

Warm Greetings to all of you!

World Toilet Day is celebrated by the United Nations since 2013 to focus on the global crisis of 3.6 billion people still living with poor-quality toilets that ruin their health and pollute the environment. India, under the 'Swachh Bharat Mission' launched in 2014, started working on building toilets for every household and declared itself Open Defecation Free in 2019. This herculean task could not have been possible if community leaders like Anjum Shaikh from Mumbai would have not taken it upon themselves to bring sanitation home.

Anjum Shaikh, a CII Foundation woman exemplar from the 2020 cohort identified and chose to work on the problem of accessing toilets, which we all face at least once in our lifetime, but comfortably choose to ignore.

The M-East Ward slums in Mumbai, where Anjum lived, was a living example of the deteriorating sanitation standards of a developing India. On every visit to the toilet, someone would have to accompany a woman to stand guard outside the toilet. Moreover, a minimum wait of 30 minutes in the queue outside the toilet was common. The loss of time for many women was also accompanied by lewd remarks and hooliganism which made the experience even more painful.

A study by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) said that though the benchmark for toilets, adopted as part of India's 'Swachh Bharat Mission' is one toilet for 25 women or 30 men, M-East Ward has 190 people to one toilet seat. **For many, it's unimaginable to even think of its terrible impact on the health of women and children, says Anjum.** Something as basic as the right to safe hygiene was never looked at by the community as a necessity and the absence of this basic right was fast becoming the new norm.

Anjum's frustration crossed all boundaries when one of her friends from the community was physically abused by her partner for spending more than half an hour outside the house. Her friend had simply been waiting in the queue for her turn in the community toilet. Her own experience of being harassed as she and her friends waited in queues to access toilets made her desperate to find a solution to this problem. She realized that the inaccessibility of toilets was a major reason why women were feeling unsafe in the slums and had a range of health issues.

From here started Anjum's journey of providing women of her community access to safe sanitation. Anjum supported a need assessment with her women's groups on toilet necessities in the M-East Ward. Of the total 449 community toilet blocks in the ward, 37% were closed and unusable at the time of the survey. She realized that this was the reason for the increased pressure on existing toilets, creating a huge hygiene and sanitation issue. Hungry to achieve her goal, Anjum developed creative methods like Shok Sabha (Mourning Meeting) of a toilet and mobilized the community to attend these events.

Many such activities were conducted to win over the community and gradually the community started reciprocating Anjum's efforts. Once the survey was over, Anjum with the community members, approached the Municipal ward and created a cycle of follow-ups with them but with no results. Finally, she designed an 11-day campaign where the community did a candle march on the death of the toilet. The campaign reached the ward commissioner's office, which prompted the authorities to approach Anjum.

Anjum's consistent efforts ensured the construction of new toilets in the ward and repairs with a 24*7 source of electricity and water, prioritizing safe sanitation and hygiene for 2000 women.

Anjum is an example of strong leadership and is committed to working towards ensuring safe hygiene in all other slums of Mumbai through behaviour change communication. To support Anjum in her journey of spreading awareness on sanitation and health for the larger community, write to us at:

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