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latrine, women, sanitation, infrastructure

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In the summer of 2013, I traveled to Dhaka, Bangladesh to directly observe the relationship between gender advancement and national improvements in sanitation practices. My research and experiences in Bangladesh have led me to the conclusion that, while a great deal has been accomplished in terms of improved sanitation, further improvements cannot be made unless the critical importance of Bangladeshi women, including their sanitation needs and their pivotal position as role models of sanitary behavior, are placed at the forefront of Bangladesh’s, and the world’s, sanitation stratagem. I believe that one of the most effective tools to support this empowerment of women and to further Bangladesh’s sanitation development is the use of community-based theatre as a means for creating powerful, positive, and sustainable change.

Introduction

It’s a dangerous business going to the bathroom. At least in Bangladesh it is. Since its first days as a newborn nation Bangladesh has been embroiled in a war, a war for the health and well being of its population. This struggle has not been fought on battlefields but in the fields of rural communities, and in the confines of latrines. Over the past forty years Bangladesh has had a great many victories in the ‘War for Sanitation,’ successes earned through increasing access to health education, latrine construction, and community development programs encouraging better sanitary practices. Yet, even though Bangladesh has been a leader in achieving the Millennium Development Goal to improve sanitation practices, the war is not yet won.

Sanitary practices relating to personal hygiene, waste management, and environmental cleanliness are the intimate by-products of any nation. Only twenty years ago, 34% of Bangladesh’s population practiced open defecation, using nearby fields instead of latrines (UNICEF/WHO, 2014).

Today Bangladesh has reduced open defecation rates to less than 3% of the population (UNICEF/WHO, 2014). According to the United Nations Development Program, Bangladesh is on track to have 100% of its population using an improved drinking water source and using improved sanitation facilities by 2015, fulfilling an MDG that many neighboring nations will fail to reach (UNDP, 2013). This accomplishment is especially impressive given that the United Nations estimates that 2.5 billion people in developing countries still lack access to improved sanitation facilities (United Nations, 2014). However, sanitation improvements require 100% community participation in order to be considered both sustainable and successful. Bangladesh, while a leader in the sanitation movement, still suffers a loss of U.S. $4.2 billion a year because of health related causes resulting from inadequate sanitation (Barkat, 2012). How has Bangladesh managed to achieve such a momentous level of success while still experiencing a deficit? How can such progress be reconciled with such loss and what can be done?

Intrigued by this paradox of struggle and success, I traveled to Bangladesh in the summer of 2013, looking to understand the source of this dichotomy.

After spending some time meeting and interviewing key figures in the sanitation movement, I realized that one of the deeper issues was not one of success, but the cultural
context within which success was being measured. Sanitation is often considered in terms of the ‘average’ person’s experience and interactions. However, the ‘average’ person upon whom these measures are taken is based upon the needs and experiences of only one of two parts of Bangladeshi society: the male part. It is through a male lens that daily life and health and sanitary needs are measured and addressed. It is the male experience that defines the concept of improved sanitation. However, sanitation does not exist in a genderless vacuum and as such, it must also been seen through the lens of women, and not just men. While there have been significant improvements, my time in Bangladesh revealed this to be at the heart of what limits the total success of Bangladesh’s sanitation efforts.

Understanding the Challenge

Sanitation is a central component of the daily lives of women. It is not just about access to latrines; it’s about who is actually able to use the latrines. Sanitation is not just about clean drinking water; it’s about clean water for cooking, clean water for laundry, for personal washing. Sanitation is not just about defecation, it’s also about menstruation. Sanitation is first and foremost an issue crucial to women.

For women, sanitation does not stop at the bathroom door. Rather it is a socio-economic, political, and cultural issue, which drives all aspects of society for women. Lack of access to toilets can limit girls from attending school, which further limits their access to financial independence and political influence. It increases the risk of gender-based violence, and leads to increased disease for both women and the rest of the community. These factors are all well known, and many point to the advances Bangladesh has made towards gender equity. Yet there remains a telling fact: women comprise only 14% of the leadership in the water and sanitation sector (Cavill, Parkinson, and De Vette, 2012).

