

Women and drought

Introduction

Parts of the State of Gujarat, on India's west coast, are dry and drought-prone. This paper contains the stories of four poor Gujarati women. The stories show the effects of drought on the women and their families, and how they have tried to overcome its impact.

The women describe their experiences in their own words, and we are grateful to them for sharing these experiences. We have made some minor editorial alterations for clarity but have tried to keep these to a minimum, to avoid imposing our own shape and style on the storytelling.

We have several reasons for choosing to reproduce the women's accounts. The first is that they are personal stories. All too often the views of 'victims' of disasters are overlooked by those who are trying to help them. Although they provide only glimpses rather than the more rounded pictures that accounts by external observers might give, the women's testimonies have an immediacy and offer an insight which others' observations cannot provide.

The stories are also life stories. They put events like drought into the context of the hardships - especially the economic hardships - of everyday life. They also illustrate very clearly the particular problems faced by women, in both normal and extreme circumstances.

Nonetheless, these accounts should not be read as messages of despair. In the first place, the women's remarkable resilience is evident, even in the face of the most pressing difficulties. In addition, in some of the stories we can see that it is possible to reduce people's vulnerability to natural hazards such as drought through carefully planned development programmes that provide more secure livelihoods. Those mentioned here are run by the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), based in Ahmedabad. SEWA is an association of over 200,000 poor women living in both rural and urban areas.

The material was collected and translated by the Disaster Mitigation Institute (DMI) in Ahmedabad, which is engaged in community-based projects to reduce vulnerability to drought in Gujarat. DMI has a particular interest in developing ways whereby the 'victims' of natural hazards are not only participants in measures to overcome their vulnerability, but actually take the lead in this process.

We hope that this paper, the fourth in Intermediate Technology's series of 'occasional papers' on disasters and development, will be drawn upon in research and training. You are welcome to use and reproduce the material in any way that seems appropriate (with acknowledgment).

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