Gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic

Research report – August 2021

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Introduction

Experiences of gender transformative leaders in WASH and their contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic

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What is gender transformative leadership?

"Gender transformative leadership seeks to cultivate individuals, including decision-makers, who empower themselves and their organizations to pay close attention to gender power structures and discriminatory practices—both formal and informal—in order to advance gender equity in their organizations as well as in the communities and constituencies they serve"

Definition of gender transformative leadership from UN Women Gender Transformative Leadership Participatory Toolkit for Health Workers

How is it relevant to WASH?

Gender transformative leadership in WASH strengthens inclusion and can positively influence wider social structures towards gender equality.

Gender transformative WASH leaders take many forms. They can be in formal positions of authority, or equally can be working within organisations and communities to influence norms and practices.

Learning from the experiences of leaders can inform WASH activities through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, towards inclusive and transformative outcomes.

This research report

This research report documents findings and reflections from a study of gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the study was:

> *To explore how leaders are responding in this challenging time of COVID-19 to both ensure the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups are represented and heard, and find ways to transform personal perspectives, norms, and systemic patterns towards gender equality.*

Taking a positive deviance approach, the study engaged with leaders identified as positively contributing to gender transformations in the WASH sector.

The study brings together perspectives from 19 leaders across **Bhutan**, **Nepal** and **Lao People's Democratic Republic** (PDR). The study was undertaken in early 2021 by SNV and the Institute for Sustainable Futures-University of Technology Sydney (ISF-UTS) through the Water for Women Fund 'Beyond the Finish Line' program.

Meet the leaders

Ambika Yadav
Sarlahi District Coordinator
SNV
Nepal

Chomsy Ngamvilay
Deputy Head
Atsaphone District Health Office
Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

Bounta Chandamany
Technical Vaccination Officer
Palaxay District Health Office,
Savannakhet Province,
Lao PDR

H. E. Dechen Wangmo
Minister of Health
Government of Bhutan

Chandra Bahadur Khadka
Project Coordinator
Everest Club
Nepal

Douangchai Southammavong
Deputy Head
Lao Disabled Association
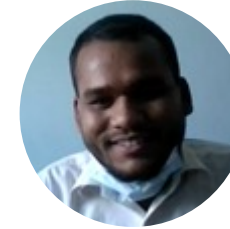Savannakhet Province Branch
Lao PDR

Kriparam Thapa
WASH Officer
Thatikand Rural Municipality
Nepal

Namgay Pelden
Gup *(local elected leader at the sub-district level)*
Bhutan

Madan Kumar Barma
Project Coordinator
SNV
Nepal

Rajesh Sahani
Member of Disabled People Organization Network
Nepal

Men Singh Lepcha
Community Health Assistant
Ministry of Health
Bhutan

Rampabitra Shah
Teacher
Education Department,
Ramnagar Rural Municipality
Nepal

Rinchen Wangdi
Chief
Public Health Engineering Division,
Department of Public Health
Bhutan

Silivanh Khamsingsavath
Accountant and Secretary
Lao Disabled People's Association,
Savannakhet Province Branch
Lao PDR

Souksakhone Kothliengthong
Head of Health and Hygiene
Communication and Promotion Unit
Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR
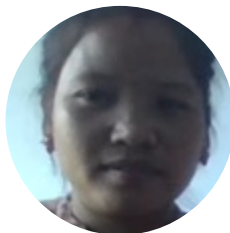
Suchitra Chaudhary
School teacher
Member of Disabled People
Organization Network
Nepal

Sunil Kumar Das
Joint Secretary
Planning and Development
Assistance Coordination Division,
Ministry of Water Supply
Nepal

Toumkham Phetsalath
Deputy Head
Champhone District Health Office
Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

Ugyen Wangchuk
Executive Director
Ability Bhutan Society
Bhutan

Approach and framework

A qualitative, strengths-based study informed by gender transformative leadership concepts

A qualitative strengths-based study

The study engaged with WASH leaders across Bhutan, Nepal and Lao PDR identified as demonstrating **inclusive leadership with potential to drive gender transformations**.

Interviews with WASH leaders explored their **values and leadership style** and took a strengths-based approach. We asked about what **enables** (and what constrains) gender transformative leadership, and identified **outcomes** achieved during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study took a **transformative approach** to research, committed to the idea of conducting research *with leaders* (instead of research *on*) – facilitating celebration and reflection.

