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Not wasting the waste

Beverly Bell | Jan. 6, 2010

S. Ushakumari: "We were never thinking about empowering women at that point of time, but through zero waste, it happened."

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 7 of 12

S. Ushakumari is a horticulturist who has been working with a public interest research organization for the past 20 years. Part of her life?s work is also a movement that is sweeping the globe: zero waste. Zero waste reexamines consumption with an ethical, economic and environmental eye. Instead of seeking to ?manage? waste, this philosophy and campaign aims to eliminate it. As Usha?s story about her community project shows, zero waste starts with the humble elements of waste reduction, reuse, recycling and composting. But it goes further by requiring companies to change the way they design and manufacture goods so that they are free of toxins. Ultimately, zero waste aims to create a society that lives sustainably on a finite resource base. In the process, it strengthens local economies with jobs, reduces energy demands and thus climate change, and saves local governments money that is spent cleaning up industries? messes.

By S. Ushakumari

KERALA, INDIA -- Zero waste came to Thanal, an environmental justice organization, as an alternative to the current waste-management paradigm. That paradigm is about burning or burying, actually wasting the waste itself.

Tourists like to visit the coastal town of Kovalam, but in the past 10 to 15 years since globalization hit, the state of Kerala has been having problem of plastics and waste excess. The figures showed that the tourist flow was actually going down in Kovalam because of waste. The government had what it thought what was a good idea: burn the waste and make it disappear like a miracle.

When we came to know about the incineration and the problems associated with it, we held a press conference, and the media took this up in a very positive manner. We gave the tourism director all the documentation on incineration. The director came to us and said, ?Okay, because of the information you gave I stopped the project, but now I need to solve the problem. Come up with some idea and we?ll support you.?

That?s how an alternate approach to waste management came into our view. We found out that almost 70 to 80 percent of this waste can be recycled or reused.

Women in the town got inspired and came forward, and that?s how we started. We began a zero-waste education center to do training and orientation programs with women, students, farmers and policymakers. Almost immediately we were training up to 400 women.

Some of the women started producing products with newspaper and waste paper from copy shops. Another group of women started making beautiful things out of coconut shells -- Kerala is known for coconut. We found women who are really talented in working waste cloth. There are almost 140 tailor shops where foreigners come to get Indian clothes because they are very cheap here. The tailors cut the clothes and they just dump the waste somewhere or burn it. The women started producing lots of beautiful products, like banners, wall hangings, bags, etc. I like to call it patchworking women?s lives. Once they mastered the production, the next issue was marketing. So we started an enterprise development program.

Most important of all is the capacity that is being built among the women. You should come and see it; only then would you believe what change can happen to these illiterate women. Actually, we were never thinking about empowering women at that point of time, but through zero waste, it happened.

Also in 10 schools in the area we are promoting worm compositing, which means all the organic waste that is generated by the children from their lunch goes to worm compost, and then into the gardens in the schools. Now the vegetable gardens are producing almost 20 to 30 percent of the vegetables for the noon meal programs. And now the children are starting the same program in their homes. We have reached a point where the children have started understanding climate change and how it?s linked to the waste issue, food production system, industrialization processes.

We are also working at the policy level. One of our main campaigners is part of a team formed by the Kerala government that is framing the policy for waste management for the state. The team is also working with the government for a program in schools. They?ve come out with a zero-waste handbook and are conducting workshops for teachers with this manual.

One of the important programs is poison-free farming. All the women understood that pesticides were creating problems for themselves and their children and they said, ?We want to be trained on organic farming.? We trained them on how to ban toxic pesticides, how to make local, organic manure, and things like that. The chief or president of the local government really got interested in the program, too. He said, ?In five years time, we have to completely change this village into organic.?

The idea from Kovalam has gone all over the world now. At least six or seven Indian states are now modeling their zero-waste programs on Kovalam?s. Other countries -- like the tourism department in the Philippines -- are very keen on implementing the zero-waste program.

[Beverly Bell, coordinator of Other Worlds, conducted and edited this interview with help from Suchi Daga. For more information about Other Worlds and the grass-roots movement featured in this column, please visit www.otherworldsarepossible.org.]

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women?s movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR *by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of* ***Other Worlds****[1]. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order. [2]

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

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