

# Gender Responsive and Socially Inclusive WASH in Bangladesh

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## Executive Summary

In Bangladesh, most WASH services are not gender responsive and socially inclusive at local and national levels. Government and non-government stakeholders working in the WASH sector are not very aware of existing inequalities between different groups of people in accessing WASH services; and how these inequalities affect access to effective, efficient and sustainable WASH services. Consequently, excluded groups receive poorer coverage of WASH than others. Perspectives of excluded groups need to be included in WASH decision making processes, and their specific needs need to be addressed, to ensure that WASH services reach everybody in the country.

## Key facts and background

Access to WASH, meaning water, sanitation and hygiene, includes safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene practices, which reduces poverty and illness, and promotes well-being and socio-economic development especially among marginalized communities.<sup>i</sup> While everybody needs WASH, every day, WASH services are not equally available to all. On the basis of people’s social, economic, political, physical and geographical position, availability varies significantly (CAP-NET and GWA, 2014; WaterAid, 2012). WASH activities are traditionally designed for ‘average’ people in communities. Consequently, a large number of people are excluded from accessing WASH services. We have learned that it is often low-income women, children, elderly, pregnant women, people with disability, third gender, minorities, slum dwellers and people in hard to reach areas who belong to excluded groups, and affected most when WASH services are not enough inclusive (GWA, 2003; Mason and Mosello, 2017).

In Bhola, an island in the South of Bangladesh, for example, we have seen that the nomadic people (*Bede*) of Dhania Union are often left behind from access to and use of WASH services. Because, usually they are considered as low cast, they have no access to land and live on their boats on the riverbank, through fishing they earn a reasonable income only during monsoon when there is enough fish in the river, and they hardly have access to schools. Consequently, they cannot always get access to tube-well water, sanitary latrine, and activities related to sanitation and hygiene behaviour. There is no tube-well or sanitary latrine for them on the embankment. So they have no choice but to drink river water, defecate on the boats, and use river water for cleaning and washing. In this way, nomadic people, especially the women are suffering.

This example from Bhola is unfortunately not unique. It’s mostly people from excluded groups for whom WASH facilities are not accessible, not affordable or not sustainable. Poor WASH facilities have huge opportunity costs which limits people’s participation in education, income-earning, socio-political groups, and household level activities. It ultimately affects their empowerment and limits their contribution to the national economy and social development.<sup>ii</sup>

To improve this situation, evidence is needed: who are these excluded groups and where are they located? This is easier said than done as there is a lack of disaggregated data and evidence on WASH. Most of the information related to WASH services coverage is mentioning the percentage of total, rural and urban but disaggregated data mentioning the coverage of all different

Country: Bangladesh			
Service (Basic)	Coverage (%)		
	Total	Urban	Rural
Dr: Water	41.7	53.4	35.5
Sanitation	46.9	53.7	11.3
Hygiene	40.3	58.4	30.9

Source: JMP, 2015

groups of people separately, is hardly available. For example, in 2015, the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) data on Bangladesh only covered the total, rural and urban scenario of Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene coverage and service level, not the scenario of women or men and of poor, rich or other groups. This is one of the reasons why policy makers at national level and local government at Upazila (sub-district) and union levels may not really be aware of the terrible situation of their own citizens.

### Who is accountable for providing equitable services?

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives has overall responsibility for monitoring and governing the WASH sector, including policy formulation through its Local Government Division. Within the Ministry, DPHE is responsible for WASH services in all parts of the country, except Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong, the three largest cities, which are covered by the Water Supply and Sewerage Authorities. At the local level, LGIs are responsible to allocate and execute WASH-related activities.<sup>iii</sup>

At all these levels however, policy and implementation practices related to WASH, are mostly made by men, adult, influential, and able-bodied people. They decide where to install the tube-well and toilets, how many, following which design and technology, and with what type of facilities without considering different needs of different people. Women and excluded groups hardly participate in the decision making processes, so their opinions are largely ignored. Consequently, although WASH facilities are available, they often are inconvenient and inaccessible to use at all times by those people they are meant for (CAP-NET and GWA, 2014; Greene, et al., n.d).

For the accountable authority who need to ensure gender responsive and inclusive WASH services for all it is important to acknowledge this and to better understand:

- who is excluded from WASH services
- how exclusion from WASH services manifests itself
- why certain people are excluded from WASH services
- different WASH uses and priorities of women and men of different groups
- specific WASH needs and issues of the different excluded groups

**Acronyms:**

CSOs- Civil Society Organizations  
DPHE- Department of Public Health Engineering  
LGIs- Local Government Institutions  
MHM- Menstrual Hygiene Management  
NGO- Non Governmental Organization  
SDG- Sustainable Development Goal  
WASH- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Engaging all groups of people including poor men and women, children, elderly, third gender, minorities, people with disabilities in the local WASH committees will help to have a basic understanding of inequalities and barriers people face in

accessing WASH facilities. If meaningful participation of women and other vulnerable groups' members is ensured from the outset of the WASH activities - like planning, procurement, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, LGIs will understand their different needs and rights as well as stakeholders' own duties.