While conducting my research, the problematic nature of this statistic made itself evident. Almost unilaterally across the organizations I met with, both governmental and private, the leaders of each project were male. In our discussions, the issues belonging to women were bundled up into comments about the community at large, but problems involving women’s health were not mentioned; words like menstruation were avoided at all costs and any indications regarding the personal hygiene standards of women were glossed over. When attempting to address the complexities surrounding sanitation, women are swept up as a part of the larger project, rather than seen as a distinct priority. Projects in this space are plentiful, while those that focus only on the relationship between women’s needs and sanitation are much more sparse. Despite the well-established sector connection between societal gender roles and sanitation, the processes and issues regarding women’s needs specifically remain a taboo subject.
Even though Bangladesh has acted as a leader in women’s empowerment, sanitation is still viewed in terms of the male experience (Khatiwada, 2014). Men and women do not experience sanitation in the same way, as there are both biological and sociological differences. Men have priority access to latrines, and often will not use a latrine that a woman has used because menstruation makes her, and thus the latrine, unclean. Men do not risk gender-based violence by using a community latrine, nor do they have to feel shame if there are cracks in the walls of the latrine from which they can be seen. Men certainly do not have to address the issues of how to clean and dry rags that are used in lieu of sanitary napkins. These and other issues directly relating to women are sometimes swept under the rug of ‘total sanitation access’. Yes, the village has a latrine, but are women able to use it whenever they want or need it? Are the issues of menstruation and other female bodily functions incorporated as a key element in sanitation programs?

Though women are being included, their specific needs and issues oftentimes remain unaddressed. Previous studies clearly demonstrate that women’s involvement correlates to successful and sustainable programs. For example, a study performed by the International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC) of community water and sanitation projects in 88 communities in 15 countries, found that women’s participation in these projects was strongly related to the effectiveness of said projects (UNWater, 2006). However, the sanitation movement needs to push beyond working toward women’s participation to mandating women’s leadership in directing the purpose and deployment of sanitation initiatives. Sanitation projects are launched with the aim to benefit the communities within which women reside, but are often not created for the specific benefit of women. This means that women’s sanitation and health needs are considered of secondary importance to the needs and health of the community at large.

As one Bangladeshi government official confided to me, for the success of a sanitation initiative, it is essential that women’s issues come first. That means more than including them, it means more than putting toilets in the community. It’s not enough to only give women clean drinking water and latrines, for this will only address the symptoms, but not the larger illness that remains. For example, even though a woman is provided arsenic free water and a latrine, her sari will drag on the ground and could pick up the germs off the latrine floor. It will trail behind her in the mud and the dirt. She won’t mind that her hem is dirty; after all, her hands are clean. But she will trail this sari throughout the house and she will use it to wipe her children’s face and even to clean her own face and hands. When this happens, all the effort that went into building that latrine and all the education about hand washing will be for nothing simply because no one thought about a woman’s sari when creating programs for better sanitary practices. This issue reflects the deep failure to look at issues like sanitation through gender analysis. The issues around sanitation are not limited to just giving a latrine or two to the community, but more how does a woman’s lifestyle, her roles, and her cultural interactions interplay with her needs.

Gender equality in sanitation is not created by ignoring the differences between men and women but by honoring the difference in their needs and experiences, particularly understanding the sanitary requirements of women (Fong, Wakeman, and Bhushan, 1996). Unfortunately, these are highly taboo subjects. How do you discuss and break stigmas that are not talked about but must be talked about in order to move forward? How do you operate within cultural norms without disrespecting them? You have to have a platform that adapts to the individual environment, a platform that is flexible and able to internalize change as fast as the world within which it operates. Theatre is one surprising secret weapon that is emerging, a tool that may serve to help other nations struggling with sanitation.
Facilitating Change Through A Creative Solution: Theatre

Time and time again, theatre has used to provide a forum wherein difficult and even taboo subjects can be broached, where ideas can be formed, and where change can begin. The theatre can help people ask forbidden questions, consider the world from a different view, and give a voice to those who traditionally cannot speak.

Too often, sanitation education initiatives attempt to reach out to communities via the men of the household. While these programs are successful in creating informative programs for these men, there is no trickle down effect for the other members of the community. In rural areas, Bangladeshi men have a higher tendency to travel for work and are often away from the house for extended periods of time. They do not experience the consequences of the sanitation status of their villages and homes the way women do. They also have social priority. Village latrines may exist, but the community often only permits the men to utilize them. So it is the women who still struggle.

In Bangladesh, one of the most impactful organizations I met with was not an aid organization or a government program but a children’s show: Sisimpur. This wonderful program is a part of Sesame Street Workshop, the global extension of the Sesame Street program in the United States. Sisimpur is the Bangladeshi branch and they produce television and live theatrical. One of the main characters of Sisimpur is a girl muppet named TukTuki.

According to the team at Sisimpur, outside of America, nobody watches Sesame Street more than the Bangladesh people. They especially watch TukTuki. When I spoke to community leaders at Sesame Street they explained to me that TukTuki was so significant because she was able to break down barriers. By placing a female muppet at the center of their program, they could teach people about sanitation as a whole by teaching them about sanitation for women, shifting the focus to topics such as food handling, child care, women’s health issues, etc. The taboo could be spoken of, the unmentioned could be mentioned and thinking could change. TukTuki allowed the audience to see women as the central point in the war of sanitation and that a community’s health is determined by the health of its women.

