHRA PRADESH

Hemlatha overcame the trauma of a childhood accident, moved away from her family, worked hard for a professional education and even took up a corporate career in Bangalore. But she felt she was missing something. She quit her job and began working with rural communities on water issues in Madanpalle area of Andhra Pradesh. She’s an expert at conducting simulation games in villages where farmers learn how their crop choices will impact water availability in the future. This prompts them to take collective action which they otherwise would have resisted. Hemlatha’s family may not approve of her choices, but she’s an independent spirit and her zest for water consciousness has found her a place where she belongs.

I was born in in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh. My father worked as a contractor with NTPC and later ran a fertilizer store. We also owned land where we grew paddy and groundnut. I loved working along with our farm laborers and nurtured a small patch which I cultivated. I had an elder sister and two younger brothers. My childhood was uneventful until the day I hurt my right hand with a knife cutter. All fingers in my right hand had to be amputated. The accident was traumatic for my mother and so my father sent me to his sister’s house to a nearby city, to complete my schooling. I felt lonely at my aunt’s house. She was nice, but her children would tease me. I missed being with my family and spent most of my time in seclusion.

Post school, I finished my post graduate studies in English and my MBA. Later that year, I picked up a job in Bangalore. I didn’t enjoy sitting in an office and changed a few jobs. In 2007, I heard of an organisation that worked with rural communities and decided to join them. Even though my profile didn’t include working with people directly, I was happy knowing that I could contribute to improving their lives.

In 2008, I joined the Foundation for Ecological Security to work on an agriculture project. **As I interacted with farmers, I began to realize the extent of their water challenges. Water is a farmer’s lifeline. With rainfall becoming erratic and groundwater getting depleted, I kept worrying - what will happen if their borewells dry up?** I spoke to my father regularly who expressed similar concerns.

Meetings with farmers would be late in the evenings after they returned from their day’s work in the fields. I didn’t mind the late hours or the long distances in congested state transport buses. In the village meetings, farmers talked about how they were digging deep for water and yet were not successful. They would talk about migrating to cities in search of work. A farmer once wept reminiscing a life in the past when water was enough. I was deeply moved by her predicament. Despite having land, she would now have to work for others.

I noticed that even though my project area was in the grip of water shortages for the past decade; farmers were still planting water intensive crops like paddy. In 2014, I got trained to help farmers make right choices for crops with the help of simulation games. Under these games, we created real life situations about crop choices and their impact on water and incomes. The games are highly interactive and soon farmers started treating me as one of their own. With the help of the games, we created awareness about water being a common resource and not any one person’s individual right. As farmers made choices of water intensive crops, they understood the impact on ground water and the residual availability for other farmers. We helped them understand how individual behavior and choices can impact the entire community. Farmers took deep interest in the games and came forward to participate with enthusiasm. It was a fulfilling experience to see how tangible results started emerging from the games. 3 villages banned digging borewells. Another three banned growing paddy in rabi crop season. Farmers come to me and tell me that they expect to see me wherever water games are played.

Creating a relationship of trust with farmers has been critical to address my region’s water challenges. When I facilitate the games, I become one of the farmers - talking their language and using local examples. It helps them connect with me and open up during the sessions. Solving water issues for one farmer or for one village or for a district will have a direct impact on addressing water issues at a larger level.

When I was moved away from my family after the accident, I missed them terribly. With the farmers in my project, I feel like I have got a new opportunity – to be with a different family, to be with people, to interreact as much as I want and help them where they need assistance. In the past 4 years, I have travelled to over 70 villages to conduct the water games, impacting the lives of over 1000 farmers. I feel like I am home.



*Foundation for Ecological Security, a non-profit organisation based in Gujarat

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I come from a conservative family. I left a corporate career to do this work knowing that it will come with a fair share of challenges and yet I love what I do. My extended family of farmers and the work I do for them fills up the void in my life and I want to continue doing it.

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AKTA SINGH

39 YEARS

LUCKNOW / FAIZABAD, UTTAR PRADESH

As a young girl, Akta Singh was deeply impacted by the discrimination women faced in an orthodox society. She draws her inspiration from her father who is a social worker and her grandfather who gave her the first opportunity to step out of her village to support a local school. Her husband stood by her as she set up PARAS, a non-profit foundation that works on women's issues and women farmers in a deeply feudal region of Eastern Uttar Pradesh. She set up a school to encourage parents to send their girls for education. Her foundation works with farmers (women and men) through a Resource Center to train them on water management techniques and help them reduce their irrigation costs. Akta works in some of the most challenging social contexts in India but she believes that women deserve an equal world. And she powers on...

