



Gender and WASH Committees: Women's Participation, Leadership and Decision-Making

Sanitation, Hygiene and Water Management Project, Bajhang

Project Background

The Sanitation, Hygiene and Water Project was implemented in Bajhang District in Nepal's remote far west by the Nepal Red Cross Society and ran from July 2014 to June 2018. Guided by the Government of Nepal's 2011 Sanitation Master Plan, the project assisted target communities to address their water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) needs equitably to improve the health and wellbeing of all.

Bajhang is mountainous, up to 7000 metres above sea level, with low population density and a lack of transport and market infrastructure that limits access and service delivery. The target population was largely poor and included a number of Dalit communities. Cultural practices, such as *Chhaupadi*¹, created barriers to women accessing water and toilets and practicing hygienic behaviours during menstruation.

The region is considered one of the most gender-inequitable areas of Nepal. Men and women alike have been brought up in a deeply patriarchal society and mindset with the result that women are regarded as incapable or less capable of taking leadership positions: both men and women assumed that women should not take on these roles.

Results

The project strengthened the capacity of women, and the enabling environment, for them to actively participate in WASH and Water User Committees. They now represent 55% of membership, which has led to visible improvements in their standing in their communities. Inclusion of women in WASH planning and decision-making processes also strengthened other key results from the project, including:

- Target areas declared open defecation free and people having and using toilets near their home.
- New and rehabilitated water supply schemes are providing safe water, managed by sustainable Water User Committee (WUCs).
- Households have increased their awareness and practices related to hygiene.
- Community systems developed for solid and animal waste management.
- Changes to some of the restrictive *Chhaupadi* practices, with women now having improved menstrual hygiene practices, including the capacity to produce and sell reusable sanitary pads.
- Schools within the target communities promoting hygiene through peer-led WASH clubs and with increased access for students to improved sanitation and water.

1. Prohibits Hindu women from participating in normal family activities while menstruating, as they are considered "impure". Traditionally women were kept out of the house and stay in a cattle shed/makeshift hut; forbidden to touch men, consume milk, yogurt, butter, meat, and other nutritious foods. They could not use warm blankets, and were restricted from going to school or performing daily functions like taking a bath.

“Nobody will make our villages clean, we need to work ourselves and make it better.”

- Chanmati Jhaprel, Ward WASH Committee Secretary, Sainpasela

Impact of including women in WASH Committees and Groups

The project aimed to motivate and empower households to address their WASH challenges and community decision makers to sustainably manage access to water and sanitation and maintain improved hygienic practices. This was underpinned by support for inclusive decision-making that reflected the needs and interest of all – including men and women. The project targeted 50% female representation on Ward level WASH Committees and WUCs, and supported women to take up management or technical roles within these.

Research conducted in May-June 2018 shows that the project has left a meaningful legacy of improved participation, leadership and decision-making by women.

“In case of rural women residing in villages of Bajhang district, far away from the urban centres, empowerment of women could just mean simple things such as being able to introduce themselves in public gatherings, communicating without shyness, and dealing with official processes at the local government offices.”

- Red Cross District Chapter

- Women’s participation in WASH committees has exceeded the Government’s mandatory provision of 33% representation. Ward WASH Committees and WUCs now have an average of 55% women participation.
- Representation does not equal participation, however meeting minutes show women were not just attending but also regularly participating as both general members and in decision-making roles, indicating their commitment and sense of ownership.
- The increased confidence, self-esteem and social currency of women participants has had a noticeable impact on household gender relations. While men continue to be the primary decision-maker, women have more of a voice.

Some female members of WASH committees were able to change the meal schedule in their household because they had to attend committee meetings or events, indicating a distinct shift in the control of household level decision-making.

“Generally, lunch time is at 12 to 1pm. Nowadays, when we have to attend to afternoon meetings, we ask everybody to eat by 10am so that we can be free for community work. Further, now we don’t wait until everyone else has eaten for our turn to eat. If someone is late or not ready to eat at 10, we cannot go out hungry.”

- Focus Group participant, Sainpasela

- Community perceptions regarding women’s participation in community life, as well as their roles outside of the home, have improved. Women face fewer restrictions from their families in relation to participating in community activities and groups. Women committee members report having an identity outside of the home, which is ground-breaking in itself.
 - Women participated in menstrual hygiene management (MHM) trainings and shared their experiences with their committees, who then collectively promoted key messages to the community. MHM training has had tangible impacts upon women’s human rights and experiences of ostracization resulting in a reduction of menstrual related taboos at the household level. It has greatly reduced the practice of *Chhaupadi* and, in some places, the *Chhaupadi* goths (sheds located outside the household for use of menstruating women) have been removed.
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“We had to go through many restrictions. Every month, we were not allowed to live inside our house and were barred from eating several food items. After participating in the MHM program, we convinced ourselves that these restrictions were baseless. Then we decided not to follow them. At the outset, some family members opposed us. We did our best to explain to them, but we were also determined to follow our decision. Ultimately they gave in and gradually accepted our decision.”

- Focus Group participant, Royal

- 50% of all technical trainees, such as water technicians and masons, were women. Many reported increased confidence and social currency, with their technical skills helping challenge negative gender stereotypes in their communities.
- Women’s participation in WASH and Water Committees has facilitated a broader role in women’s community decision-making and participation. Several women and men who were Committee members/leaders or project Community Motivators were nominated as candidates or elected in the recent local elections.

“Sometimes I feel like a blind person trying to find the way. Had I been taught to read and write, I could have led the whole district not just this WASH committee.”

- Focus Group participant, Sainpasela

- The increased confidence, self-esteem and social currency of women participants, gained during their engagement in these Committees, has had a noticeable impact on household gender relations.
 - GESI training provided a basis for engaging women (and men) but if it had been provided with more depth it could have broadened the impact.
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“We are leaving back 35 motivators of whom 30 are young women. All of them are locals, well known and trusted in their communities. If we had provided them with intensive GESI training, they could have been change agents who could significantly contribute towards the promotion of gender equality.”

- Project Health Supervisor

- Technical training of women in itself does not ensure their employment in the field. While 50% of all technical trainees were women, only some have found paid positions.
 - Women were more effective leaders in women-only groups than in mixed gender ones. The project experimented with some women-only committees and this was effective in garnering meaningful participation of women and developing some exemplary women leaders who have become game changers in a predominantly male domain. Learning from this suggests that women’s leadership and decision-making was greater when they could work amongst themselves in comparison to working on committees that also had male members.
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Recommendations

The groundwork has been prepared for increased leadership roles for women. Despite their low levels of formal education, the women that have participated in the WASH and Water User Committees and WUGs have overcome deeply entrenched social barriers. They are now considered valued members of community organisations and community leaders. Based on the learnings from this project the following are recommended for future WASH projects:

- Projects should conduct gender analysis of the local area to identify barriers and issues faced by women and include gender sensitization activities for all key stakeholders.
- The time burdens women face should be explicitly acknowledged at the beginning of the project. Family members should be encouraged to enable women to participate in Committee meetings.
- Guidelines for WASH Committees requiring 50% representation of women should be developed and linked to eligibility for project support.
- Local influencers need to be engaged to encourage female participation.
- A range of capacity-building activities for women, such as literacy and management skills and financial training, are required to accelerate transformation.
- Promote the use of trained women and older community members for technical roles as they are less likely to migrate for employment.
- Ensure MHM is integrated in WASH project activities and encourage women (and men) in WASH Committees to advocate for women’s human rights, in abolishing harmful and unhygienic practices during menstruation.
- Consider the involvement of religious leaders in MHM and WASH promotion to help change deeply-embedded social norms.

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