Empowering poor women to become to improve and upgrade their habitat: Nafisaben’s journey from an ordinary women to a changemaker

Nafisa Ben has lived in Sarkhej all her life. Born in a poor family of 10 with a single earning member, she had to give up her education at the age of 13 years. She got married in 1995, and moved to Nehrunagar in Sarkhej, close to where she was born and raised.

When she moved to Nehrunagar, the living conditions in the community were abysmal. There were wide open drains overflowing with filthy water, many a times this water used to flow inside the houses. The quality of water that was supplied was very bad, most women traveled upto half a kilometer to a public tap get potable water. Electricity wasn’t regular either, households used to remain in darkness for up to two days straight. The community was in interiors and was disconnected from citywide social and infrastructure networks. The poor condition of access roads prevented outside interaction and intervention. As a result, the community slowly became home to several illegal activities.

In 2007, MHT started work in the NehruNagar area. As a first step, MHT conducted several meetings and area sabhas facilitated the formation of a Community Based Organization that coalesced women from 250 households into a collective. The women were then trained by MHT on local governance, institutional arrangements, and to effectively interface with govt. bodies and elected officials to access improved infrastructure. Nafisaben attended all the trainings. She showed the confidence and interest to bring about a change in her community. MHT and other community members recognized this. They nominated her among 10 women leaders who would work with the government to bring water and sanitation services into the area and lead the process of community transformation. Nafisaben then organized the community and applied for getting legal drainage and water lines into her area. She faced many challenges on the way, but her determination kept her going.
She was threatened by the local goons several times over. They wanted her to quit and left no stone unturned to make all her efforts futile. They spread false rumors with the intention of tarnishing her reputation. However, with the support from her family, MHT, and most importantly other women from her area, she continued her work. Finally, her efforts paid off in 2012 when the work for laying underground drainage and water line was commenced. At the end of 2014, all 945 households in her community had individual water & underground drainage connections.

Her untiring efforts were noticed and acknowledged by the then ward councillor of Sarkhej ward, and Nafisaben was appointed as Female Ward Pramukh of the area in 2012. She began working with the ward councilor to bring about these changes in other poor communities in the Sarkhej Area. MHT continued to provide capacity building and technical support to women in these communities. By 2015, Nafisaben was known and trusted by all families in the Sarkhej area. She was offered a ticket for 2015 elections by a leading political party. She won her seat by a huge margin. Today she continues to work towards improving the lives of the poor in her ward in the capacity of an elected councillor.

“I am really thankful for MHT’s support throughout the whole transformation process. The organized the community and brought us all together to work collectively. They instilled the confidence in me to keep going. I still look up to them whenever I need guidance.”

Nehrunagar, Sarkhej. before and after. Nafisaben with the support from other women in her community led the transformation of her area.