A good way to do this is to start with involving the community members to identify the most excluded groups in the community and reaching out the families who have no access to WASH services and committees.



*WASH Committee meetings should be organised in accessible places inviting representatives from excluded groups*

For example, in Bhola Sadar<sup>1</sup>, different groups of men and women including char dwellers<sup>2</sup>, nomadic people, people with disability and low caste people were explicitly invited and at least one of each group became member of two CSOs named Water Management Citizen's Committee (WMCC) and NGO Network under the Watershed project. As a member, they are accessing information and

<sup>1</sup> Bhola Sadar is a sub-district of Bhola District under Barisal Division, Bangladesh.

<sup>2</sup> Char is River Island where landless migrants receive temporary permission to live. So the communities are new and outside the government structure. There are no embankments (yet), so people always fear floods.

insight in procedures, and joining in different meetings with a variety of local and national stakeholders. Now they are able to join lobby and advocacy meetings with government stakeholders for better WASH access for all, and some positive processes are taking place:

- DPHE and LGIs professionals of Bhola Sadar are more focused on specific needs and specific locations: they are taking initiative for ensuring separate, MHM friendly, disable friendly, pregnant friendly, and elderly friendly sanitary toilet in the schools and public places
- DPHE and LGIs are planning to install sufficient number of tube-wells and sanitary toilets in the chars, cluster villages and on the riverbank

Along with local WASH committees, government stakeholders can encourage other government and non-government stakeholders involved in gender and social inclusion related activities to build partnership to mutually support each other. Together they could conduct an accessibility audit, disseminate information to all related stakeholders on accessible formats, do lobby and advocacy for an accessible budget, and make WASH facilities as accessible as possible for the people who used to be excluded. It could mean designing a system for greater interests, including a provision of “Leave No One Behind”.

### **Conclusion: what does it mean?**

Gender responsive and socially inclusive WASH services can bring a range of benefits to diverse user groups, and can offer a positive contribution to poverty elimination, improved health and nutrition, improved well-being, access to education, empowerment of women and girls, reduced inequalities and economic growth, if planned from the onset. When WASH services are not explicitly tailored to the needs of different users, there is a large risk that these users are not reached, they remain unserved, and they do not share in the intended benefits. As the universal coverage of WASH is the focus of SDG 6<sup>3</sup> and the government of Bangladesh has committed to it for the socioeconomic development of the country<sup>iv</sup>, WASH services should be available, accessible, affordable and usable for all. Therefore, it is important to identify the excluded, to analyze the reasons for their exclusion from WASH activities, to design WASH activities in such a way as to eliminate the multiple barriers the excluded groups face, and to have a mandate for sufficient, equitable and timely resource allocation and operation at all levels. Development targets will never be met unless the unequal power relations are eradicated, as well as gender and social inclusion aspects are given enough consideration in WASH policies and practices.

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<sup>3</sup> SDG 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

## Recommendations

To ensure that WASH services reach every citizen equally irrespective of their age, sex, ethnicity, socio-economic class, caste, religion, location, and ability, both government and non-government sector need to work together, complementary to each other. Following suggestions were made:

- Ensure effective participation of women and people from excluded groups from the local level to national level WASH forums so that they can address the issues of women and excluded people in the WASH policies and implementation
- Ask women and vulnerable groups for their specific needs, and listen to their suggestions.
- Collect or request for disaggregated data and pay specific attention to women and excluded groups so that results and impacts show how all community members benefit from the WASH programmes
- Collaborate with other government stakeholders and CSOs to generate evidence needed for planning, budgeting and decision making
- Bring relevant government officials, WASH project personnel and representatives of excluded groups together to establish constructive and on-going policy dialogue.
- Design WASH projects in inclusive way to reduce the extra cost for exclusive facilities for individual groups and provide guidance to LGIs on how to implement inclusive WASH services at local level

“Nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens”- Article 28 (4), The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WASH> [accessed on 10 March 2018].

<sup>ii</sup> Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/wash/index\\_3951.html](https://www.unicef.org/wash/index_3951.html) [accessed on 10 March 2018].

<sup>iii</sup> Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A1651F1B7F6C4EB24925778B002504F1-Full\\_Report.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A1651F1B7F6C4EB24925778B002504F1-Full_Report.pdf) [accessed on 11 March 2018].

<sup>iv</sup> Available at: [https://www.globaltaxjustice.org/sites/default/files/SDG-and-Country-Process-in-Bangladesh\\_EquityBD-Campaign-Paper.pdf](https://www.globaltaxjustice.org/sites/default/files/SDG-and-Country-Process-in-Bangladesh_EquityBD-Campaign-Paper.pdf) [accessed on 10 March 2018]

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