

Discussion Paper:

Pathways towards gender equality in and through German humanitarian and transitional WASH assistance

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Glossary

Feminism	An ideology and set of movements that work to achieve social, political and economic equality between the sexes.
Feminist foreign policy	While there is no agreed definition of what constitutes a feminist foreign policy, these policies usually centre on the '3 Rs' (resources, rights and representation).
Gender analysis	Gender analysis is a structured way to make sure that development initiatives are designed with the roles, needs, and participation of women, men, girls, boys, and those with diverse SOGIESC in mind.
Gender checklist	A checklist is an analytical tool containing a set of questions to assist staff in considering the different needs and perspectives of women and girls.
Gender equality	Gender equality exists when women, girls, men and, boys and and those with diverse SOGIESC have equal rights, opportunities and status.
Gender equality organisation	Local and national gender equality organisations strive to achieve gender justice, women's rights, and women's empowerment.
Gender harmful	Limited or no awareness of differences for women, girls, men, boys and those with diverse SOGIESC, with taking action that may increase inequities or harm to women, girls, men, boys and those with diverse SOGIESC.
Gender norms	The way women, men, girls, and boys are expected to act and be is shaped by gender norms. Internalising gender norms at a young age can solidify ideas about gender roles and stereotypes.
Gender responsive	Considers differences and potential inequities between women and men and takes action to remove barriers or challenges faced by women (e.g., targeted training for women workers, gender policy and action plan to increase women's representation in senior roles).
Gender sensitive	Considers differences and potential inequities between women and men and takes action to respond to practical needs of women (e.g., access to on-site childcare facilities).
Gender transformative	Aims to change social norms, behaviours and attitudes that affect women's ability to change the positions traditionally held by women and men.
Sex and gender	The term sex is defined to mean the biological differences between women and men. Gender refers to the social relationships between women, girls, men, boys and those with diverse SOGIESC.
SOGIESC	People with diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics.
Transformative feminist leadership	People with a feminist perspective and vision for social justice who are individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes.
Women's empowerment	Women have the ability to make meaningful choices about their careers and personal lives, overcoming past limitations on their options.

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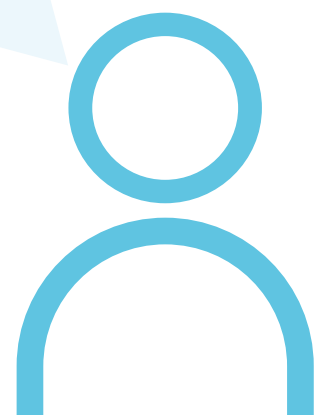
We are grateful to Sue Cavill (independent consultant) for her great work in collecting and analysing data and writing this paper, together with Johannes Rueck (German WASH Network) who coordinated the process. We also thank the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) for the support that made this work possible.

Box 1:

Narrations by affected women from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Bihar

“ I am extremely distressed. I have lost all that I possess. You may lay the blame on the wrath of nature, but I would say my misfortunes are a fall-out of my fate. I have walked several kilometres from my home to be safe and get help. But I have been compelled to live in a camp with unfamiliar men. I am terribly uncomfortable about living in such close quarters with them and it feels like living on the edge. My most private activities have suddenly become public. I live with the feeling of being constantly watched, especially when I go to the toilet or bathe, even though I try to go late in the evening or early morning. I really wish there was a way of putting a stop to my periods. If it is embarrassing at home, here it is far worse. I dread to step out of our little hut on ‘those’ days as my clothes are woefully stained. There is no way of washing my clothes and I live with the fear that the whole world is privy to my situation. I feel the eyes of the men in the camp follow me everywhere. The toilets in our camp do not have doors yet they remain dark and dirty. The situation is truly depressing. One of my friends recounted this story of a girl in a nearby camp who had gone to fetch water from the government tanker. One man offered to carry the jerry can to her house in return for ‘favours’. Hearing such tales has made me nervous and I am scared to talk to anyone.”

Source: Oxfam, 2010



Summary

This paper aims to identify practical challenges and recommendations for promoting gender sensitivity in humanitarian and transitional WASH assistance, and to define quality criteria and key monitoring indicators related to this topic.

