



A house of her dreams

Meena Soni, Vishwas Nagar in Odhav, Ahmedabad

About Meenaben

Meenaben is a home-based worker who tailors dresses and cloth bags on a piece-rate basis. She is a resident of Vishwas Nagar Chawl in Ahmedabad where she lives with her husband, son, and daughter. Her husband runs a small provision store in their locality and her son contributes to the household income through his part-time job. Their combined family income of INR 15,000-16,000 (USD 201-215) helps them access reliable services and satisfy the daily needs of the family. Over the years, Meenaben has strived to bring significant changes to her house and her community. From the tight and inadequate house with limited services, which was not conducive for productive livelihood and household activities, she has come a long way. Today, she is a proud owner of a three-room pucca (permanent) house, with the required space for her growing children and their needs. Her income has

also increased as she can take bulk orders and safely store her raw materials and stitched clothes.

With time, she has also grown as a community leader, garnering the trust of other women by advocating for community services and helping with their home improvements. Meenaben's personal growth goes hand-in-hand with Vishwas Nagar's development into a safe, hygienic and thriving community. As a leader and part of the local Community Action Group (CAG), she gives a voice to the community's concerns and pushes for tangible action on the ground. She also works with Mahila Housing SEWA Trust (MHT) to build awareness about innovative and sustainable technologies for home improvements.

The beginnings

In 1997, Meenaben purchased a semi-pucca (without a permanent roof) house in Vishwas Nagar with the assistance of INR 40,000 (USD 538) from her father. She used to work as a garment worker in a nearby factory, earning about INR 10 (USD 0.13) per piece for stitching. Her family income amounted to only between INR 3,000-4,000 (USD 40-54) per month, which compelled her to bring work home regularly with the intention to earn more.

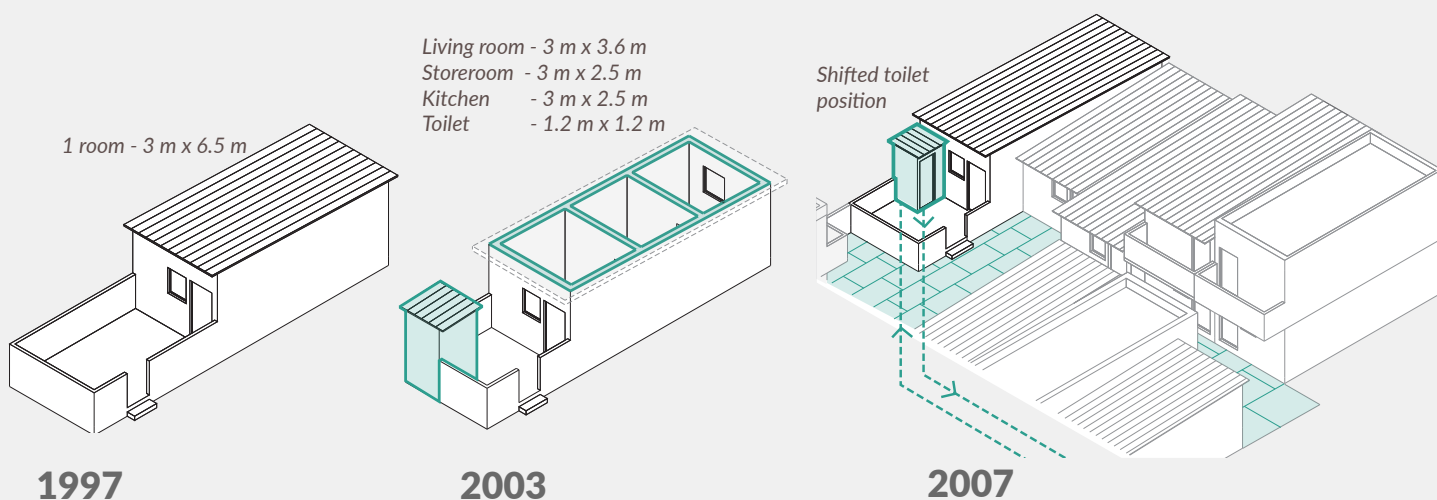
Meenaben and her family regularly suffered from health and livelihood consequences because of limited space and poor air circulation and daylight in her house. The tin sheet roof increased the indoor heat during summers and was prone to rainwater leakage. She faced maximum losses during monsoon due to the increased risk of damage to her materials. She could not bring extra work home, fearing damage and subsequent pay cuts. Moreover, with only a single door and window, her house was poorly ventilated. It further aggravated her husband's lung disease and ate up major portions of their household income. Many

families in Vishwas Nagar experienced the same plight of cramped houses, inadequate services, indoor air pollution, and the lack of indoor daylight. Women home-based workers constantly faced the unavoidable challenges associated with poor habitat conditions. Before the residents had legal water connection and sewerage through the Slum Networking Program (SNP), women traveled every day to collect water, spending more than INR 100 (USD 1.30) per month. Families relied on kerosene lamps or illegal electricity connections and frequently incurred costs up to INR 250 (USD 3.40) per month. These costs to avail of even the basic services constituted about 12% of Meenaben's monthly income. Moreover, with absent toilets, open defecation created an unhygienic environment. Meenaben still recalls how residents from other neighborhoods hesitated to visit their community due to the foul smell and its unsanitary appearance.

