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**EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD**

Women's role in water safe community initiative in Nepal

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Nepal

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Background

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) recognizes water and sanitation as a basic human right. With this spirit the Government of Nepal has been working progressively in the WASH sector aiming at providing sustainable, affordable improved sanitation and water services for all people while prioritizing poor and inclusion of women, children, disadvantaged and minority groups. Based on the current level of achievements, overall the current WASH programme in Nepal could be rated as 'Gender Sensitive' as per 'Gender Integration Continuum' scale (Adhikari, 2018). However, there are tremendous opportunities for Nepal to further move ahead and thus to be be rated as 'Gender Responsive' or even 'Gender Transformative'. This is quite possible, if systematic gender analysis of the WASH Programme is carried out leading to identification of gaps and corrective measures are taken to address these gaps. In this context, this paper attempts to examine the role of women in Water Safe Community (WSC) initiative based on a field study carried out earlier (Bishwakarma, 2020). The WSC initiative has recently been implemented in communities in rural areas of Nepal with assistance from UNICEF. The field study employed both quantitative and qualitative tools covering 26 water safe communities from central mid-hills of Nepal. Five of the major steps towards WSC (i.e., retention of open defecation, effective water user committee, implementation of climate resilient water safety plan, 100% of households having access to safe water, strong linkages between water users and local government for maintenance) were assessed from gender lenses using the Five-Domain Model for Gender Analysis Framework.

Key findings

Sustaining open defecation

During the social movement for elimination of open defecation in Nepal, no subsidy was given for construction of toilets. All segments of the society and institutions were mobilized where women's groups like mother groups, saving and credit groups and many more played important roles in convincing/helping male members in their family and society for construction of toilets. However, with regard to use/sustaining a household toilet, there has been a little change in gender roles/relations. All women irrespective of their caste-ethnicity and wealth are rather heavily engaged for day-to-day cleaning and maintaining the sanitation and hygiene facilities. Since the WSC initiative also included a component of behavioural change related to Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) with actions like orientation on MHM, health and hygiene promotion including toilet use and handwashing with soap, and formation of MHM group of young girls. These helped women and men to understand the MHM not only from the perspective of hygiene promotion but also from women's rights perspective. Women claimed that the availability of water for 24 hours at home helped improve women and girls' ability to manage menstruation safely. The MHM approach adopted in WSC initiative challenged the social taboo where menstruating women are restricted from using the toilet or the common water tap and are placed at a separated small house.

Inclusive and active water and sanitation user committee

In all the Water and Sanitation Users' Committees (WSUCs), women representation is about 36% including one third of women occupying key positions as per provisions of the national policy. However, around 10% of

decisions taken by the WSUCs' were found to be for direct benefit of women such as nominating women for attending training sessions, and opening WSUC's bank account amongst others. In one of the WSUCs, women representation was 100% which was functioning very well. This was possibly due to the active role of women and full awareness/support from the community and the municipality. They have more reasons to actively participate in the programme as it helps them to have individual connection to the drinking water at their houses which is critical for performing other chores and thus they perceive the direct benefit from the WSC initiative. One woman responded that *"We have become capable on different WASH related needs like wastewater management, use of wastewater for kitchen garden, solid waste management, household cleanliness, water purification and drinking safe water which are directly or indirectly addressed by the water safe community initiative"*. Among the water supply maintenance workers, one fifth were women. This job can be considered as a non-traditional job for women. For this UNICEF and the Government have been doing advocacy by increasing awareness, setting a criterion to have a female maintenance worker, and to have at least one female wherever there are two workers. For this, women received technical training (plumbing) and they are paid monthly, which is around 30 USD. This provision has brought a good change in women's personal status as well as in the community. Prior to the WSC initiative, a review of the water safety plan revealed that almost all water supply schemes were less functional due to leakages and lack of maintenance. When the WSC initiative was launched, the people in the community had a strong desire to get a household connection for safe drinking water. The WSC initiative required a contribution from the community which was mostly in-kind. In all water improvement works, women's in-kind labour contribution was substantial compared to men – around 80% contribution.

The reasons for heavy engagement of women were obvious in that at least one male member from around one in four households is abroad in Gulf, Malaysia and India for labour jobs. Despite the huge workload on them, one woman shared that *"For us it is good that our male members of family send money from abroad. What will he do if he was here? It has benefited in terms of education of the women, freedom of mobility, increased decision-making power for women in community groups/spheres and financial independence and better access to land and property because we are receiving remittances sent by our men from abroad"*.

There was substantive evidence that there is a high 'social transaction cost' for which women are paying for with their time. The demand for women's participation has increased in all aspects. In productive roles, like farming, selling vegetables as well in community roles as in the WSC. In the WSC Kavre it was found that a woman is a member of up to seven community groups. All groups meet once a month to take on certain community works, like agriculture, irrigation, forestry, and health etc. On the other hand, it is perceived that being a member of many community groups can help get their rights to access to a project package and earnings and also acquire higher status in society and thus helping the empowerment of women.

Existence of water quality monitoring mechanism and meeting water quality standards

In all WSCs one male and one female are performing as water quality assessors using a 'dry membrane plate' test for E-coli and an Arsenic tool kit. UNICEF in collaboration with the municipality have provided technical training on water quality assessment. It helped to develop the capacity of one female and one male water quality assessor in each WSUC, and both are performing equally well and have set examples to show that women can do such work if they get a fair chance and are given responsibilities.

Conclusion and way forward

The Water Safe Community initiative has plenty of windows of opportunities for empowerment of women and can help to change their strategic needs in the society. But yet, there are some gaps in understanding and adequate actions on the gender dimensions and intersectionality in the programme which need full attention from the government and development partners before scaling up of the programme.

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