An online survey was completed by 37 practitioners operating at global and country level, including staff from national NGOs as well as national staff from international agencies. Interviews with key informants from 10 German WASH Network organisations helped confirm the survey results. Additionally, 7 organisations contributed examples of gender-sensitive humanitarian WASH best practices by completing an online form. Key survey findings include:

- While not all programming followed an organisational gender policy, most respondents (49%) classified their programming as gender-sensitive or (46%) gender-responsive.
- A minority of organisations indicated that elements of their WASH programming are more transformative – the most common examples of which include changing unequal attitudes, gender norms, and power relations connected to menstrual hygiene management.
- Situation analysis, baseline surveys, and discussions with women at community meetings are common approaches to identify gender-related barriers in WASH access. Only 19% say they always perform a gender analysis.
- To address the basic WASH needs of girls and women, common practices include consulting them on the placement and upkeep of toilets, bathing and laundry areas, waste removal, and water sources, all with the goal of reducing safety and security risks.
- Common activities to empower women in WASH include promoting their active role in management through committees and community decision-making (50%) and engaging men to support their participation (17%).
- Gender policies and strategies (80%), leadership (69%), and gender-focused capacity building (60%) indicate organisational commitment to gender equality.
- Programme monitoring assesses access to improved WASH for both men and women (94% of respondents) and examines whether women feel safe using community WASH facilities (64% of respondents).
- Agencies primarily use safeguarding policies and procedures (78% of respondents) to guarantee the integration of Do No Harm principles in WASH programming.
- Insufficient financial and human resources (cited by 75% of respondents), lack of gender-specific skills and confidence among WASH staff (47%), and limited partnerships with rights-holder organisations (42%) are the primary obstacles to incorporating gender equality into WASH programmes.

This paper considers gender equality at multiple levels within humanitarian WASH response. Discussion follows on the four factors shown below along with recommendations for members of the German WASH Network.

1

At the setting level: A pathway towards gender transformative change is possible according to the different stages of a humanitarian WASH response – from first response, humanitarian assistance to transitional assistance.

***Recommendation** – The German WASH Network should commit to adhering to the GFFO’s minimum standards for gender-sensitive WASH programmes, including “Do No Harm” principles, gender analysis, disaggregated data, and partnerships with women-led organisations. As humanitarian WASH projects shift from emergency relief to long-term development, the objective is to progressively incorporate more transformative practices.*

2

At the organisational level: An organisational gender policy, coupled with training, can foster gender equality by supporting staff in designing, implementing, and monitoring gender-inclusive WASH programmes. It can also promote the recruitment of more women, minority, and gender-competent staff for leadership roles.

***Recommendation** – The German WASH Network is well-positioned to strengthen member confidence and expertise in developing and implementing gender-specific initiatives through technical contributions. For instance, providing tailor-made training solutions, tools and guidelines.*

3

At the programme level: Gender equality and women’s empowerment need to be integrated into project design and funding from the very beginning. Integrating gender perspectives into WASH programmes requires the use of gender analysis or data. Success hinges on working with national or local women’s organisations. Youth organisations are key players as they are often more receptive to social and cultural changes.

***Recommendation** – Funding is required for targeted measures to address gender-specific risks and challenges in humanitarian WASH programming. The German WASH Network can urge humanitarian donors to allocate funds for mandatory gender analysis, monitoring, and collaboration with youth and women’s organisations to ensure programmes align with local contexts.*

4

At the personal level: Staff themselves may hold beliefs that hinder efforts to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in programming. Adopting a gender lens empowers WASH staff with the necessary perspective, knowledge, and skills to successfully incorporate gender equality into their programmes.

***Recommendation** – Integrating a gender perspective into our work, along with greater awareness and knowledge about gender equality issues, can help WASH professionals understand the impact of their attitudes and behaviours on both programming and colleagues. It’s crucial to recognise that promoting gender equality in WASH programmes isn’t just a technical solution.*

1

Introduction

The purpose of humanitarian assistance is to *“save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after man-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur.”*

(Development Initiatives, 2021)

While gender-thinking in the WASH sector is not new, the practical application of gender-sensitive practices has been less systematic in humanitarian than development policies and programmes. When WASH services are deficient, the weight of the consequences falls unfairly on women and girls, who are the main users and managers of these services at home, and who provide care for family members. Achieving gender equality outcomes in the design, implementation, and management of WASH services requires a gender-sensitive approach as a crucial first step. Some believe that humanitarian WASH responses can also serve as an important entry point for broader gender-transformative change both in service delivery and within the humanitarian system itself.