I was born in 1979 in Bihar and grew up in a small village in Ambedkarnagar, Uttar Pradesh. I grew up in a large joint family with my parents and three siblings. My grandfather ran an organisation in the village that worked on social development projects. My father was a social worker. We had over three acres of land, which we cultivated with the help of farm labourers. Our needs were limited, and we were financially secure.

Even though my father and grandfather were in social work, the atmosphere at home was patriarchal and orthodox. My grandmother and my father's younger brother had the final say on household decisions. My father worked out of town and my mother was denied the right to make decisions for her own children. While both my brothers went out of the village to pursue higher education, my sister and I sat back at home after high school. From my childhood, I noticed that the work done at home by my mother and other women was never acknowledged. Women were financially dependent on their fathers and husbands.

I got married in 2002 and moved to Hyderabad. I wanted to pursue further studies, but my young son kept in poor health. I spent most of my time taking care of him. In 2004, we moved to Lucknow. When I expressed my desire to pursue a college education to my husband, he was supportive and encouraged me. During this period, I joined a non-profit organisation that worked for health awareness. It was my first experience of working in an office and on the field. Although I worked as hard as anyone else, I often felt held back as they weren't receptive to a woman's ideas. After sometime, I decided to quit and open my own NGO. Even though my family members weren't supportive of my idea, my husband backed me up – as he always has.

Having experienced gender discrimination, I was keen to work on women's empowerment. In 2005, I opened Paras Foundation in my grandfather's name. We chose Faizabad district near Lucknow to work with women farmers and village girls. As I had limited knowledge of the field, I joined a network of civil society organisations in Faizabad. We learnt how to

write proposals, manage accounts and conduct audits. It was a great learning experience and helped me further the work I wanted to do through my foundation.

I met many other NGOs and our foundation started working on small projects. During a research study, I found out that there was a high rate of school drop-outs amongst girls in our area. The study revealed that parents of the girls did not trust the school authorities with their safety. We applied for a grant and with the funds received, we opened a school. I personally went door to door convincing parents to enroll their daughters in our school. With our assurances, we build inroads of trust and now have a school with over 200 students. In our school, we take great care to inculcate the values of gender equality in children.

I worked extensively with women farmers to understand their issues. **In our area, men often migrate to cities in search of work and women shoulder the dual responsibility of their households and their farms. Women would be involved in all labour intensive aspects of cultivation like weeding which could cause debilitating damage to their health.**

We helped women farmers get machines that would help them remove weeds while standing and trained them to operate their equipment. This relieved women of significant drudgery and hardship.

There was no dearth of problems for our farmers. The cost of diesel to extract water through pumps was rising, making access to water a real challenge. Rising input costs made it even harder for women farmers to make ends meet. We created a Farmer Resource Centre to help all farmers (women and men) with farming inputs and advisories for growing crops using water saving techniques. We provided good quality seeds, organic fertilizers, pipes and other equipment for irrigation on nominal

rent. This significantly reduced water related costs for farmers while improving their production. I personally train farmers in

these sessions. We started with four Gram Panchayats and now work with over 4000 farmers of which 3000 are women.



*Paras Foundation, a non-profit organisation based in Uttar Pradesh

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When I decided to work, I knew it wouldn't be easy. I did face eve-teasing and other forms of intimidation, but I was convinced to carry forward. My primary motivation was to help women get their due. Gender discrimination that exists in our society is staggering. I decided to fight against it. With the support of my husband, I've challenged norms that hold women back and will continue to do so.

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NEETABEN ASHUBHAI PATEL

40 YEARS
DANG DISTRICT, GUJARAT

Neetaben experienced deep degrading poverty as a child. Borrowing clothes from the neighbours and working barefoot on farms as a laborer marked her young years. Yet, she strived to study and graduated in a programme on Rural Studies with the help of her supportive parents. Her own experience has been her driving force to dedicate her career to helping rural communities find their way out of poverty. As a professional working with a reputed development organisation in the Dangs area of Gujarat; Neetaben's work on water conservation and women empowerment has reached out to over 30,000 people – a mark of her life's commitment to the cause of restoring dignity to the poor.

