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FEATURE-Where Indian women lead, a better life follows

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By Bappa Majumdar

KANAIPUR, India, March 5 (Reuters) - Every morning 10-year-old Indian villager Nipa Haldar crosses a canal in a small boat and trudges along a mud road for 20 minutes to reach school, pursuing her dream of becoming a nurse.

Nipa has not missed classes once in three years, just one of hundreds of young children in Kanaipur village in the eastern state of West Bengal to have benefited from a law that promotes the involvement of women in local politics.

"I want to become a nurse and help all the poor and ailing people when I grow up," she says as she heads for classes about 70 km (40 miles) from the state capital, Kolkata.

In 2004, a newly elected village council, or panchayat, in Kanaipur included for the first time a representative number of women -- and resulted in a mini social revolution.

In addition to their new clout in village affairs, the move also sprouted a number of self-help groups.

Together they have improved the provision of healthcare and education for women and children, according to a study by UNICEF of 165 villages in West Bengal.

"The number of visits by health workers in these villages was significantly higher and the desire to do good work by women leaders had a ripple effect on everyone else," Priyanka Khanna, a UNICEF spokeswoman, told Reuters in Kolkata.

That may not be radical -- micro-credit pioneers have been saying for years that one of the best ways to chip away at rural poverty is to give women control of project purse strings -- but in India it marks a milestone.

With 70 percent of a billion-plus population living in a patchwork of poor villages and small towns in India, these grass-roots changes have a significant impact.

FEMALE TOUCH

In 1993, India amended its constitution to accommodate the concept of panchayati raj

-- effectively village self-governance -- and make laws out of its previously non-binding rules.

Among the changes was the reservation of one-third of seats on every village council for women.

In West Bengal, ruled by the world's longest-serving elected communist government, moves to boost the role of women began in the 1970s. The constitution change added impetus and by the time the UNICEF study was completed the results were there to be seen.

"Women come out of the shell once they see that someone from the same gender is fighting for them and that impacts the entire household and the village," says Kolkata-based sociologist Prasanta Roy.

The survey revealed that in areas where women had taken up their allocated places on councils, investment in clean drinking water had doubled compared to those still run solely by men.

Roads were twice as likely to be in a good condition.

A similar UNICEF study in the western state of Rajasthan found that a child living in a village where the council was headed by a woman had a better chance of being vaccinated against common diseases.

And there was only 13 percent fewer girls than boys sitting behind school desks, a significant improvement in the conservative desert region.

UNSHACKLED?

Less likely to study fully or follow a career, many women in India's rural and small-town heartlands still have to ask permission from a father or husband to step out of the home.

Here an intensely patriarchal society largely untouched by the mood of emancipation makes for a hard life.

Boys get an education and grow up to take most of the decisions; women do as they are told -- largely work and raise the kids.

But in Kanaipur, Soma Dey, the village's first female council chief, was busy examining dozens of new solar-energy panels that will provide electricity to 400 people.

"At least 90 percent of the village is covered with conventional electricity, but in remote places we have installed solar energy," said a beaming Soma, wearing an orange shawl to beat the cold wind blowing across the Hooghly river.

Eight years ago, the village did not have a single school and access to medicines was a luxury beyond the reach of most people.

Today it has 15 schools and several healthcare centres stacked with medicines -- all funded by the state government.

Since the 2004 election, Soma and her 12 women colleagues on the 30-member council have successfully wooed the state government for money and roped in experts to improve lives.

"I found women shy to talk about their health problems and domestic violence, but now they come everyday," Soma says.

Affordable loans are now available in a country where debt lurks in most rural homes.

"We used to live on coconut water, and farm marshy lands eight years ago, but now I have a new boat to go fishing in," said 70-year-old Nirmal Gharani.

Nipa clings to her 95-year-old grandmother Phulphuli, who settled here after leaving Bangladesh 10 years ago.

"It's an oasis here, I'm not going back," the old woman says.

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