Making room for work and living

To overcome the hardships linked with the poor habitat conditions, Meenaben started investing in

Timeline of Meenaben's investments towards home improvements



1997

Meenaben purchased a single room semi-pucca house for INR 40,000 (USD 538).

2003

PE1 Meenaben added a storeroom, kitchen, living room, and a toilet for less than INR 10,000 (USD 135). She also constructed an underground water tank for INR 2,500 (USD 34).

CP3 She took the role of a community leader 'vikasini'.

2007

PE2 With MHT's assistance, Meenaben reconstructed the toilet as per norms for the Slum Networking Program (SNP). She also received water connections and drainage at the cost of INR 2,100 (USD 28).

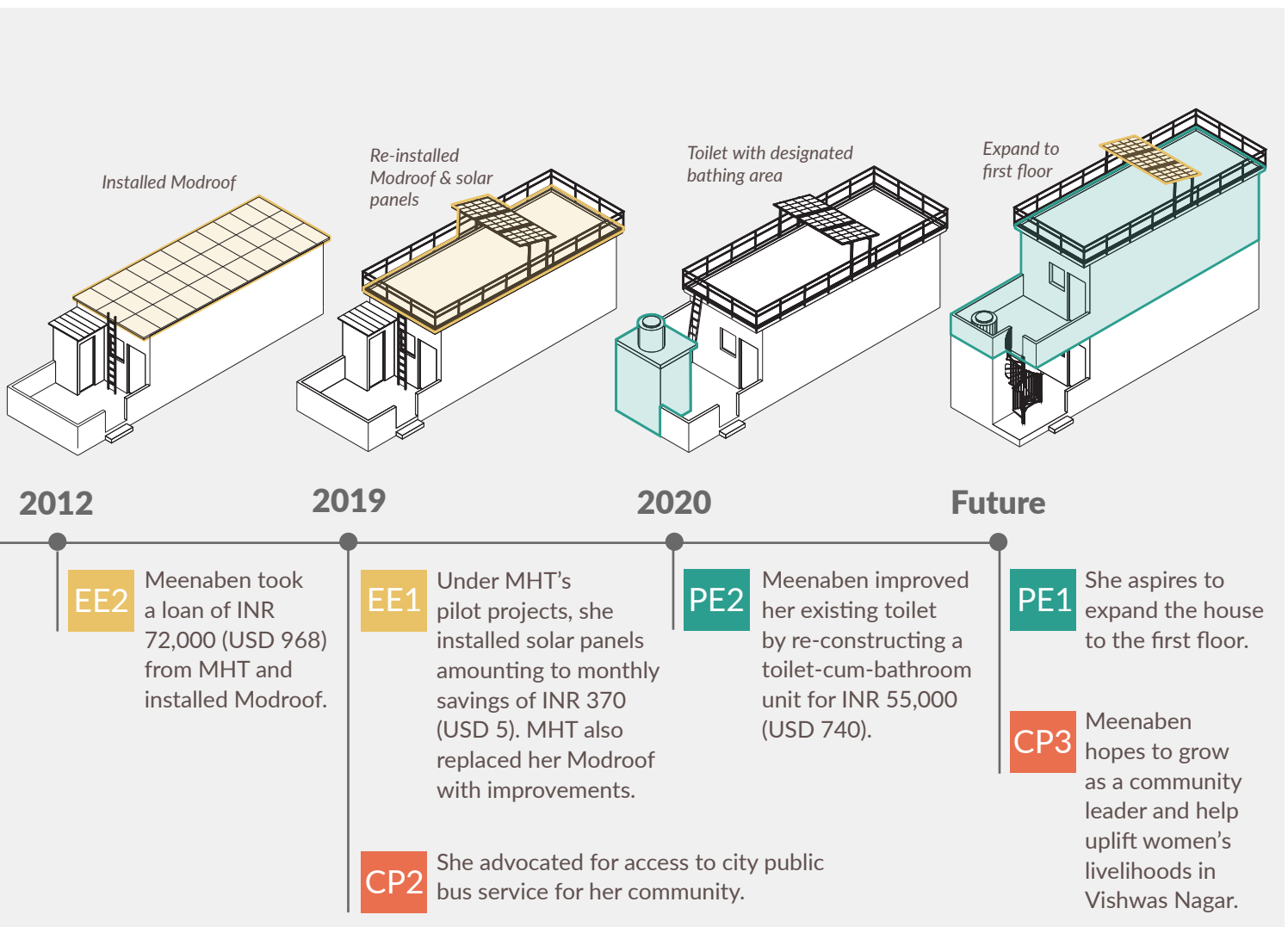
improving her home in 2003. She extended her one-room house to accommodate both household and livelihood activities separately. She added a storeroom (3 m x 2.5 m), kitchen (3 m x 2.5 m), living room (3 m x 3.6 m), individual toilet, and plastered the walls for less than INR 10,000 (USD 135). She now had a dedicated workspace for stitching where she could work continuously without any re-arrangements to accommodate her household activities.

