

Project Dignity Empowers Rural Women and Girls and Changes Lives, One Toilet at A Time!

■ Submitted by Manish Mehta

Manish participated in a breakout session on this project at The Rotary International convention in Lisbon, Portugal.

Following are some statistics on sanitation and how it can change lives:

- Four in 10 humans have no toilet facilities; at least six in 10 humans have inadequate facilities.
- 90 percent of diarrhea is caused by bad water and poor hygiene habits, killing one child every 15 seconds.
- A 40 percent decrease can be realized in diarrhea within a month if rural families get access to clean personal sanitation.
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Project Dignity is a Rotary Club of Ann Arbor North (RCAAN) -led initiative in partnership with Rotary Club of Calcutta-Midtown that places Rotary-funded toilets with selected rural families who will set a good example for their neighbors, to encourage sanitary habits. It has provided in-home pit-type composting toilets during 2011-12 to 110 women subsisting in the harsh Sundarbans, a densely populated ecologically-sensitive river delta region of Eastern India (outside Calcutta) near Bangla Desh

Clean water means that children (especially girls) are healthier and able to go to school regularly so as to receive an education and not be at risk of trafficking if they remain sick from water-borne illnesses. With children in school, mothers are able to train in sustainable rural vocations, and hence, find work to improve their families' lives and standard of living. Access to private, in-home toilets means that girls and women can regain their dignity and have the freedom to care for themselves.

Project Dignity's Rotary partners are: Rotary clubs of Ann Arbor, Chelsea, Ferndale, Milan and Saline – several clubs have committed funds for a second year in order to make a larger impact on lives.

We are also working closely with Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, an interfaith grass-roots group in the Sundarbans to select which families are at the highest risk so as to prioritize who will first receive toilets. (The ashram also lends bicycles to school girls so that they can get to school safely).

Two invited presentations on Project Dignity were recently made at the World Water and Sanitation (WASHRAG) Summit on June 21 and at the Rotary International Convention in Lisbon. RCAAN is next experimenting with a social entrepreneurship model to install 500 new toilets by enlisting the local people to sell new toilets to others through peer networks, so as to accelerate the uptake of clean sanitation in this area which needs 50,000 toilets.

The photos show one instance of how these toilets are changing the lives of rural women.

RCAAN invites District 6380 clubs to participate in Project Dignity. An investment of \$1,000 can change the lives of at least six multi-generation families, and thereby impact 75-100 persons in the Sundarbans.



A new pink-walled toilet in the home of a seamstress benefits health and productivity of four women and their kids by saving them long walks in darkness to the community pits which are located 200 feet from homes. It also helps the seamstresses turn over higher numbers of clothing apparel and hence raise their incomes. Also seen is the faith-based leader who urges the families to participate in the toilet installations.

