

Changing Ancient Beliefs about Latrines

Women pastoralists are frontline promoters of environmental hygiene and sanitation

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Gubala Halake is a young enthusiastic woman pastoralist and head of household living in Bokossa. She is a member of the community water and sanitation committee and has received training on water use and sanitation practices in sessions organized by the GWI Running Dry program. During the selection process, the Water and Sanitation Cluster Leader strongly resisted accepting Gubala in the Water and Sanitation Committee (WATSANCO) in preference of another nominee who was socially closer to the Cluster Leader. Nevertheless, due to her strong aspirations and strong motivation and commitment, the community convinced the Cluster Leader to accept Gubala.

In response to the training and awareness-raising activities she had participated in, she instantly became a model woman in her village when she constructed a private pit latrine from locally available wood. She excavated the latrine pit on her own and constructed the latrine structure with minimal support from young children in the village and a local carpenter. Gubala said that she did not have any previous knowledge about hygiene and sanitation until the recent intervention by CARE. She said that diarrheal diseases and abdominal pain are serious problems, particularly among children, because the village uses drinking water from a nearby pond which is periodically contaminated with human and animal waste from flood waters.

During the course of building her family latrine, Gubala, was criticized by some community members because Borana pastoralists do not believe in using pit latrines because of a long-existing cultural belief that a pit latrine is something "evil" (*bol'aatti udaanuun falfaltuumma dha* in the local language). Furthermore, some community members tried to discourage her by saying that their livestock and children might fall into the latrine pit. However, resisting all criticism and also acknowledging that her contribution alone cannot fully solve this problem of water contamination, she has constructed her own latrine so that others in the community can learn from her. In addition to constructing a latrine she has started improving the sanitation condition within her house including constructing a wooden shelf from locally available materials to hygienically store her cooking utensils and prepared food.

One of her elderly neighbors who had previously tried to discourage Gubala was later convinced of the merits of using a pit latrine and is now using Gubala's pit latrine. He even said, "If it hadn't been for my age I would have constructed my own latrine." Another who had not received training also became motivated to build his own latrine through the continuous awareness-raising sessions implemented by WATSANCO and by observing his neighbor's latrine. Though many are still skeptical, some older pastoralists express acceptance by saying, "even though we have not used pit latrines in the past and do not believe in it, generations of this age can use it because they belong to this modern era."

Why women care more about hygiene and sanitation

Women are found to be more responsible community members in improving environmental hygiene and sanitation than men, in part because these problems affect them more. The problem is particularly serious for women after delivery when they cannot walk long distances into the bush, as well as for children and elderly individuals. Gubala explained that constructing a pit latrine close to her home saves time for cooking, breast feeding, and other domestic work.

In addition, during seasonal migration, male pastoralists move away from home with their livestock in search of water and pasture. During this period, the burden of every domestic activity, including cooking, child care, tending to the elderly, water collection for human and animal consumption, and supervising family health, are left to women pastoralists, making them the frontline actors of environmental hygiene and sanitation in the rural societies of Borana.



Fig 2: The pit latrine constructed by Gobal (Photo by Woldu Terefe)

In Gubala's community cluster, a total of 12 pit latrines have been constructed within a short period in response to the interventions of the GWI program. Furthermore, the lesson is surprisingly spreading to other neighboring clusters and many individuals are constructing their own pit latrines. Of course this has not happened overnight, rather it is the fruit of continuous community awareness efforts by the project's community facilitators and training delivered to government partners and health extension workers. The strong community commitment and, in particular, the commitment of women pastoralists towards changing their community is very rewarding and proves the supreme roles of women in safeguarding public and family health.