This paper aims to:

- a) identify practical challenges and key recommendations for increasing gender sensitivity in the field of humanitarian WASH assistance, and
- b) define quality criteria / key indicators for the WASH Q framework on this topic.

Our methodology is described in the next section, followed by a review of standards for humanitarian WASH action and benchmarking change related to gender equality. We'll share our key findings from the survey and interviews, and then propose recommendations for German humanitarian WASH programmes to help promote gender equality and achieve gender-transformative change.

A note on this paper:

Most respondents in this study said their current programming is either gender-sensitive or responsive. Consequently, the primary emphasis of this paper is on women and girls. That said, we do feature experiences from partners who work with men and boys to advance gender equality and women's empowerment. We point out the current shortcomings in the WASH sector's ability to adapt services to meet the needs of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).

Acknowledging that other forms of discrimination overlap with and exacerbate gender discrimination, the use of the term "women" in this paper is broad, encompassing women with disabilities, women of all ages, diverse economic and educational levels, women of different sexual orientations, transgender women, and women from various racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

2

Approach and methods

To understand how to advance gender equality and empower women through WASH programmes in humanitarian and transitional settings, a desk review assessed various documents. This included reviewing global WASH cluster guidance, such as minimum gender-sensitive WASH standards, donor policies and expectations, and strategies from the German WASH Network. The study covered WASH programming in short-term and protracted emergency responses, as well as development contexts.

Key informant interviews were held with representatives of **10 organisations**. The online survey garnered responses from **37 practitioners** with varying experience in implementing gender policies across different countries and regions. Participants included staff from national NGOs, the German WASH Network, and international agencies. Furthermore, **7 individuals** completed an online form and provided examples of gender-sensitive humanitarian WASH best practices. Few of the organisations are dedicated solely to humanitarian assistance, but rather have a dual mandate to work on both development and humanitarian WASH programming. A webinar brought together the Working Group and the German WASH Network to validate initial research, foster knowledge sharing, and exchange practical experiences.

The study's findings and recommendations, though based on evidence, are limited due to the small sample size from which the evidence is derived.



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Good practice for humanitarian WASH assistance

Global efforts to achieve gender equality in humanitarian response draw upon a range of international standards, frameworks, and commitments. These include the Humanitarian Charter, the Sendai Framework, and broader commitments outlined in the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). See [Table 1](#) below.

Table 1: Standards and guidelines

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (GEEWG) in Humanitarian Action

The IASC issues policies and guidance on incorporating a gender perspective into humanitarian responses, emphasising women and girls' rights (IASC, 1999), empowerment (IASC, 2008), and shifting gender roles and norms (IASC, 2017, updated in 2024).

Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS) on Quality and Accountability

Sets out nine commitments to ensure that organisations support people and communities affected by crisis and vulnerability.

Sphere Handbook

Sphere includes minimum quality standards for WASH (Sphere Project, 2018). Although not mandatory, the Sphere standards are a widely accepted framework based on consensus and used extensively within the humanitarian sector to guide response efforts.

The Accountability and Quality Assurance (AQA) Initiative

Aims to enhance the quality and accountability of WASH responses through a collective quality assurance process, focusing on actionable metrics aligned with SPHERE and CHS standards, the principle of «Do No Harm», as well as community feedback and immediate corrective action. While traditional M&E approaches tend to focus on tracking activities (e.g., volumes of water provided), AQA focuses on understanding the outcomes for the affected population (use of safe water, satisfaction with the service).

Global WASH Cluster

To improve accountability and effectiveness in humanitarian coordination, the Cluster establishes 5 WASH commitments for inclusive and equitable WASH outcomes, benefitting people most vulnerable to crises.

- **Assessment:** Consult separately girls, boys, women and men, including older people and those with disabilities to ensure WASH programmes are designed to provide equitable access and reduce incidences of violence
- **Decision:** Ensure that girls, boys, women and men, including older people, and those with disabilities, have access to appropriate and safe WASH services.
- **Implementation:** Ensure that girls, boys, women and men, including older people and those with disabilities have access to feedback and complaint mechanisms so that corrective actions can address their specific protection and assistance needs.
- **Across the response:** Give priority to girls (particularly adolescents) and women's participation in the consultation process.
- **Response monitoring:** Monitor and evaluate safe and equitable access and use of WASH services in WASH projects.

