

Women's WASH Platforms in Bangladesh and Cambodia

Gender

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Oxfam

Towards Inclusive WASH Sharing evidence and experience from the field



*"...(Before) there was so much
disease and more than 200
deaths one year"*

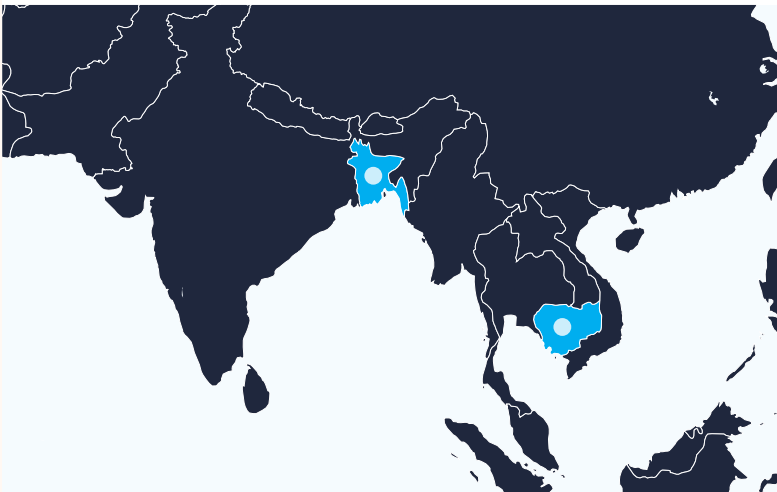
A WWP member from Kratie

Background

Oxfam's multi-country portfolio is located in more than 100 remote rural communities in six countries and is funded by AusAID's Civil Society Organisation WASH Fund. The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects in Bangladesh and Cambodia deliver multiple outcomes including improving water and sanitation, encouraging safe hygiene behaviour and mobilising village Women's WASH Platforms (WWPs). These volunteer groups of women receive small grants for their own projects, training in gender and leadership, share lessons and advocate for themselves with government officials and/or non-government organisations (NGOs). The project seeks to increase the WASH capacity of the WWP members and leaders and decrease gender inequities by reducing the time women

Location

» Kratie, Cambodia; Jamalpur and Naokhali, Bangladesh



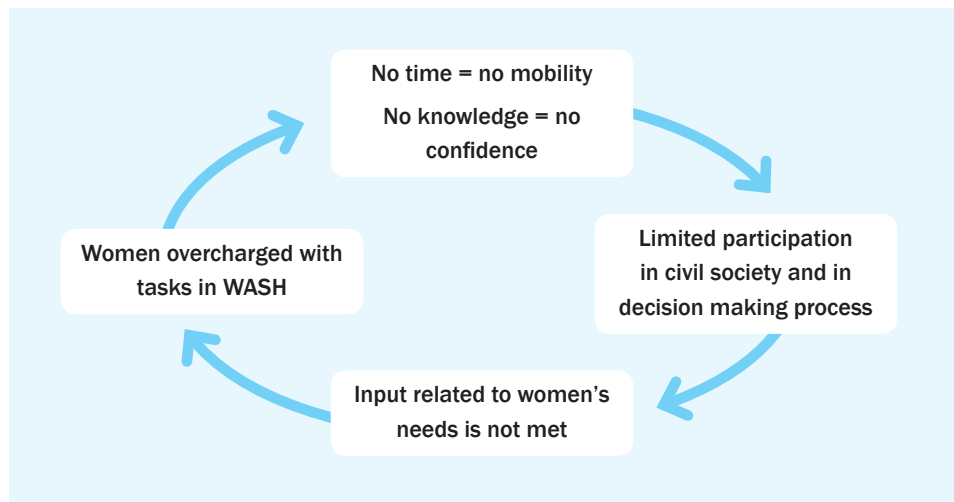
and girls spend on WASH-related chores and by supporting women to be decision-makers in local community development.