Steps in the study:

- Team formation and research co-design

- Literature review and collaboratively developing the conceptual framework

- Development and refinement of interview guide

- Identification and recruitment of participants

- Interviews (n=19, including 9 women and 10 men)

- Analysis with reference to the conceptual framework

- Collaborative reflection to identify insights and implications for the WASH sector

Respondents

The participants were nominated by SNV teams in each country based on their knowledge of the health and WASH sectors. Nominated leaders were those who had demonstrated gender transformative leadership in the health and WASH sectors before and during COVID-19 response. From the initial list of nominated leaders, we sought diversity in experiences in terms of gender, disability status, level of experience and type of role (formal or informal across different organisational types).

In total, **19 interviews** were completed with 9 women and 10 men identified as demonstrating inclusive leadership with the potential to drive transformative change in the WASH sector in their countries.

Leaders involved in the study worked in a range of organisations and played diverse roles in the WASH sector. They included:

- 3 in national government positions (1 woman and 2 men)
- 7 in sub-national government positions (4 women and 3 men)
- 5 in rights holders organisations (3 women and 2 men)
- 4 NGO workers (1 woman and 3 men)

Five of the 19 leaders were people with disabilities (PWD) or working for PWD organisations.

	Bhutan	Nepal	Lao PDR	Total
Women	2	2	5	9
Men	3	6	1	10
Total	5	8	6	19

Gender transformative leadership concepts

Leadership can be thought of as the ability to bring people together to work towards common goals, or simply as being about social influence.[1] Our conception of gender transformative leadership was developed through a literature review and team discussions.

Gender transformative leadership can be conceived of as the ability to profoundly **expand dominant perceptions** of leadership towards the belief in all genders as being worthy and valuable leaders.

Gender transformative leaders do so **by being an example** in how they act in their own life, and in supporting others to **critically reflect** on their own perceptions and beliefs.

Gender transformative leadership might **look and feel different**. These leaders (women, men and beyond-binary) might embody and lead with **feminist and relational values**.

They are **purpose driven** towards rights and equality. Their style of leadership might be more **inclusive, collective, and open**.

They might be deep listeners and lead from the back. They might recognise leadership as a **process of collective learning** (reflection and action for transformation).
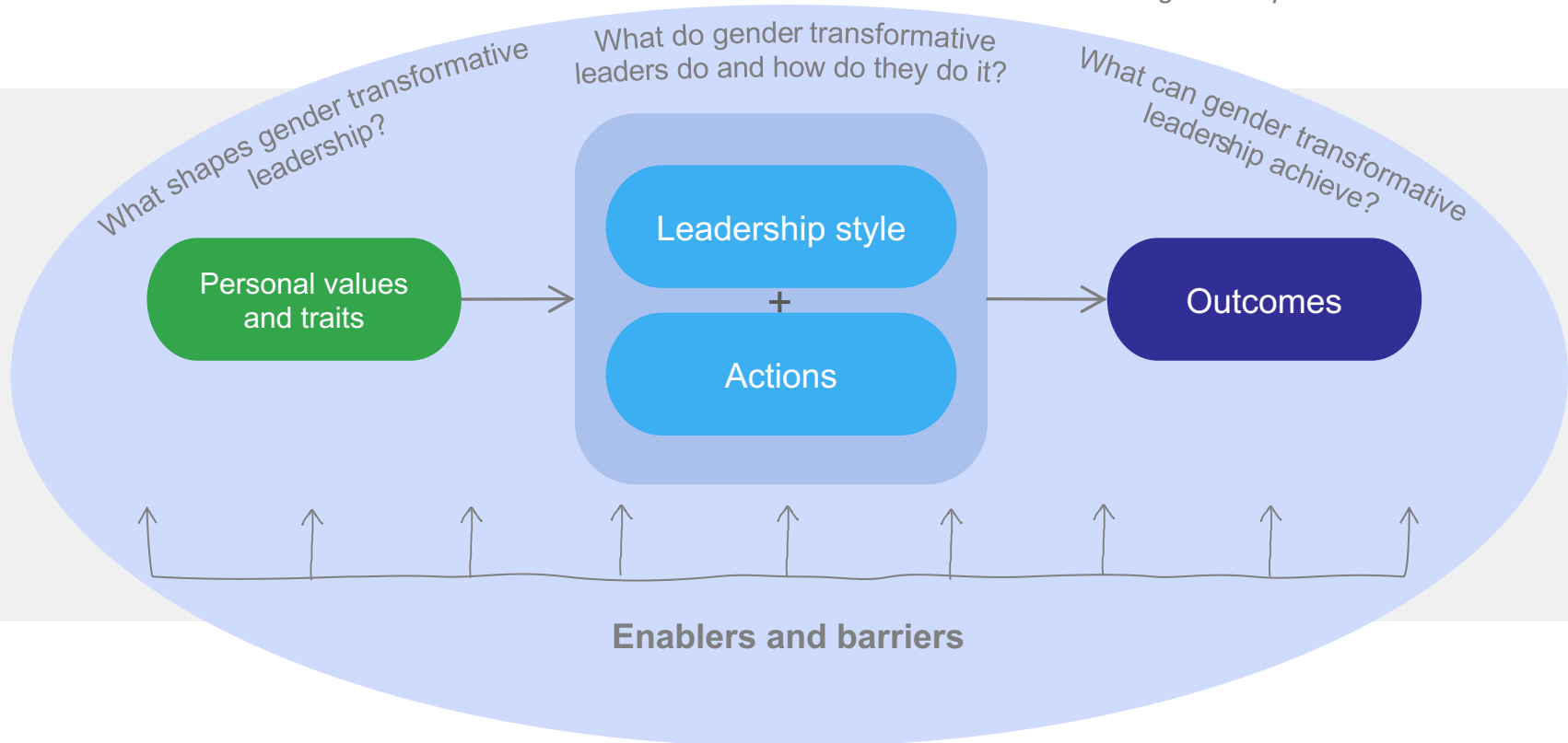
Gender transformative leadership also makes external changes. Leaders irreversibly **change norms**, standards, institutions and relationships towards those that facilitate **equitable and meaningful participation** of women in all their diversities and all genders in leadership.

