

Headline: Researcher's Diary: Why do people defecate in the open?

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Majority of the people in the villages of Union Council Masoo Bozdar and Dad Khan Jarwar, District Tando Allahyar, are constrained to live without lavatory facilities inside their houses. In Union Council Dad Khan Jarwar, 51.2% of the households do not have latrines, while in Union Council Masoo Bozdar 57.1% of the households do not have latrines, according to a Poverty Scorecard Survey (PSC) conducted by National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) in 2016.

Being tenants, living on the landlord's property, the poor people have little control over the houses they live in. "Our landlord prohibits us from constructing toilets on his land", said Dhani, a local woman, during a Focused Group Discussion held last year in Khalid Khan Jarwar village.

Also, they have little money to spend on construction, even if they are able to get permission from the landlord for construction of toilets.

The issue is not limited to the two UCs though. According to a [UNICEF](#) report, 40 million people do not use toilets in Pakistan.

Due to absence of latrines, the people are forced to relieve themselves in the open, behind bushes, under trees, and near water bodies. In rain, and heat, or storm, the women and men, often walk long distances to find a bush, or a tree, or a water body, to defecate.

This laborious, and often humiliating experience, is not a major problem for men. They can easily use open area for defecating any time. It is the women who have to wait for darkness, or wake up before everyone, to find a safe, honorable, place for defecation. They have to wait for long hours, many a time as long as 13-14 hours, to relieve themselves.

"We mostly use open area for defecating when darkness falls in the evening, when the sun rises in the morning", said a 52 year old woman, whose name is being withheld to maintain privacy.

In order to urinate less during the day, the women often cut down their water consumption. "Normally we drink little amount of water to curb frequency of urination", said Jami (name changed).

"When the people are sick, and can't walk for long to find bushes and water bodies, they urinate or defecate in the animal pan located within the household's boundary wall, or they use the space available behind the house", said Mao Patel, a local resident.

Women and children who have to defecate in the open are more susceptible to health issues. Around 110 children, under the age of five, die every day in Pakistan from diarrhea-related diseases, which is often attributed to poor sanitation. (Grieve, 2015)

While those living off the landlord's property are not allowed to construct toilets, the locals having their own land and property also seem to not prioritize lavatories, and instead defecate and urinate in the open. Interestingly, many families can afford to buy motorcycles, mobile phones, television sets, dish antennas, and refrigerators, but choose not to construct toilets and stop defecating and urinating in the open. On inquiry, many locals said that because of the absence of drainage and sewerage system in the area, the toilets may not be very useful.

It appears that the practice of open defecation is affected by economy, culture and level of education. All three factors can be at play in some cases, while in other cases one of them can determine the attitude towards hygiene, and open defecation or urination.

Learning from the Bangladesh experience can be useful. " [That] you have to first recognise that it's a behavior shift that's needed before you put in the infrastructure" (Magda, 2014)

The issue can be addressed by raising awareness about the hazards of open defecation, and by convincing the locals that it is in their own interest to stop the unhealthy practice. Helping low-income people in construction of toilets and proposing alternate waste management models to the village people can also be helpful.

In the long run, the state should devise policies to reduce tenant's dependency of landlords, and to create more educational facilities in the regions, to develop citizens who are more informed and inspired to change the unhealthy practices that appear to be normal.

*Names have been changed to maintain privacy.

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