



**SEWA Bharat**

All India Federation of Self-Employed Women's Association

# “Building a Strong Community”

## A Case Study of Drainage and Road Construction in Mubarakpur, Patna

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## SUMMARY

In informal settlements, service provisioning is either limited or bypassed. Lacking awareness of rights, basic infrastructure services, and procedures to seek these reduce one's agency as a citizen. Existing norms and standards, as well as domestic roles within households, mean that women bear a greater brunt.

The WOW project works with these women and communities in Patna and Delhi. ZAA aims to improve the working conditions of women to enhance their economic empowerment and increase women's collective and individual agency in decision making and use of assets.

In Mubarakpur, Patna, lack of drainage and concrete roads created adverse conditions for working women; streets were often waterlogged creating difficulties in movement. This case study narrates a story of positive change. Earlier, women would ask with a sense of despair, '*what change will come?*', but now they have emerged confident and decisive. For women in Mubarakpur, collectivisation has helped garner positive results, resulting in an empowered community eager to bring improvements in their area.

## CASE STUDY

Mubarakpur, a recently urbanized area within the Danapur municipality administration is highly inadequate and deficient in basic infrastructure, making it one of the worst-off settlements in Patna. "What will change this time?" was a question field mobiliser like Pushpa ben were confronted with upon their arrival in Mubarakpur. Over the last 30 years, the lack of government engagement and infrastructure development has created a sense of pessimism among the residents.



**Figure 1-** Women workers in Mubarakpur had to contend with flooding of streets even outside of rainy season.

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Therefore, the first challenge faced by SEWA was creating an atmosphere of hope. Meetings were run with the help of local agevans<sup>1</sup> and focused on listening to and understanding the priorities of female residents and whether limited infrastructure services impacted their work. Creating a channel of communication with the women built trust and attracted more women to participate in community meetings. Slowly, their initial hesitation was taken over by a newfound enthusiasm.

The meetings revealed that improper drainage systems and damaged roads were particularly problematic as they resulted in perpetual waterlogging. Unable to cope with rainfall, Mubarakpur was overwhelmed during the 2019 floods. Flooding brings with it an additional range of problems such as disease, restriction in movement, and difficult working conditions. While these problems affected the entire community, it brought more challenges to the lives of women, and especially those who were gainfully employed. At home, women's duties increased as sanitation work fell primarily upon their shoulders. Moreover, in Mubarakpur, approximately 60% of women work outside the home, mostly as domestic workers making impairments in the ability to travel quickly and safely particularly challenging. Due to the informality of their work, women are extremely vulnerable to being fired for minor issues such as late arrival at work or staining on garments: flooding exacerbated this vulnerability. Manju ben says that "things always become more difficult for women, with logistical difficulties [from flooding] ... we are criticized both at the workplace and home if we get late"; both domestic and economic labor is made more difficult by inadequate infrastructure services. What needed to change became clear, the next stage was to develop a plan of how to bring this about.

While women from the community understood the need for improved drainage and roads, SEWA's training sessions helped them understand which government agencies to approach and how to hold local authorities accountable. Initially, a couple of women approached the ward councilor with their demands. This meeting was not particularly fruitful. Perhaps the councilor felt that he did not need to take issues raised by a few women seriously. As a result, only disinfection work was undertaken and the root of the problem remained unaddressed. In response, SEWA's field staff mobilized the community and 15 women returned to the councilor

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<sup>1</sup> Agevans are grassroots women leaders who exhibit a natural tendency to take on a leadership role in their communities. They are the driving force of SEWA's organizing and advocacy efforts.



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with a formal set of demands; this time they received greater acknowledgement and the flood water was pumped out of the settlement. Furthermore, garbage collectors regularly began to visit the area. While this indicated a growing engagement with the citizens of Mubarakpur, long-term solutions to the issues faced by working women due to flooding were yet to be resolved.

With the help of SEWA, the community identified three clear needs: a sewerage network, a drainage network, and paved roads. Community members continued to exert pressure on the councilor by visiting him in groups, and in December 2019, they issued multiple formal letters to him stating their needs. Subsequently, they wrote to and met the Executive Officer (EO) at the Danapur Municipality as well as the officer in charge of waste collection. Post this meeting, the tender process for road construction and drainage construction was undertaken. Measurements were taken and excavation for drainage began with the promise that concrete tunnels will be installed to ensure proper drainage of water. Road construction work is currently underway with ballasts currently being laid. Through this process, it was learned that generating a formal set of demands and demonstrating persistence are key factors in ensuring that women, and their demands, are taken seriously.



**Figure 2-** Excavation work for the drainage network has taken place.

Not only do infrastructural improvements promise to alleviate some of the barriers that have limited the economic prospects of women in Mubarakpur, but the experience of engaging with government authorities has also brought some more immediate results: social empowerment. Lalpari ben, a community leader, reflects on the newfound respect for women in official settings. She says, “earlier, we were not well received or heard enough outside, and now when we visit government offices, they offer us chairs and water too”. She adds that earlier, men would visit government offices to get work done, but through autonomously addressing issues, uniting as leaders, and participating in advocacy work, women have challenged existing narratives in the community. Their identity as agents of change is confirmed by stories, told with pride, by male

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members of the community seeking the advice of women (trained under WOW) for accessing local officials. Moreover, women are not only adopting a more active role in settling issues between the community and officials but in resolving intra-community conflicts. Demonstrating this is Manju ben's case. Manju's relatives were resisting the installation of a legal electricity connection - the disagreement turned violent, and she was badly injured. In response, a group of women came to support her and took her to the hospital. Later, the issue was brought to the attention of the ward councilor and police, which later intervened in the matter.

Halfway through the project's implementation phase, there are visible instances of the strengthened women's collectivization which allow for the monitoring and implementation of infrastructure services as well as the pursuit of social welfare schemes from governments. The building of strong community relationships has been on display during the COVID outbreak. Agewans have undertaken the role of ration distributors during the lockdown, a vital role delegated to them via ward councilors. This shows that community representatives (in the form of agewans) have gained in leadership and confidence and are now acting as a bridge between citizens and the government.

As Pushpa ben, a field mobiliser, says: "It's easy to break one finger but when all fingers come together and form a fist, it gets difficult to break that." When SEWA began working in Mubarakpur they were not met by a cohesive community but one that had become fragmented. The coming together of the women as the 'fingers', to take action collectively as the 'fist', has created a newfound strength. There will, undoubtedly, be new problems that residents of Mubarakpur will have to face, but now the community has the confidence to address them.

Perhaps then, that is the answer to the women's initial question of: "what will change this time?" It is the community that has transformed into a collective force. It was through learning to use their collective strength that they were able to create an environment in which women workers, their needs, and contribution to the community, are more valued and respected. Whilst this is clearly a hugely positive and encouraging example of SEWA successfully sharing its culture of collective mobilization, it is crucial to highlight that this is not the end of the process. Road works are not yet complete. Infrastructure work has been halted, due to heavy rainfall and COVID, and the moment that has been built could easily be lost. However, there are signs like the growing leadership of agewans which create optimism that the work will be finished. A further test of the community's resilience will arise when SEWA withdraws from actively mobilising in the area,

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leaving the community to fight their battles on their own strength. While the WOW interventions to advocate for road and drainage improvements in Mubarakpur are described almost universally in terms of success, there are still challenges for SEWA, and Mubarakpur, to contend with and learn from. Empowering female workers will be an ongoing challenge but now it is one that Mubarakpur, and the more united community within, is more ready, willing, and able to address.