These leaders might do so by vocalising a commitment to changing social norms; **bringing people together** to see and address entrenched exclusion, inequalities and marginalisation; and **challenging existing power relations**.

Conceptual framework

From literature and discussions, we developed a conceptual framework capturing key dimensions of gender transformative leadership in the WASH sector during the response to COVID-19.

What shapes gender transformative leadership?

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

What can gender transformative leadership achieve?

Personal values and traits

Leadership style

+

Actions

Outcomes

Enablers and barriers

Conceptual framework - definitions

Personal values and traits reflect a leader's worldviews, consciousness and personal principles. Values are fundamental in driving transformative action.[1] Gender transformative leaders commonly have feminist values and embody principles of gender equity and social justice.

Leadership style describes how a leader conducts themselves and communicates with others. Literature describes gender transformative leaders as motivating, caring and collaborative[2]. They often display humility[3], curiosity and integrity.[4]

Actions refer to what a leader does in their role. Gender transformative leaders tend to build networks and platforms that support gender equality and inclusion[1], also ensuring funding. They practice and role-model self-care, balance and self-esteem in their work.[1,5]

Outcomes are the changes that the leaders achieve as a result of their actions and leadership style. Outcomes of gender transformative leadership might include changes in rules, policies, formal institutions, systems, structures and decision-making.[1,2]
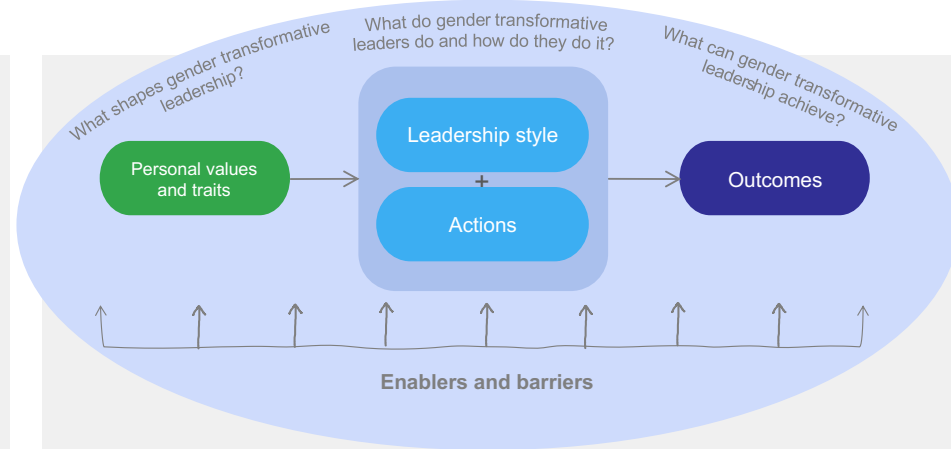
Enablers and barriers are factors that shape a leader's values, style, actions and achievements. They include a wide range of personal, collective, relational and structural factors and experiences. While our research focused on positive cases, the framework captures critical barriers to gender transformative leadership. Acknowledging that barriers such as norms and exclusionary practices exist and can hinder gender transformative leadership is necessary so that leaders can share their visions for dismantling them.[1,5]