I was born in Mograwadi village in 1978, in the Navsari district of Gujarat. My parents owned an acre of land where we grew crops for our own food. It was barely enough, so they worked as farm labourers to cover household expenses. My two brothers and I also worked as labourers- cutting grass, sugarcane and picking mangoes for twelve rupees per day.

Most of my childhood memories are marked by how little we had. Many a times, our family would borrow clothes to wear from our neighbors. I didn't have footwear and would work bare-feet in the fields. My only solace was school. I got good grades and was often rewarded with notebooks and stationary items. After 7th standard, I travelled to the nearby village of Ambhetta to pursue further education. Times were hard for my parents, but they supported my education.

In 1999, I finished school and was at a loss for what to pursue further. While I was working my way through this confusion, my grandfather informed me about a programme in Rural Studies. It was a residential program where food, uniform and books would be provided for free. I petitioned my parents to help me apply for this course. With great difficulty they put together Rs. 2000 to enroll and pay my first-year fee. I didn't want to burden them further, so I studied hard and won scholarships. My dominant thought was to work with a good organisation where I could earn to help my parents and the poor people of my area.

Post my graduation, I worked with a small organisation in Navsari. A good break came in 2002, when I interviewed with AKRSP and joined them. With my income, I could finally help my parents. At work, I got the opportunity to work in villages, helping them address their issues in ways I wished someone had for my village and family while I was growing up.

In 2008, in the village of Kambodia, there was an acute water crisis. There was no water to drink or for simple household chores. I helped the villagers draw out a plan to install water supply channels. They put up the proposal with the Panchayat but it was shot down. The Panchayat did not like the idea of people

proposing solutions. They were used to petitions and pleas. When our original plan fell through, I led a group of village women to approach the Panchayat.

For the first time ever, women from the entire village came together to talk to the Panchayat, forcing them to sanction the plan. This helped more than 200 households to get regular water supply. Till then, the water committee of the Panchayat didn't include women. After this protest, the Panchayat passed a resolution and handed the water committee to the women to run.

In another village, a biased Sarpanch wouldn't allow women to install a handpump. He did it to assert his authority and didn't care about families that were suffering. The funds were not even from the Panchayat budget as the Mahila Vikas Mandal had provisioned for the handpump installation. I tried reasoning with him, but he threatened me with dire consequences. Other villagers also asked me to step away. I got all the women from the village together and confronted the Panchayat. Our persistent protest ensured that the handpump was finally installed and the entire village benefitted from it.

In 2013, I was a Cluster Manager. Around that time, I came across three villages in Subeer block, where people were facing acute water problems because their check dams were broken. These were old structures built by the government. They would fill up only during the monsoon. With resources from the organisation and contributions from village members for shramdaan, we repaired the dam. It now helps in irrigation, recharging ground water, meeting drinking needs of cattle and household chores. More than 2500 people benefit directly from the dam.

I have a deep connect with the communities I work with – my roots belong to this land. Having lived in similar circumstances as a young child, my biggest reward is when the problems of a village get solved.



*Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (India), a non-profit organisation based in Gujarat

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I knew that marriage will pose a problem with the kind of work I wanted to do. I am independent and had I been a man, I wouldn't be questioned for working late or expected to take permission for looking after my parents financially. I wanted to establish that a woman can lead a life of her choice too, so, I never married. I want to continue helping people solve their issues and be a role model for young girls.

”



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The idea of writing **Women for Water** came through the course of many field visits as we interacted with farmers, village professionals and our NGO partners. It took effort on the part of many team members in our partner network across the country to make this book a reality. We would like to acknowledge their contribution and their immense patience with us!

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India has
100 million women farmers.

They're the largest force anywhere in the world to combat a galloping water crisis. Do reach out to us to know more about how you could support them.



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We are constantly struck by the incredible women we meet in the course of our work at Hindustan Unilever Foundation. We're also puzzled by the fact that the mainstream narrative is muted in recognition and support of women as farmers, professionals and entrepreneurs working at the intersection of water and agriculture.

The idea of a book on women and their inspiring journeys of change came when we realised that others need to hear these stories too! Many adventures later, the book is in your hands. We hope it will spark a conversation and action to generously support women as they evangelise solutions for a more water conscious and secure world.

Spanning young women, mothers, grandmothers; their stories would be incomplete without the men who supported them – their fathers, husbands, brothers. The villagers who rallied with them. The NGOs who mentored them. We'd like to acknowledge all of them.