Initial situation

In the project target areas, water and sanitation facilities are inadequate and often not properly managed. The prevalence of WASH-related infectious diseases is high. Women bear the burden of WASH deficiencies, but they have little or no way to contribute to solutions (Figure 1). In Cambodia, government policies on governance and development designate gender equity as a priority, yet official systems, practical will and local habitual practices keep women outside of decision-making processes. Similarly, in Bangladesh, new "chars"¹ not yet under government administration are dominated by musclemen,² and the densely populated flood-prone river basins suffer from lack of services and the absence of gender sensitivity in decision-making.

Inadequate WASH services in both projects meant that hygiene practices are unhealthy, undignified and even risky. In Cambodia, young girls run all the way home from school when they need to defecate. In some areas, women haul buckets of faeces-contaminated river water up steep embankments for household needs. Contaminated drinking water is a source of water-borne diseases, which bring an additional burden to women

Figure 1
WASH and women's participation (before)



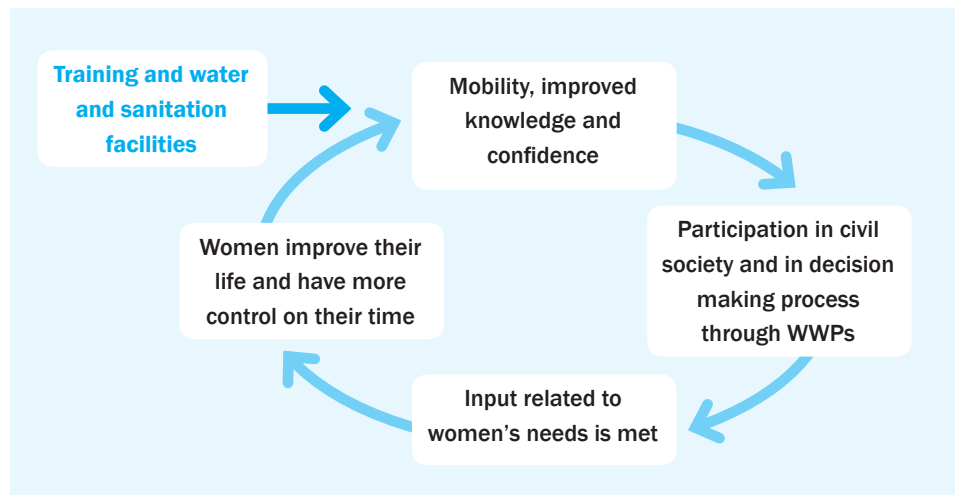
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¹ Char are accretions of sand and silt forming new land masses in the middle of rivers or where rivers meet the sea. Landless migrants receive temporary permission to live there, so the communities are new and outside the government structure.

² Members of gangs who intimidate or use violence upon communities

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Figure 2
WASH and women's participation (after)



who are the traditional health carers in their families. In Bangladesh, bathing and defecating in the open, in densely populated areas, is a constant challenge to women's dignity. In both locales, women walk long distances to collect and transport water because women do not usually participate in the decisions about the location of new community tubewells.

The WWPs provide a platform for women to assert their needs and to take action, building on WASH knowledge from their experience in their own households (Figure 2). Although WASH is broadly acknowledged in both countries as the province of women at the household level, they are often not consulted in WASH-related decision-making processes. Even though both countries already have some established government structures for including women in society, the WWPs are a significant step towards improved grassroots participation.

Project evaluations show that a gender sensitive approach and access to gender-sensitive WASH facilities has a significant positive impact on the daily lives of women and girls. However, a gender sensitive approach to WASH benefits not only women and girls, but also all people in the community, as everyone is empowered by improved water and sanitation services and hygiene practices. Empowerment is a complex process that can be built by improving everyone's access to essential services.

Oxfam's actions

In both countries, Oxfam initiated the formation of the WWPs in target villages and trained the members on leadership, WASH monitoring, proposal writing, project planning, financial management and some technical skills. Oxfam funds proposals written by the WWP members of between US\$100 and US\$1,500. The most immediately visible, shared results of the WWP projects, as presented at recent forums in both countries, include: increased awareness of gender/role-differentiated needs; increased experience and confidence in decision-making among WWP members; increased recognition of women's abilities in public-sector activities by their communities at large; and promising possibilities for links with the government's development apparatus. This is in addition to successfully achieving practical WASH-related goals such as ending open defecation and improving health from safe water use and hygiene.

