

Case Story - 2005

Women's Fight Against Mismanagement in Flood Relief Activities

Location: Mingalpur Village, Dhandhuka Block, Ahmedabad District, Gujarat

In the aftermath of severe floods that devastated several parts of Gujarat, central and state government teams promptly visited affected villages to assess the damage and initiate relief efforts. This included the distribution of financial aid—commonly referred to as “cash doles”—and compensation for damaged homes and infrastructure.

One of the worst-hit areas was Mingalpur village, located in the Dhandhuka block of Ahmedabad district. Nearly 300 houses in the village suffered damage due to the floods. The village is also home to around 200 women members of the Bhal Women's Savings and Credit Cooperative, a community-based initiative supported by Mahiti Trust. These women played a proactive and determined role during the relief and recovery phase.

Exposing Irregularities and Demanding Accountability

As relief efforts began, Mingalpur Sarpanch along with the village secretary, and accounts and treasury officials, began distributing compensation funds. However, the disbursement process raised suspicions among the women's group. The meetings and transactions were being conducted privately at the Sarpanch's residence, instead of at the Panchayat office, where such official business is typically carried out in a transparent and accountable manner.

Upon closer observation, the women discovered several anomalies:

1. Compensation was allegedly being awarded to individuals who were not affected by the floods.
2. Abandoned or dilapidated houses, which had collapsed years earlier, were falsely documented as being recently damaged due to the floods.
3. Several needy families who had lost their homes were excluded from the compensation list.

When the women confronted the Sarpanch and the village secretary, their concerns were dismissed. Undeterred, the women escalated their protest, demanding a fair and transparent process. Three prominent women leaders—**Katuben, Valiben, and Kanuben**—took the lead in challenging the corrupt practices. Recalling a similar episode two decades earlier, they warned the secretary of consequences if mismanagement continued. They insisted that officials personally verify damaged homes before issuing any further compensation.

Escalation and Legal Action

The confrontation escalated into a tense standoff. As the situation intensified, the women instructed the village men to refrain from involvement, believing that they might be more vulnerable to pressure or intimidation. The Sarpanch fled the scene, while the village secretary and the treasurer escaped in a vehicle and filed a First Information Report (FIR) at the Dholera Police Station. Notably, the FIR named only the male villagers—consciously omitting the names of the women leaders—acknowledging the difficulty and public backlash involved in arresting women activists.

Refusing to be silenced, the women's group took decisive legal action. With the support of Mahiti Trust, they approached the District Collector and submitted a detailed petition documenting the discrepancies and injustices. They also secured legal representation and filed a petition in court. As a result, the wrongfully arrested male villagers were released, and the matter was brought to wider public and institutional attention.

Broader Impact and Resistance

This courageous act of resistance by the Mingalpur women had a ripple effect across other flood-affected villages. It brought attention to irregularities in relief distribution and prompted stricter oversight in ongoing recovery efforts.

However, the battle was not without its challenges. The women faced backlash from upper-caste leaders who had benefited from the misappropriation of funds. Despite this, the solidarity, courage, and integrity of the women stood strong.

This case underscores the critical role of grassroots women's leadership in promoting transparency, accountability, and justice—especially in crisis situations. It also highlights how community-based organizations like Mahiti Trust can support and empower rural women to challenge entrenched systems of corruption and exploitation.
