

THE SCIENCE OF DIGNITY: A REVIEW OF HEALTH, SAFETY, AND SOCIAL MEANING IN RURAL SANITATION

SK NOOR MAHAMMAD^{1*} AND AMIRAH NASRIN¹

Traditional sanitation systems in rural areas are often viewed primarily as a public health or technical matter, but this review of the literature will look at the health, safety, and social implications of proper sanitation. This will specifically look at how proper sanitation reduces disease incidence, protects the vulnerable rural populations, and ensures that health and safety are met. Factors surrounding the cultures and behaviours associated with using and accepting toilets often influence the extent to which people accept the use of toilets within the environment in which they live. When considering and implementing a rural development project, an understanding of community identity and objectives should be considered in addition to engineering considerations even when all technical aspects of toilet design have been met.

Introduction

Sanitation has been traditionally seen as a technological aspect to improve health and promote public safety as per public health officials. However, In less developed areas, where daily life, including use of toilets and sanitary systems, is viewed as an extension of cultural and familial traditions, toilets are much more than a place to defecate or urinate they are an extension of a person's dignity and self-respect, a private and intimate place, a safe refuge from danger (fear of being attacked by animals when travelling to the bush to eliminate), and a social identification (fear of not being able to use a latrine due to menstruation). Examples of these types of experiences include the woman who has to walk to the bush to use a latrine very early in the morning due to fear of being attacked, a young girl who is embarrassed to go to school because she cannot use the latrine, and an older resident who feels uncomfortable using the latrine after dark. If public health officials want to gain a better understanding of sanitation in rural communities, they need to develop models for delivering sanitary

services that include the relationship between health, safety, and social meaning. In developing these models' public health officials should think about: 1) the interrelationship among health, safety, and social meaning; 2) social inequity in relationship to sanitation; 3) individual motivations for continuing to use sanitation services; and 4) the best practices and innovative strategies for maximizing the effect of sanitation on the health outcomes of rural areas.

Sanitation and the Scientific Foundations of Rural Health

It is clear that a strong justification exists, scientifically, to provide sanitary facilities in rural areas. The nature of the sanitation system including the presence of contaminated drinking water, and of open defecation, etc. provides for the transmission of pathogens such as *Vibrio cholerae*, *Shigella* spp., rotaviruses and helminths¹ from the faecal waste of the rural population. The effect of this is even greater in rural areas because of the poor functioning of the health systems and the limited availability of safe water. A growing body of evidence that has come from low-income locations demonstrates that improved sanitation reduces the prevalence of enteric diseases, reduces the incidence of child stunting, and

¹ Assistant Professor, School of Law, Brainware University, Kolkata, India

* Corresponding Author: sknoorm2017@gmail.com

decreases mortality², as well as has a significant impact on the environmental health of communities, because poorly located pit latrines contribute to the contamination of groundwater in high-permeability soils³. However, the vast majority of scientific studies limit their consideration of toilet facilities to being a technical object, without consideration of the increasing understanding that the experience of inadequate sanitary systems produces very strong feelings of shame, exposure and the loss of dignity in users of those systems.

Safety and Bodily Security in Rural Environments

Women and girls' increased chances of victimization resulting from the nature of the social expectations surrounding sanitary and public safety when using sanitation facilities in many rural regions creates risk for them. East African studies have shown women had an increased likelihood of sexual assault, harassment, and animal attack when they travelled somewhere with limited visibility at night⁴. South Asian studies found women's behaviours in terms of sanitary practices were largely determined by the fear, modesty, and vulnerability factors inherent in women's position as vulnerable members of society⁵. The toilet becomes a place of security, protection from violence, and dignity for women rather than a means of convenience for relieving themselves. Many adolescent girls do not return to school after missing school due to sanitary facilities unavailability during menstrual periods⁶. This limited educational attainment continues to perpetuate the education inequity experienced by many adolescent girls. Men and older adults, as well as men and women with disabilities, also find safety to be a major concern with respect to public sanitation.

Social Meaning, Cultural Identity, and the Toilet as a Symbolic Object

While sanitation is rooted in the sciences, the actual implementation of sanitation in rural communities is based on the cultural values and practices of the people living in them. For example, in much of Africa and South Asia, there are deeply entrenched cultural beliefs that equate feces with dirtiness and therefore, people in these regions view toilets as incompatible with maintaining the sanctity of the home. As a result, even though some people may receive financial assistance to buy toilets, many people will not buy one because of the strong beliefs they hold⁷. Recent trends have shown that, in some modern villages, toilets are now associated with aspiration, progress, and status. For example, many younger people in these modern

villages look to toilets as a source of social mobility and therefore, see a toilet as a way to improve their position in society⁸. In addition, sanitation behaviour is affected by caste, class and community identity; thus, there are complex interactions between how an individual views their position in society and their attitude toward sanitation and hygiene issues. In contrast, older people may view the use of toilets as unnecessary and culturally inappropriate. Understanding these complex dynamics is essential for successful implementation of any sanitation program. Rural sanitation makes a significant contribution to the restoration of respect and dignity by providing a unique way for women to maintain their privacy and their psychological state⁹. Women often describe acquiring a toilet for their home as a "celebration"¹⁰. Having access to a bathroom gives a woman the ability to relieve herself without feeling the fear of being seen in a public restroom, which can cause anxiety because of the risk of embarrassment, leading to a low sense of self-worth. Woman's mental health and self-esteem are being improved by proper Sanitation (restroom facilities)¹¹.

Behavioural Dynamics and Community Adoption

The behavioural practices of individuals are a significant barrier to sanitation reform and when researching to support user uptake of toilets, the current behaviours of the user should be evaluated and addressed in addition to their established behaviours, perceptions and ritual¹². The present residents of many rural developing nations are still engaged in open defecation despite the vast amount of evidence available regarding the negative impact on health, in part because of the convenience and/or a tribal tradition or cultural socialising aspect¹³. The greatest long-term success for sanitation is to have scientifically proven evidence of benefits, which when paired with community-based engagement and social mobilisation, can be measured against measurable scientific data.

Conclusion

The Safety, privacy and respect for our body are essential to our dignity and are especially important in rural sanitation. Rural sanitation is often viewed simply as a technical problem. However, it involves much more than just the technical aspect of sanitation, it includes a lot of the dignity of those affected. Providing toilets is not only about providing physical infrastructure; providing toilets allows a person to regain their dignity after being deprived

of sanitation for a prolonged period. Recent studies show that while sanitation is very important to improving the health of communities, it is also very much a human activity, combining science with the realities of people's lives in rural communities. As we continue to conduct research on rural sanitation, it will be important to include research on the psychological and emotional aspects of rural sanitation, as well as to remember that the ultimate objective of all development is the dignity of people. □

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