In both countries, there are WWP savings or lending groups targeting women. The great innovation here is the emphasis on giving women hygiene and technical knowledge and encouraging them to assess their problems and evaluate their solutions, so they are able to conceive and implement their own proposals. However, the two country contexts and the staff are very different, and thus their programs are also different. A comparison helps to tease out obstacles, solutions, possible positive and negative effects, and issues and questions that may be relevant to other country projects.

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Figure 3
Cambodian WWP write a WASH proposal, Cambodia
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Figure 4
WWP members learn about hygiene promotion, Cambodia
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selected from hygiene promoters. Basic literacy was only required of two members. The executive members then identified a larger group to form the WWP, on average seven to nine, but up to seventeen in one village, most of whom were neighbours. The three executive members received training on gender, hygiene, writing proposals, leadership (facilitating a training/meeting) and accounting. Following a cascade model, they then passed on the training to the other members (Figure 4). In Cambodia members were not required to meet regularly.

Many of the WWPs sought support from the chiefs of their village (usually men) when publicising about clean water and hygiene, since the involvement of this authority figure was important to recognition of the WWPs by fellow villagers as knowledgeable, especially at the beginning of the project. While in Cambodia there was no formal or official reason that women should not be leaders, the complex political history, lack of system linking state structures with other village community processes, the circumstantial division of labour, overlapping status hierarchies of age, gender and wealth, education levels and entrenched local habits had disenfranchised women (and poor men) in crucial community decision-making processes, especially those associated with the official government hierarchy.

For this reason, perhaps the most exciting result of the first completed phase of this project was the way WWP members rose to the challenge of two 'sharing' forums held in the provinces, and one workshop held in the capital, Phnom Penh. Government

Cambodia Program

In Cambodia, Oxfam project staff introduced the WWP initiative in 68 villages under its WASH program. In the first stage of the program 34 WWPs received grants. With encouragement from government counterparts and in alignment with the government's gender policy, most of the projects focused on training or strengthening awareness of local communities on hygiene and best WASH practices. Other proposals included: promotion of the use of baskets for garbage collection; provision of pans and pipes to families to build latrines; and spare parts for ceramic water filters, stock piled by the WWPs (Figure 3).

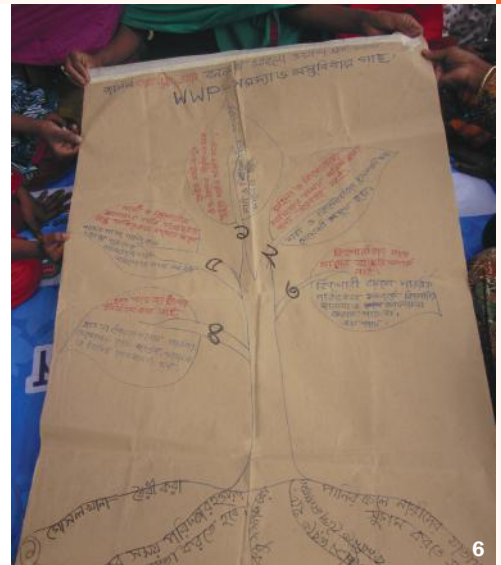
Oxfam staff and the government staff of the local departments of health, women's affairs, education and rural development, worked with village chiefs to select a hygiene promoter to launch the WWP. Every group had three executive members

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5



6



7

Figure 5

A WWP member from Bangladesh

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Figure 6

WWP draw the structure of their team, Bangladesh

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Figure 7

A WWP member and her village problem tree diagram, Bangladesh

Oxfam Bangladesh

officials answered direct questions from WWP members. WWP representative members not only reported on their own work to the national sector, and lobbied for a link between improved WASH services and commune development plans, the members also responded spontaneously to questions from officials about their difficulties, and described the way they overcame obstacles. A WWP member from Kratie said the WWP project “showed them I can take a leadership role.” She went on to describe her work:

(Before) there was so much disease and more than 200 deaths one year. The people thought it was caused by a tmoep, (a kind of sorcerer), or spirits, so they wanted to move out of the village. Now they use bamboo to carry boiled water to the field and dig a hole and cover it when they defecate.