[1]Brown et al. 2019; [2]Soeters et al. 2019; [3]Kristof, 2020; [4]Chamorro-Premuzic and Wittenberg-Cox 2020; [5]CARE, 2020

Findings

Characteristics of gender transformative leadership across the dimensions of the conceptual framework

3

- This section describes the findings within each of the conceptual framework dimensions: *Personal values and traits, Leadership style, Actions, Outcomes,* and *Enablers and Barriers*.

- Findings for each dimension also include reflections with reference to relevant literature.

- Each finding includes the frequency, or number of leaders who mentioned a theme, denoted by n=*x.* The stronger themes are presented in darker colours.

- The thematic analysis disaggregated responses from men and women leaders. In most cases there was alignment between both groups, and where there were meaningful differences, these have been noted.

Personal values and traits

What shapes gender transformative leadership?

What we found (1/2)

A **learning orientation** (n=12) was evident across interviewed leaders, seen as openness to learning from others and curiosity about new ideas.

Leaders were **self-reflective** (n=5). They emphasised working on self and being open to feedback on their style and actions.

Social justice values (n= 19) were evident in all leaders, and a desire to do right by those in positions of disadvantage, which often stemmed from personal experiences of disadvantage, or witnessing it in others. Some leaders also demonstrated **feminist values**, though they were less explicit.

Humility (n=3) was evident with leaders open to learning from others, aware of diffuse expertise and describing themselves as enabled by those around them.

Leaders talked about **courage** (n=3), being willing to do new things, take risks and sometimes work outside established rules when needed to achieve their goals.

Leaders were **altruistic** (n=6), wanting to contribute to their communities.

Related to social justice values, striving for **equality** (n=5) was important in the work that leaders do in aiming to achieve systemic change.

Reflections

- Most of the personal values and traits in the data aligned with the literature on transformative leadership.[1, 2, 3, 4]

- We found particularly strong evidence of learning orientation, self-reflection and social justice values (stronger themes are identified with darker text box colours).

[1]Brown et al. 2019; [2]Kristof 2020; [3]CARE 2020; [4]Cattlin, 2020

Personal values and traits

What shapes gender transformative leadership?

What we found (2/2)

Leaders were motivated by wanting to **prove themselves** (n=8) in their leadership roles. This was more common (though not only) among women or leaders with a disability. It reflects the fact that transformative leadership requires pushing against norms, and while motivating, implies greater effort required for those in positions of less power.

Having excellent **communication skills** (eloquence, clear and consistent messages) **and being good listeners** (n=8) were also highlighted as essential traits of gender transformative leaders.

A positive outlook (n=5) or optimism when faced with challenging circumstances such as COVID-19, which in turn had a positive effect on others, was seen as an important trait in leaders.

Leaders expressed that being able to **inspire, motivate and mobilise others and be a role model for others** (n=8) was crucial when working towards achieving a common goal and leading others to live a better life.

Several leaders spoke about the importance of being **trustworthy** (n=5) and how that gaining others' trust and respect enables them exert their influence

Leaders demonstrated exceptional **commitment, dedication and passion** (n=9) for their work, with leaders speaking about always doing their best in their endeavours and how that dedication has helped become the leaders they are today.

Reflections

- The feeling that leaders have to prove themselves can lead to a double burden and additional pressure for these leaders who have to fulfill their leadership roles as well as prove their status, and can also fuel impostor syndrome.

- The fact that leaders who are women or have a disability feel this burden suggests the prevalence of social norms regarding leadership as predominantly men's domain.

