



A poster showing good hand washing practices outside a community toilet in Delhi. Photo credit: USAID/India

Open Defecation vs. Community Toilets: A Complicated Choice

February 6, 2017

She told us all to just forget it. I didn't catch her name, I just watched her adjust the microphone and stand on tiptoes at the podium. Her grey hair peeked out from behind and she sounded frustrated.

Forget the security. It won't make a difference. Forget the caretakers and the cleaning supplies. We don't need those. We just want sewer lines in our communities. That's enough now. We want to use a toilet in our home.

The other women in the audience clearly agreed given the loud burst of applause when she mentioned sewer lines. Instead, she has a community toilet; that or the choice of squatting somewhere out in the open. Choosing between defecating in the open or using a community toilet is layered with far more complexities than I'd understood before.

My colleagues and I from [USAID/India](https://www.usaid.gov/india) were spending the day at a workshop orga-

nized by our partner, Centre for Urban and Regional Excellence (CURE). They're in the early stages of a behavior change communication study that will help us understand why, even with access to community toilets, open defecation is still happening. There were about 100 people living in five slums across Delhi who had given up their day to tell us.

I sat with the women and some of the kids for lunch outside. I asked some fairly invasive questions about how, or if, they use the toilet in their slums.

They were candid. Veer, Neelam and Ruqyya did most of the talking, while other women huddled around and nodded, occasionally chiming in. They live in different slums but the experience sounded similar.

Veer always goes out in the open and she's completely unashamed.

The men stand in front of the [community] toilet. They play games on top of the roof and then look down. They say things to us. You know, they'll dress up as women. She demonstrated, pulling her dupatta all the way down over her face and shimmying. See? You can't tell. I could be a man or a woman. You wouldn't know. They dress up as women, they get in line with us, they might touch us. She demonstrated that too and it made me jump. Every few days someone is raped. On one side of the toilet is where we live and on the other side it's jungle. They can pull us there.

I asked what would happen to the men and women if the women reported it. Their accounts were so much worse than the statistics I scan through in reports.

She'll end up dead if we talk about a rape. What do you think? No, we just say she's not feeling well for a couple days. Yes they say things to us every time. This is all during the day; we don't go at night. The toilets are closed then anyway. We try to go in groups.

Neelam and Ruqyya are in their early 30s with small kids. Neelam said she goes two or three times a day. Each time it costs her one rupee. But there's no soap and maybe one light. If she's short on time and the lines are long, she and her children might just go in the open.

Ruqyya is luckier. She has a toilet in her home though most of her neighbors don't. Her colony shares one community toilet with two other settlements. She said it was about 25,000 people using 42 toilets in questionable condition (that's 595 people per toilet). If the toilets were open 24 hours per day (which they are not) each person would have less than two and a half minutes.

The next day at work, I counted how many times I used the restroom and did a little calculation based on what the women had said.

Each time I went, I'd have to walk a bit, maybe 10 minutes depending on which slum I was in. I'd have to spend time in line and time walking back. There goes half an hour. It'd cost me one rupee each time. That'd add up. The chances of the toilet being clean would be low. If I had a kid, I'd have to figure out what to do with the child while I used the toilet. Even after all that, if I decided it was worth the trip and cost of using a dirty community toilet, it would almost be a given that a man loitering outside

would say something vulgar to me or peep into the toilet while I crouched down to use it. The chances of my getting assaulted or raped, even during the day, would be high. Every single time.

If for every sip of water and bite of food I had to make the same decision as Veer, Neelam and Ruqyya...well, I'd choose open defecation too.

The women made their position clear: their solution is sewer lines; they want toilets in their homes. If community toilets are the immediate option then better maintenance and more security will encourage use. Understanding this information is the first and most crucial step to successfully ending open defecation. USAID and CURE will share what we learned with the local government, pointing out community-specific issues so that future interventions address what is most needed.

There's already a lot of USAID partner progress; I've seen the success USAID-supported partners have with this method. Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor, in partnership with the local government, organized women's groups that encouraged their communities to use toilets instead of fields. Because of these women, Visakhapatnam is among the 415 open defecation free cities in India. Another partner, [Urban Management Centre](#), pushed for better toilet maintenance prompting the local government to triple sanitation worker salaries. It led to a more motivated cleaning staff and cleaner community toilets. This kind of advocacy works. It makes me confident that the results from this workshop will help the local government, CURE and USAID identify the right actions to take to help end open defecation. And to do so with safety and dignity for everyone involved.

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Additional Resources:

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

This article appears in Global Waters, Vol. 8, Issue 2; for past issues of the magazine, visit Global Waters' homepage on [Globalwaters.org](#).