Bangladesh Program

In Bangladesh the project was initiated in 20 villages, half in the river basin region of Jamalpur, and half in the new communities of Naokhali. Oxfam and partner agencies with programs and staff long established in each region organised initial meetings with village women and villagers to choose both a Village Development Committee (VDC) and the WWP. The VDCs have no official role with the WWPs but in practice were sometimes given an unofficial advisory role to ease tension (Figure 5). The VDCs received no funds, but the WWPs received small grants. While trainings were similar to those in Cambodia, they also included menstrual hygiene management (MHM) issues. The trainers reported that the trainings helped the WWP members to ‘see’ their problems. The women then walked from house to house, teaching, by showing people, the same way they had learned (Figures 6 and 7). Monthly meetings sometimes included female partner agency staff and village health promoters. One exciting aspect was the way in which bathing cubicles, developed by a WWP in Naokhali to solve the problem of public bathing, were admired by a visiting WWP from Jamalpur and then replicated there (Figure 8). Naokhali WWPs have also started groups to teach adolescent girls about MHM.

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Figure 8
WWP in front of their new
bathing facility, Bangladesh
 Oxfam Bangladesh



WWPs in Bangladesh have opened bank accounts and manage the balances, withdrawing money to buy construction materials from the market themselves. Most of the women had never done either before. Market places and management of public projects in programs areas tended to be the province of men. Therefore, implementing every aspect of their WASH proposals challenged entrenched barriers to women's civil participation. A WWP member from Jamalpur describes her engagement:

I fought to stop open defecation like (I would fight) a liberation war ... before I wasn't doing anything for the community, but now, no force can stop me.

Key differences between the two programs

WWPs engaged with each other in different ways in the two countries. Whereas in Bangladesh, individual WWPs went to see the work of their counterparts in other villages, in Cambodia, regional and national forums brought all the WWPs together to exchange ideas and experiences.

The Cambodian and Bangladesh implementing teams had the opportunity to exchange ideas at the national WWP workshop in Cambodia. Viewing the design of latrines and bathing cubicles at the same forum sparked

analysis of technological possibilities in the Cambodian team and WWP members. Cambodian WWPs confronting government officials, sparked ideas for the Bangladesh team whose project had not yet linked to government.

After

In Cambodia, the WWP members were able to plan and proceed with their projects without opposition. When their leadership or knowledge was challenged, they did not take a confrontational stance. Pervasive teaching of the rule of law and human rights in Cambodia demands compliance but also provokes resistance among community members. The women deployed more subtle strategies, using reason in the face of bias or knee-jerk resistance from men towards their new roles. They garnered support for their leadership by making significant positive changes in daily lives. They negotiated task sharing with husbands for the benefit of the family. The lesson here, in consonance with grassroots approaches as alternatives or complements to women's rights approaches, may be that women can draw from lessons on non-violence, conflict resolution, and everyday wisdom to help mould Cambodia's emergent political culture. As leaders, the WWPs might be able to capitalise on different kinds of power (alternatives to

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top-down state power) that studies have suggested congeal community cooperation and equalise differences from 'below'. Some WWP members said that in the future they are willing to act as advocates for gender-sensitive WASH issues.