Personal values and traits

In their own words

" *Selflessness, equal treatment, activeness and kindness are the characteristics of leadership*

Suchitra Chaudhary

" *A leader should be brave*

Toumkham Phetsalath

" *One needs to want to lead with an attitude to learn.*

H.E. Dechen Wangmo

" *I wanted to show the community that people with disability can do everything.*

Rajesh Sahani

Leadership style

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

What we found (1/2)

Gender transformative leaders **lead by example** (n=11) and **pursue equality in their personal life** as well.

Leaders demonstrated they were **inclusive**, they involve and **gave others voice** and sought others' input and participation (n=7).

Leaders were **goal or vision oriented** (n=7) and said that leaders should be visionaries and work hard to achieve the goal.

An '**anything is possible**' attitude (n=3) underpinned leadership style

Leadership of self (n=4) was seen as equally important to outwards focused leadership. It involved self-reflection, investing time in learning, acknowledging their own limits, and actively seeking feedback from others.

Some leaders (n=4) mentioned that they **provided mentoring** to others, and see great value in building others' skills and knowledge up.

Gender transformative leaders **sought to build consensus and be persuasive** (n=6). They convinced people to see that GESI is important, they didn't elevate their own status, they were aware of and managed backlash, felt energised by criticisms and didn't shy away from them.

Leadership style

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

What we found (2/2)

Leaders focused on others and prioritised **direct engagement with vulnerable or marginalised people** (n=7), however, noting that this had to be somewhat limited during COVID outbreaks. Meeting diverse communities raised their awareness, knowledge and motivation towards inclusive leadership.

Two leaders expressed that they are **willing to take some risks** (n=2), which is linked to the value of courage. The degree to which this was possible depended on different circumstances.

Leaders highlighted the importance they placed in a leadership style underpinned by **teamwork** and leading with an **'open door'** for new ideas and collaboration (n=6)

Leadership styles were primarily **empathetic** (n=12). In the response to COVID, they prioritised vulnerable and disadvantaged people (women victims of GBV, elderly, PWD); and supported their staff to ensure their wellbeing.

Some leaders highlighted the importance of **adaptive management** (n=2), and having flexible plans without compromising the overall goal

Leaders gave extensive evidence of managing up and **influencing at both the community and government levels** in order to effect change (n=7).

Reflections

- The gender transformative leadership styles identified in the data align with those emerging in literature. The literature highlights styles that are motivating, caring, participatory, empathetic, communicating with humility,[1] curiosity, integrity,[2] focus on prevention, do not underestimate risks, prioritise long-term social well-being over 'popular decisions' [3, 4] emotionally intelligent, democratic, willing to listen, focused on others.[5]

[1]Kristof 2020; [2]Chamorro-Premuzic and Wittenberg-Cox 2020; [3]Fioramonti et al., 2020; [4]Blaser, 2020; [5]Cattlin, 2020

Leadership style

In their own words

When I face obstacles and criticism from others while working, it gives me more energy. When I face social and political criticism, I visit those groups and try to convince them.

Rampabitra Shah

I firmly believe that everybody, irrespective of who they are has things to contribute, valuing other people's potential and even at the MoH, always keeping my door open to my sub-ordinates, nourishing the relationships that support my leadership.

H.E. Dechen Wangmo

Convincing higher-level stakeholders is difficult, but when they experience people's situations in the field first-hand, they are assured and convinced to change things.

Sunil Kumar Das

I have never stopped raising my voice for women and marginalised communities in my society as well as in my home.

Ambika Yadav

If one wishes to achieve something, it can be done at all costs

Men Singh Lepcha

Examples of leaders' actions (1/3)

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

Improving WASH services for all during the pandemic

During the pandemic, **Ambika Yadav from Nepal** and her team, together with the local government conducted a WASH sector gap analysis to identify vulnerable groups whose access to sanitation and handwashing facilities was impacted by COVID-19. They identified women, children, people with disability, elderly people, and poor and marginalised communities as the most vulnerable. Based on the analysis, they promoted GESI-friendly contactless handwashing stations in public places and quarantine centres. These efforts led to significant improvements in hygiene behaviours among the vulnerable groups.
Ambika was also proactive in mobilising her team to spread awareness about the importance of physical distancing and handwashing with soap through mobile messaging, particularly among people with disabilities.

Enabling women's participation in the workplace

Namgay Pelden from Bhutan initiated the construction of a breastfeeding room for the convenience of breastfeeding mothers visiting the Gewog office for work, and for the young mothers working in the office. She is in the process of seeking the support from agencies like the National Commission for Women and Children.