A significant component of Sisimpur’s outreach efforts includes taking the stars of their programs, such as TukTuki, on live performance tours throughout Bangladesh’s regional villages. These productions consistently result in a major turnout from the local communities. Whole families attend; mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and the children, both boys and girls. What occurs during these performances is a feat unmatched by any of the pamphlet or literary or material driven sanitation campaigns: a successful reeducation of the population. The reason behind this success is very simple; it’s because those attending the performance don’t see themselves as attending an informational session. They are simply going with their children to see the famous TukTuki and friends live; they are just watching a children’s play. Embedded in this is the immense power of theatre for young audiences, of it’s potential for accessibility, transformation, and emulation. In this setting, gone are the stigmas surrounding the topic of sanitation and the social constructs that prohibit education from being evenly demonstrated across the community. Sisimpur’s live performances offer a safe communal forum where the whole family, the whole village unit, come together to change their mental paradigms regarding sanitation as a whole community. All this with TukTuki at the helm.

At Sisimpur, defecation and menstruation are topics spoken of with ease and importance. The inability to speak something, whether it be
an idea or a word, gives it power. Sisimpur, a children’s program, speaks aloud what many aid and governmental workers cannot bring themselves to openly discuss. They are the craftsman of a space that allows adults and children to learn and evolve together. As a theatre maker and a proponent of the social obligation of theatre, I think that Sesame Street and friends are demonstrative of theatre at its finest. They are so much more than a kids show, they are a revolutionary force for a better world. The power behind Sisimpur is its recognition of theatre as a neutral forum where individuals come together to form temporary communities. This muppet show is not simply a form of colorful entertainment, it defies social convention by acting as a place where the masses come to experience and redefine the personal. It is the neutrality of the theatrical environment that allows it to serve as a tool for creating positive sustainable change.

In the theatre, there is no question of a right or wrong performance. It is not a place for condemnation or judgment. In fact, the theatre is one of the few sacred places in the world that universally promotes dialogue and growth. Theatre not only encourages us to admit our weaknesses, it shows that those weaknesses are part of what makes us people. No individual, and certainly no nation, is without its weaknesses or mistakes.

What is essential about the theatre is that it creates a temporary, intimate microcosm that teaches us where to go and how to improve from those mistakes that make us all so very human.

Bathroom behaviors are a very private and intimate act. So are our bathroom spaces. A latrine is not simply a latrine, it is a political space, a political body. And women are being denied access to that body.

Theatre can be used globally as a tool to for women to reassert their autonomy to that body, to their bodies.

**Conclusion**

At its inception, Bangladesh was described by the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, as a ‘basket case’ nation (Nasir, 2010). Forty years later, Bangladesh is still here. It is not a failed nation, but it is failing in the same way so many nations across the globe are failing: it is failing its women. While Bangladesh has made significant strides in gender equality and education, there is a difference between the story the statistics tell and the real world experiences of Bangladeshi women. This is not just a Bangladeshi problem but a global one. The road to empowerment starts with the basics, it starts with sanitation, and it starts with muppets on a stage.

The missing stories of Bangladesh’s women means half of the country’s story is missing. Sisimpur is working to create a narrative for these women and to give them a voice. For Bangladesh to continue its success it needs to speak of the women who have been harmed, held back and chained into poverty because they don’t have a socially acceptable place to go to the bathroom. Theatre is the tool for telling those stories. It is the tool for change.
Victoria Cano is a recent Northwestern alumna, where she graduated with a double major in Theatre and English, a minor in Gender Studies, and a concentration in playwriting. Recently, Victoria returned to Philadelphia where she served as an assistant to the Artistic Associate at Theatre Horizon, and as a collaborator on ‘The Imagine No Homelessness’ project.

Victoria has worked abroad in numerous countries. She worked as development associate for a production company at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where she also earned a certificate in ‘Business in the Arts’ from the University of Edinburgh. In 2013, Victoria traveled to Dhaka, Bangladesh on a grant from Northwestern University to investigate the relationship between gender and sanitation development. From her research, Victoria developed a play, ‘Converting to Bangladesh’ which will have its world premiere with the Artemisia Theater Company in Chicago in September 2015.

Victoria will be pursuing an MA in Classical Acting for the Professional Theatre at the London Academy of Music and Drama in the fall of 2015. Victoria’s words to live by are “Your life is an occasion. Rise to it.” She can be reached at victoria.icano@gmail.com.

Works Cited


