

Gopi Devi: I can lead a life of dignity

The context

The story of Gopi Devi etches out clearly the challenges that disabled persons face. In this case a disabled person is a woman, who experienced four-fold barriers of gender, disability, poverty, and last but not the least low educational attainment and skill. In the context of the pandemic, these challenges became even more life threatening. However, it is at this stage that the Water for Women Project played a very important role. Not only did Gopi get the unflinching support of the Community Management Committee (CMC) and the project team but also a platform to speak up and reach out to and sensitise many key stakeholders and leverage the much-needed opportunity to ensure that the WASH system commits itself to disability inclusion in ways that has never happened before. It is in this context that this case study based on Gopi's testimony assumes significance.

Daily predicaments

Gopi Devi is a 45 year old woman who lives with her husband, Laxman Singh in Patel Nagar, ward 19, Jaipur. The couple have two children, a son and a daughter, aged 15 and 18 years, respectively who take care of their parents.

She is disabled and cannot move around without assistance. To support her family Gopi Devi took a job in a charitable trust as a cook. However, during the pandemic, people stopped ordering food from the Trust and slowly work came to a complete standstill. To add to her misfortune, in April 2021 her husband Laxman Singh, a three wheeler auto-rickshaw driver had a massive road accident, which left him crippled and bedridden.



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Gopi, reached out to the CMC members and they began supporting them in their activities as much as possible. However, now with both Gopi and Laxman physically challenged, Gopi found it difficult to use the toilet, take a bath or take care of her daily routine activities. With the children away at school there was no one to take care of the couple.

Gopi recalls, "I would not eat anything till my daughter returned from school for fear of soiling my clothes. Earlier, my husband used to look after me and help me clean up but in the present circumstances this was not possible, and this left me feeling helpless and dejected.

“It was at this time that my friends in the CMC and the CFAR team helped me fill out an application for disability pension and supported me in securing a wheelchair from Bhagwan Mahavir Viklang Sahayata Samiti. My husband was also given a walking stick to help him move at least short distances and use the toilet. This helped us a great deal.

“But we still find it difficult to make ends meet. Since, both of us have lost whatever little steady earnings we made and our savings dwindled to nothing, I joined the Radhika Self-help Group and learnt how to make herbal incense sticks and mosquito repellents. I put all this in a bag, hang the bag on my wheelchair and sell the products door-to-door. The local shopkeeper extended support and gave me raw material to make papad and chips. I pack all this and sell the wares in the nearby shops. All this has helped me earn Rs. 1000-1500 a month to take care of my household needs.



“However, one problem which both I and my husband faced was in using the toilet. Both of us cannot squat on the Indian toilet that we have at home. This was something we were unable to share with anyone and it left us feeling ashamed and depressed.

“Much to our surprise, on World Toilet Day, November 2021, an elevated fibre toilet stool was handed to us by Shri Ashish Kumar, Deputy Commissioner, Jaipur Municipal Corporation. Along with this, I also received a portable mini hand washing station unit in which a one litre plastic bottle can be attached and hands can be washed. We were informed that the portable toilet seat was manufactured by SATO and many charitable people donated small amounts of money so that disabled and needy persons like us can be helped to lead an independent and dignified life.



“When I reached home, and showed the toilet seat and hand washing unit to Laxman he felt very happy and relieved. We are both now able to put the stool over the Indian toilet seat and use the toilet without any assistance and help.

“We have kept the mini handwashing unit near our bed so that we can wash our hands as frequently as possible as this small unit enables us to wash our hands 18 times in one litre of water.

“We will now rebuild our lives, earn money, take loan from the government and start afresh....”

Post script: Gopi Devi and Laxman Singh are not the only people whose lives have been impacted by the Water for Women Project. In both cities, the project till date has reached out to 1360 persons with disabilities with WASH services such household toilets, drinking water, doorstep waste

collection and desludging services and supported 294 with social entitlements such as pension, identity cards, welfare entitlements and assistive aids.