Reflections

- All the leaders shared compelling stories of actions they have undertaken to ensure their work is gender transformative and supports social inclusion.

- These examples align with the literature, in highlighting that leaders build sustainability and transformative agency of networks and organisations, and enact leadership as a 'collective' rather than only reductively as an individual.[1, 2]

[1]Brown et al. 2019; [2]CARE 2020

Examples of leaders' actions (2/3)

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

Supporting younger women in the workplace and gender mainstreaming

Chomsy Ngamvilay from Lao PDR advocated for and supported female staff to move up into higher roles and leadership positions in the District Health Office. COVID-19 didn't stopped her from continuing to support gender equality in the office and in the community, as she mainstreamed gender work into all her work in public health and WASH. She said:

"There are many women who work under my supervision and I can say that I lead them and show them how to work hard to provide quality services. I am sure that my leadership will be an example, and they can mainstream gender into their work more in the future."

Reflections

- This story highlights how leaders can enact their leadership in fresh ways that truly change the patriarchy[1] as well as practicing transformative leadership in professional bodies.[2]

[1]Brown et al. 2019; [2]Blaser, 2020

Examples of leaders' actions (3/3)

What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

Involving men in gender activities

During a menstrual hygiene day celebration in a community, **Men Singh Lepcha from Bhutan** gave a talk on menstrual hygiene management. This was the first time such talk was delivered in this place, where menstruation was a taboo. He first took all the women outside, and handed out a red ribbon to all the men present. As the women came back inside, he invited the men present to tie the ribbon around women's upper arms and to applaud the women to honour them.

Then, after all was done, he told them it was menstrual hygiene day. He said:
"It is not just about telling men, but also about involving them, and having mass participation."

Placing the vulnerable at the centre of the response

Dechen Wangmo from Bhutan mobilised her team at the Ministry of Health to call every person in the country over 60 years old to ensure their safety during the pandemic and to reduce mortality from the virus. This, she felt, was one of the reasons there had been only 1 death from the pandemic in Bhutan while in so many other countries there had been extensive elderly and vulnerable population deaths.

Encouraging men's participation to manage resistance

When doing activities towards gender transformation in communities, **Madan Kumar Barma from Nepal** faced resistance from men. He said that men in the community thought his team were disseminating a negative message in the community in terms of household roles and responsibility, gender equality, women's rights, and gender-based violence. This was a very challenging situation, which made him change his approach. He brought both men and women in one place and started discussions on gender equality together. This changed men's perceptions about women's discrimination. Now women participate in different forums and committees, and there is no discrimination, though there is still work to do in terms of their involvement in decision-making.

Outcomes

What can gender transformative leadership achieve?

What we found (1/2)

It was evident that **improved quality WASH services** for all was achieved, especially related to access to water and hand hygiene behaviours during COVID-19 response (n=8).

Delivery of **inclusive health services** (n=5) and an **increase in girls' access to education** (n=2) was reported.

Through their work and advocacy, and by being role models, leaders are slowly **changing social norms** (n=5) and changing men's views towards women and women's participation, especially in rural settings. They have also achieved **higher awareness** (n=4) of the need for gender equality and social inclusion among community members and other stakeholders.

Some women leaders reported believing that through their work as leaders they have been able to **change the public's negative perceptions of women leaders** (n=3).

Leaders reported having placed **vulnerable groups at the centre of the COVID response** (n=12)

Increase in women's self-confidence (n=1) and their **participation** (n=9) in the workplace and in community engagement settings, with reference to women beneficiaries.

Outcomes

What can gender transformative leadership achieve?

What we found (2/2)

Leaders have observed an **increase in their self-confidence** as a result of their roles as leaders (n=9).

One of the leaders reported achieving **changes to policy** at the national level (n=1).

The effect that leaders have had on others through their mentoring and capacity building builds an **intergenerational legacy of gender transformative leadership** (n=2).

A sense of **personal satisfaction** (n=10) was a finding predominantly expressed by men. Leaders felt proud of their achievements in WASH, COVID response, gender equality and disability and social inclusion.

Reflections

Reported outcomes align with findings on achievements from gender transformative leadership and gender transformative programs more generally, which span changes in social norms, changes in public perceptions of women leaders,[1] formal and informal decision-making practices, as well as tangible improvements in access to quality services (e.g., water, education, healthcare).[2,3] This research also highlights the value of having all genders being engaged as leaders in the realisation of women's rights, which is also reflected in the literature.[2,3,4]

Outcomes were not easy for participants to articulate. Social change processes are complex and pathways for change are unclear, making it difficult to attribute leadership styles and actions to specific outcomes.