Meenaben remarkably benefited from the addition of storage space for her goods. She also started working completely from home and coordinated with her employer to collect raw materials and deliver the finished products. With the improvements boosting her home-run business, Meenaben even observed a substantial increase in her earnings and savings.

Getting access to clean water and sanitation

In 2006, Meenaben attended a meeting by MHT aimed to spread awareness about the SNP. The scheme promised reliable water connections, paved roads, sewer lines, and individual household toilets to the

residents of Vishwas Nagar. Meenaben recalls how their initial caution about MHT's intentions changed to an assurance that they could help improve the community's well-being. She joined other women in Vishwas Nagar and encouraged families to contribute INR 2,100 (USD 28) to execute the scheme. The families who faced difficulty in investing found support in MHT and SEWA bank for financial assistance. Soon, a CAG was formed and Meenaben emerged as a leader, to give the program the momentum it needed. Initially, the CAG members faced challenges from family and found the bureaucratic procedures tedious and complex, but eventually succeeded in enabling the community to access clean water and sanitation infrastructure. Meenaben claims the SNP had a significant impact on her livelihood and overall well-being. Her neighborhood was now clean, well-maintained, and welcoming. She wanted to live and make a life there. In 2014, she took a loan of INR 40,000 (USD 538) from MHT to buy a second-hand grocery store in the same neighborhood which supplemented her daily income from home-based work. She also set up an Anganwadi (daycare center) at her house to engage children from her community.



Cool roof to tackle extreme heat

The tin sheet roof still troubled her family during months of extreme climate, worsening her husband's breathing issues. In between treatments and regular hospital visits, Meenaben was desperately looking to reduce the heat building up in her house. So when she learned about the Modroof system during MHT's CAG training workshop, she saw a solution to her long-standing problem. The roof was affordable, brought down the indoor temperature by 4°C to 5°C, and appeared durable. She installed the Modroof in 2012 with a loan from MHT amounting to INR 72,000 (USD 968), repayable at INR 2,500 (USD 34) in monthly installments for three years. Later, when she pointed out water leakage after installation, MHT assisted her to replace the Modroof in 2015 with quality improvements from similarly tested models.

In 2019, she installed solar panels as a part of MHT's pilot projects. It powers her home appliances like fans, lights, and tailoring machines, reducing her average monthly bill from INR 750 to INR 380 (USD 10 to USD 5). Meenaben explains how these improvements to her house and better access to infrastructure services have helped her increase her monthly income to INR 12,000-15,000 (USD 161 - 202).

“When we installed the Modroof, we got immediate respite from the summer heat. But water leakage still persisted in some areas. MHT helped us replace the Modroof with an improved model and stop the leakage. Now it is as good as a concrete roof!”

Safer streets and accessible transport

In one of MHT's community meetings in 2019, women from several settlements in Odhav Ward voiced their concern about inadequate public transport service. Meenaben, representing the CAG from Vishwas Nagar, indicated how the lack of public bus services to their locality compromised the safety of all the girls and women. As a community leader, she stepped in as an agent to resolve the rising concern and worked with MHT to build evidence in support of their demands. She helped in mapping a new bus route responding to the travel pattern of women and called the attention of the local bodies for action.

“We always thought that working with the government is difficult and hesitated approaching our local leaders and officers. Now, with MHT's training, I feel more empowered to voice the community's concern effectively using data and evidence. We have built a pleasant working relationship with the local government and the elected councilors.”

Agent for change

Meenaben started engaging with MHT as a community leader in 2004 and rose through the ranks as a board member. From helping her community access improved water supply and drainage to mobilizing support for day-to-day challenges, Meenaben has played an instrumental role in Vishwas Nagar's growth. She has participated in multiple CAG meetings focused on training women on new climate-resilient technologies, city-level plans and policies, and ways to approach local government. During the Modroof pilot projects, Meenaben facilitated a visit for women from slum residences to another community where the Modroof was installed. With MHT's training, she grew confident in her ability to voice her community's concerns to the governing bodies and actively advocate for necessary improvements.

Future aspirations

Meenaben estimates that today her house is valued at about INR 15 lakhs (USD 20,172). She says that her family now lives in “a palace of her dreams”. She aspires to upgrade her home by adding another floor to welcome her son's family in the future. Meenaben also hopes to empower the women in her community through the skills she has gained from MHT's trainings and workshops.

References

Soni, M., (2021, March 19). Personal Interview.

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