In Bangladesh, WWP members must negotiate the politically loaded issue of "purdah" (covering the woman's body for modesty related to both her spiritual well-being and to her own and her husband's honour). Like Cambodian women, they have pressure from their husbands to fulfil particular domestic duties (especially cooking). Young married women are also subject to the power of their mothers-in-law. Because of their involvement in the program, WWP members and also their husbands received insults from men and were pressured by religious leaders and illegal, armed 'musclemen' who control Naokhali. For example, one WWP had to seek help from the police when villagers who were angry at the placement of a bathing cubicle destroyed the window of a home nearby. WWP members showed great courage in facing intimidating obstacles like this. This should be taken as both a testament to the strength of women's interest, but also a warning regarding the care needed to protect participants from retribution. As for the future of this project, several groups have already begun making contributions of personal funds to continue in a small way. In both programs, once the WWPs were able to identify their community's WASH problems, they showed initiative that amazed male observers and won them considerable latitude from husbands and village leaders. However, the pressures outlined earlier can impact the sustainability of the projects by preventing women from participating long term. It was also noted that the replacement of local natural materials with manufactured ones bought at the market, and substituting paid labour for a building task that husbands or brothers might do/have done also impacts on community relationships and support for the project.

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Learning points

A number of challenges arose during this project. Rural life involves an economy of time and energy, not just money, and women's participation in community development requires flexibility throughout the village. They can often be excluded from participation because of everyday time constraints and expectations of their spouses depending on their age and position in the family structure. Improving the distribution of tasks to allow for women's participation requires households to rearrange their habits and limits mobility of other members.

There was also a degree of ambivalence about volunteering because it exacerbated or called attention to financial pressures, incited tensions between husbands and wives and made it difficult for the very poor in each locale to participate. Groups composed of neighbours may encounter more concerns about corruption (Cambodia). Groups of relative strangers may take longer to build trust among group members (Bangladesh).

The bulk of the management tasks often fell on a few leaders. In Cambodia there are many community demands on the few relatively educated women. In Bangladesh, there may be some tensions when leaders are young, on committees with strong older women, although training members seemed to help distribute the burden of participation across many women.

As the discussion has shown, in both countries the shape the projects took was influenced by the context. The choice of the WASH projects implemented by the WWPs was related to the substance, format and context of trainings, too. In Cambodia they were likely influenced by the officials' assertions that publicising hygiene and clean water is appropriate for women. In Bangladesh, influence came from community enablers (from NGO partners) and their focus on available technologies was necessarily linked with technical capacity building. However, this seems like necessary support, not excessive intervention.

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In some cases the WWP had to negotiate with power brokers. In both countries, they had to convince local power brokers of the value of hygiene and clean water as well as the WWP members' suitability to carry out projects. Getting power brokers and WWP husbands on board at the outset could help. Perhaps this could be done by including them in trainings or as audience to WWP practice-teaching sessions.

In Cambodia and Bangladesh, women's empowerment becomes tangled up with misunderstandings about culture, local politics, the agendas of international and local NGOs and far-reaching national concerns. Both programs function in a contemporary moment of history characterised by globalisation and international interventions that have made women the symbolic centre of nation-building. This has made women's participation in civil society a sometimes controversial political issue. In Bangladesh, where the WWP were reinventing, not necessarily rejecting, the use of the burka, the politics have been cross cut with disagreements on the interpretation of 'purdah' in Islam.

Gender issues, for WASH or otherwise, are not only 'women's issues'. In Bangladesh, men who help their wives must also cope with negative reactions from the community. In both countries, men as well as women saw the advantages of working together. The women of the WWPs effectively reinvented relationships with loved ones and authorities to make the projects possible, but they did not do it alone.

This case study is one of sixteen from the Towards Inclusive WASH series, supported by AusAID's Innovations Fund. Please visit www.inclusivewash.org.au/case-studies to access the rest of the publication and supporting resources.

Supporting Resources

- » Greene, K (2011) *Review of Oxfam's Women's WASH Platforms in Bangladesh and Cambodia*, Prepared for the Water and Sanitation Initiative, AusAID CSO WASH Fund. Oxfam Australia. 31 December, 2011
- » Video: Oxfam (2011) *Women's WASH Platforms – Improved access to WASH in the River Basin and Coastal Regions of Bangladesh*
- » *Completed Analysis Worksheets: (1) Wall of barriers and (2) Breaking down barriers to WASH*

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