The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic also means that societal outcomes associated with pandemic-era transformative leadership are still emerging. Articulating achievements was also uncomfortable for some participants with a tendency towards humility and modesty.

Ongoing work within the Water form Women Fund is developing tools and methods for capturing outcomes associated with gender transformative activities.

[1]Mulder et al 2019; [2]Brown et al, 2019; [3]Soeters et al. 2019; [4]Meagher et al. 2020 .

Outcomes

In their own words

> I am sure that my leadership will give them an example and they [staff] can mainstream gender into their work more in the future.
>
> Chomsy Ngamvilay

> I am pleased and really proud of how my leadership has encouraged women in my community to come forward and to participate. My work also made people realise the importance of diversity of voices in the decision-making rooms, particularly on the importance and value addition of women leaders.
>
> Namgay Pelden

> […] more people in Lao society are aware of the rights and gender equality of the people with disability.
>
> Douangchai Southammavong

> I feel proud that local government has been focusing their activities to most vulnerable community because of our facilitation.
>
> Madan Kumar Barma

Enablers…

What we found

Support from others

Support in the domestic sphere (n=9), e.g., with domestic chores and childcare, which allows more time in professional roles. This was particularly highlighted by women. Families also provide emotional support and encouragement

Support in the professional sphere (n=14) from bosses and colleagues or teachers, in the form of professional opportunities and mentoring, feedback and advice

Support from external organisations and networks (n=10) to access capacity building opportunities, exposure to new ideas and creating new opportunities for leaders

Having **role models** (n=3), **mentorship and capacity building opportunities** (n=5) built the leaders' confidence, knowledge and skills.

Access to education and access training gave the leaders the right academic qualifications, builds their credibility and their self-confidence in doing the job well (n=12).

The leaders' **personal experiences** of being in a disadvantage (particularly for leaders with disabilities and women), or **direct contact with people in disadvantage** directed them in their gender transformative leadership journey (n=4)

Reflections

The factors that have enabled respondents to become the leaders they are align with the what the literature suggests: enablers around knowledge[1], transformative learning experiences, apprenticeships and mentorships,[1, 2, 3] and support from networks in having more poor and marginalised women in power and influence, ensuring that power, funds and decision-making are in the hands of those who experience it.[3]

Access to education and external support were highlighted as enabling factors by most respondents, highlighting that support is garnered from different and complementary realms. This indicates that, for example, professional opportunities need to be complemented by support in their domestic lives. The need for domestic support was particularly highlighted by women, reflecting their double-burden given traditional caring roles.

[1]Brown et al. 2019; [2]Soeters et al. 2019; [3]CARE 2020

Enablers…

In their own words

> " I am in this position because of the leaders who trusted my capacity and ability. I could complete the tasks assigned by my boss when I was a technical staff […] I also have learned from other senior women leaders at the provincial health department, who have been my role models.
>
> Souksakhone Kothliengthong

> " When I started my professional journey in the social sector, budget was allocated only for water schemes and other infrastructure but no budget for hygiene and social behaviour change. I attended total sanitation training and that built my confidence in the WASH sector, behaviour change and GESI. That was great opportunity for me. Such types of trainings and events influenced me to work as a leader.
>
> *Chandra Bahadur Khadka*

> " I am here in this position because I received great support from my family, teacher Douangchay and my boss. My friends and people who know me well have supported me as well. They accepted my ability, accepted who I am and are willing to support me.
>
> Silivanh Khamsingsavath

> " Work experience in rural areas to support water supply and sanitation facilities has enabled me to gain rural perspective, and really understand people's struggles. Additionally, international events are very important and convenient to change the preconceived thoughts of leaders.
>
> Sunil Kumar Das

… and barriers

What we found

Almost all leaders expressed that a main challenge in their gender transformative work lies in the **difficulty to overcome gender and social norms** to drive change in communities (n=13). Some said this is particularly difficult in rural areas. Women leaders and leaders with disabilities also shared they had to overcome these norms for themselves, when trying to access to education and join the workforce, which was not the norm in their respective communities.

