



Boya Jyothi, a member of the Ward 2 women's group, speaks at a community center meeting. Women-led self-help groups are helping residents living in Vizag slums reach open defecation free status. In the city's 72 wards, there are approximately 100,000 women in self-help groups, with each group having between 5 to 10 members. Photo credit: USAID/India

USAID Joins 100,000 Women in India to Bring Dignity, Safety, and Health to a City of Two Million

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At USAID we recognize the threat poor sanitation combined with rapid urbanization presents to human health, dignity, and prosperity. This is why we have made urban sanitation a global priority for the Agency. During a recent visit to India, I was able to see some of the work being done to bring sanitation services to urban areas, and had the good fortune to meet some inspiring women who are advancing these efforts in their communities.

Currently, more than 300 million people live in India's urban areas, a number that is quickly increasing. The growing population of city dwellers is straining the country's ability to provide safe drinking water and sanitation services. To address this, the

Government of India has committed to providing sanitation and household toilet facilities for all 4,041 cities in India through *Swachh Bharat* (Clean India) Campaign.

India's commitment to this effort is vital. Close to 600 million people in the country practice open defecation, which contaminates water and can spread diseases. Lack of access to sanitation can keep people from productive activities such as work and school, either due to illness or time spent searching for private, safe locations to defecate. In India, it is estimated this lack of access results in an annual economic loss of approximately \$54 billion or 6.4 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. Forty-eight percent of children under the age of five are stunted, with 25 percent of those cases attributed to repeated diarrhea or intestinal worm infections from poor water and sanitation. Women are also disproportionately affected, as they are often vulnerable to harassment and violence when they openly defecate.

In September 2014, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi requested technical assistance from the United States to strengthen India's national sanitation during a summit in Washington D.C. with President Barack Obama. In response to this request, USAID and India's Ministry of Urban Development signed an agreement for "cooperation in the field of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)" in January 2015.

Under this agreement USAID has committed to provide institutional capacity support to advance *Swachh Bharat*'s goals. The Agency also agreed to support demand-driven technical assistance through funding city sanitation plans, mobilizing revenue streams for operation and maintenance, and piloting sanitation technology.

As part of this effort, USAID and the Ministry for Urban Development agreed to concentrate technical assistance to Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC) for the city of Visakhapatnam (Vizag), a population of 2 million people located on the central eastern coast of India. Vizag is one of the top 20 cities the Government of India has designated as part of a "Smart Cities" program. USAID has also agreed to take the lead in supporting the Smart Cities of Ajmer and Allahabad.

In Vizag, approximately 44 percent of the population live in slums, more than any other city in India. The estimates suggest a majority of human waste, 82 percent, is not collected by a central sewer system, but rather the waste enters the environment through open defecation and goes into residential and natural environments and receiving water sources.

The work to end open defecation by GVMC in Vizag is not just a major sanitation undertaking, it has also become a massive gender program with the leadership of the Commissioner. Due in large part to the efforts of approximately 100,000 women who have banded together to create self-help groups, 24 of the 72 wards of Vizag have now achieved open defecation free (ODF) status. Combined, these ODF wards represent a population of 600,000. With the help of these women-led self-help groups, Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), the USAID partner helping to implement the new Vizag sanitation strategy, the city is projected to meet the March 2017 deadline for ODF status.

In May, I visited Vizag and met with some of these women's groups along with the Agency's local implementing partners, USAID India's WASH teams, and the Hyder-

abad Consulate General of the United States.

Gathered at a local community center, we celebrated the progress these women have made in eliminating open defecation in the slums where they live. In my discussions with these female leaders I expressed my admiration for their achievements and congratulated them. These groups of five to ten women each have not only helped their communities achieve ODF status, but have also empowered women. There is no doubt their leadership will improve the dignity, safety, and health of all the people in these wards by eliminating open defecation.

While the results so far are encouraging, much remains to be done to see Swachh Bharat meet its goals. In the 72 wards being brought to ODF status in Vizag, about 165,000 people are still practicing open defecation and this number shifts with migration into the slums. It is also very difficult to reach ODF for all the city's population, especially for the homes built on the city's slopes where foundations are fragile, making it difficult to install pit latrines.

To help Vizag achieve ODF status, WSUP completed a sanitation stakeholder "landscape" map of the city, identifying key stakeholders, roles and responsibilities, and developed new processes to reduce the time needed to approve and install a pit latrine from six months to 45 days. Both of these things will be very helpful to the women leaders in their efforts to end open defecation.

WSUP is also making plans for the future as the program transitions from helping Vizag to achieve ODF status to the challenging process of developing and implementing a successful fecal sludge management system. The USAID partner believes women-led self-help groups will continue to play an important role in such matters as the timing of sludge removal from pit latrines and routes for trucks transporting sludge.

USAID and the Ministry of Urban Development are looking at the Vizag experience to determine how it might be replicated elsewhere in India to end open defecation. It is clear there is a lot to be learned from the engagement of these women-led self-help groups. These 100,000 women have truly inspired us all.

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Additional Resources:

- [USAID/India](#)
- [Swachh Bharat](#)

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