



GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN CITY-WIDE SANITATION IN BANGLADESH

Practical Action has been working to embed Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) in our work on city-wide sanitation. This requires action at all levels from communities, to municipalities, to the national government. At each level we aim to empower women and vulnerable communities and engage with men and local powerholders. In this brief we outline examples of our approaches and what that has achieved.

Community level approaches and impacts

Our work at community level involves both service providers and service users.

Service providers: Sanitation pit Emptiers operate in all urban communities in Bangladesh, providing a vital service in a context where access to basic toilet facilities is almost universal.

Since 2014, we have established workers' co-operatives which can be officially recognised. The co-operatives help ensure greater safety at work, access to mechanical equipment and schemes for savings and insurance. Through collective representation, pit-emptiers have a voice in local decision-making, and greater respect for their work. We have supported women and ensured their voice is heard in this traditionally male-dominated profession. Achievements from our transformative 'Emptier to Entrepreneur' pathway¹ include:

- A 2021 evaluation of a project supporting these co-operatives found that the proportion of women in pit-emptier co-operatives had increased from almost none to 33%.
- By 2023, we have supported the creation of 56 legal co-operatives in 13 towns for a variety of categories of waste and sanitation workers. There are 2,431 members of which 1,227 (50%) are women.

Service users: Among low-income and slum communities, Practical Action has used participatory planning approaches to build consensus about local priorities, and capacity to advocate for their needs.² Slum improvement committees, and an umbrella organisation bringing these committees together, championed the voices and role of women. Women leaders were empowered to ensure their priorities were heard. Outcomes included more female-friendly design of public and community toilets. Women's co-operatives were also allowed to operate and manage public toilets.

¹ Practical Action (2023) Emptier to Entrepreneur: ensuring dignity in the lives of waste and sanitation workers in Bangladesh. This Impact Brief outlines 6 steps in our transformative pathway.

² For example our Integrated Urban Development projects from 2006-8 and 2012-16 worked on slum upgrading and last-mile service delivery in Faridpur and Jessore. See Technical Brief on Participatory Planning.

Municipality-level approaches and impacts

Improving the relationship between communities and local government requires change on both sides. With municipalities, Practical Action facilitated trainings, invited officials to external events, and raised awareness about the importance of listening to community voices; and to having greater openness and respect for women's voices. Finding influential male advocates for women's inclusion was important.

We worked with Ward and Town-level Co-ordination Committees on pre-budget planning processes, poverty reduction and sanitation management action plans. Slum dwellers representatives including women were an important part of the committees.

Practical outcomes include:

- WASH Help Desks established with female staff who can provide gender appropriate responses to women's enquiries
- Equal pay for male and female sanitation and waste workers
- Service Level Agreements between municipalities and co-operatives for sanitation and waste management services.

National level approaches and impacts

Initially our national advocacy aimed simply to raise awareness of the rights of men and women in last mile urban communities and as waste and sanitation workers. We organised attention-grabbing events such as National Sanitation Worker Conventions and established the Bangladesh Faecal Sludge Management Network to improve sector co-ordination. Since then, outcomes in specific policy areas have included:

- Inclusion of GESI aspects in the Government's national framework and action plans on Faecal Sludge Management³; and in discussions about the WASH Sector Development Plan.
- Creation of a National Platform for Waste and Sanitation workers, with gender representative leadership and decision-making
- The creation of a national Menstrual Hygiene Management strategy⁴

We continue to reflect on our work, trial, review and refine our approaches, and advocate for further changes at all levels. We are calling for⁵:

- Widespread behaviour change to end harassment and intimidation of women and girls while accessing and using public and community toilets
- Strengthening the voice of women in sanitation governance, finding champions such as city mayors to challenge men's dominance in decision-making forums
- Aligning sanitation planning with broader gender and poverty strategies

Gender and Social Inclusion at Practical Action

At Practical Action, our efforts to see GESI established and embedded in development practices are represented all the way from local level activities in regional Bangladesh, to establishing organisation minimum standards and providing global leadership. Our commitment is that all our work will be at minimum gender sensitive, and we strive to be gender transformative.

Practical Action has specialist GESI staff at field, national and global levels, and a Global Gender Group providing guidance and support. All relevant Global Indicator data are disaggregated by sex, and we are developing more specific global indicators to track GESI outcomes.⁶

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³ Government of Bangladesh (2017) Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management (IRF-FSM), Paurashavas. Government of Bangladesh (2020) Implementation of Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management: National Action Plan, Paurashavas.

⁴ Government of Bangladesh (2021) National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy

⁵ Policy briefs on Strengthening gender responsive urban sanitation: i) Public and Community Toilets; ii) Gender and Faecal Sludge Management.

⁶ For further information see Practical Action Capability Statement on Gender Transformative Change.