Barriers specific to women leaders (n=6) include women having to work harder to fulfil both old and new (leadership) roles, negative perceptions of women leaders (such as women not being brave enough), and lack of confidence, which speak to the finding that overcoming social norms can be extremely challenging.

Other challenges around **logistics** (n=1), **mobility during COVID** (n=2), and **access to data** (n=1) were also mentioned.

Backlash, resistance to change, and criticisms when trying to change or challenge the norms was mentioned by some leaders (n=5)

Institutional challenges were also reported as a barrier (n=6). These include lack of clear policies and guidelines regarding GESI, insufficient implementation, lack of budget allocations and lack of funds to continue work during COVID, and a neutral official intuitional stance on GESI.

Reflections

The reported barriers to gender transformative leadership in the WASH sector range from personal experiences of having to challenge systemic norms and perceptions within their households and communities, to wider social resistance, and to formal and institutional structures and policies.

Identifying barriers to participation from women's experiences is highlighted in the literature as a means for developing visions and strategies for dismantling them.[1, 2] Acknowledging the exclusionary practices and restrictive norms

… and barriers

In their own words

> *It is very difficult to overcome traditional norms and overcoming gender stereotyping especially in the rural settings*
>
> Rinchen Wangdi

> *Our government has more focus on infrastructure development rather than human development. GESI issues still not a priority issues for government. Somehow, this also creates obstacle while raising the voice for gender equality.*
>
> Ambika Yadav

The effect of social norms and structural barriers can be seen in low confidence levels:

> *"I have been trying to promote some women at the office to be leaders [but]… they lack confidence to take lead."*
>
> Toumkham Phetsalath

> *Being a male and sometimes representing women is deemed as artificial to the public.*
>
> Ugyen Wangchuk

How can we strengthen gender transformative leadership?

Priority areas of focus

4

Leaders' visions and wishes for the future (1/2)

Leaders shared the one change they would make if they could magically snap their fingers and make a change to better enable leadership that seeks equality and inclusion. Five priority themes for change were identified. In no particular order, they are:

1 End harmful social norms

2 Promote diversity in leadership

3 Create education and capacity building opportunities

4 Focus on gender mainstreaming in institutions

5 Take an intersectional approach

Leaders' visions and wishes for the future (2/2)

Ending harmful social norms requires continuously challenging assumptions and finding energy - and allies - to go against dominant perceptions. Challenging harmful norms is essential so we can achieve equal rights for all, so that women's work is understood and their voices and decisions are respected, and so that traditional roles in household work and childcare are not a barrier to women's leadership. Leaders particularly emphasised the importance of shifting norms for reducing discrimination during menstruation and addressing violence against women.

Creating **more opportunities and space for diversity in leadership** requires challenging traditional ideas of what makes, and who can be, a good leader. A foundation for increasing diversity is to acknowledge and celebrate the values, traits and styles of leaders highlighted in this research.

Creating better education and capacity building opportunities is critical to realise the leadership potential of girls, women and people with disabilities. Opportunities can be created by, for example, offering targeted scholarships.

Leaders emphasised the importance of **institutional gender mainstreaming** so that 100% of existing GESI policies are implemented; GESI is part of all work, especially at community level; and all government policies and programs address GESI.

Taking an **intersectional approach** to gender transformative leadership is critical to achieve the diversity and inclusion that will ultimately strengthen our institutions and communities. Leaders talked about the importance of disability inclusion (one example of an intersectional approach) so that people with disabilities can reach their potential, there are more inclusive policies and infrastructure, and so gender experts work alongside disabled peoples' organisations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges and opportunities

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a renewed urgency for thinking and doing things differently in the WASH sector, and this comes through strongly in the leaders' words and actions. As we rebuild our societies and economies and continue to champion the delivery of essential WASH services, we must do so in a way that actively advances gender and social transformation towards more equal, inclusive societies.

The pandemic has of course created many challenges. Interviewed leaders shared the increased pressure it has placed on them and their roles, but they have showed continued strength and courage in these challenging times. We hope that this research provides some fresh insights into the critical and varied roles that gender transformative leaders can and do play in facilitating more gender equitable and socially inclusive WASH systems, policies and services. The case studies of the leaders open our eyes to the rewards, challenges and benefits of transformative leadership, showing us what is possible.

As we grapple with the pandemic-era changes, we now have the opportunity to make real change happen in our communities and the sector.

Acknowledgements

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