Agency specific guidelines

- UNICEF and UN Water (2024) have noted the ability of WASH programmes to reduce the vulnerabilities of women and girls and highlight their roles as 'agents of peaceful change in their communities'.
- Oxfam's [Tweaks Project](#) (originally 'Sani Tweaks', now 'WASH Tweaks') ensures women's voices are heard and acted upon with workshops in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Iraq, Yemen, Uganda, Mozambique, Somalia, Myanmar, Central African Republic, Chad, and Bangladesh, as well as a WASH Tweaks Champions Global Network.

Gender equality is a thematic priority for all development cooperation. Donor policy promotes gender equality in humanitarian response, with [Table 2](#) providing examples of development partner’s commitments to gender equality. The OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Creditor Reporting System (CRS) reports a significant rise in humanitarian aid prioritising gender equality from 2021-2022, with Germany being the second largest donor. German ministries use the OECD Gender Marker to set goals and monitor projects based on gender results. A feminist approach is becoming increasingly popular among donors. GFFO (2023) humanitarian assistance adheres to the ‘feminist foreign policy guidelines for international assistance and humanitarianism’. The objective is to make all humanitarian assistance gender-sensitive and to implement gender-targeted measures as often as possible, as demonstrated in [Box 2](#) below.

Box 2: Germany’s humanitarian assistance follows a gender-sensitive approach

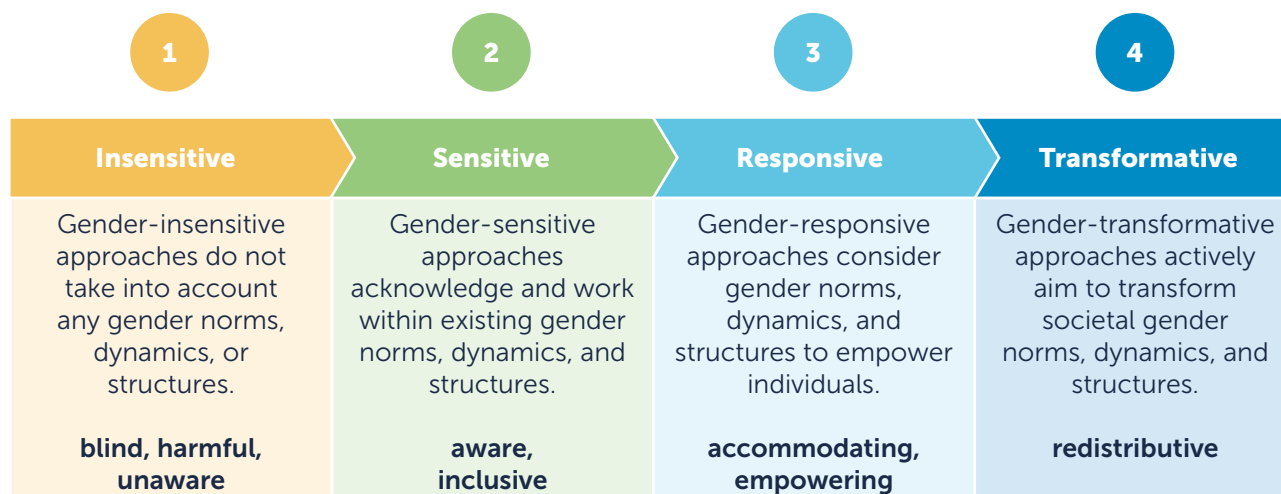
Germany’s humanitarian assistance follows a gender-sensitive approach. The GFFO defines this as “needs-tailored planning, implementation and follow-up that analyses and accounts for the different starting points, effects of crises, and possible risks of planned measures on the basis of gender-specific differences and inequalities and utilises the different capacities and potentials available”. GFFO-funded projects require:

- A gender analysis
- Data broken down by gender
- Do No Harm is ensured
- Gender-age-disability (GAD) marker
- Involvement of local women-led organisations and participation of the affected population

To address the underlying causes of discrimination, Germany’s Feminist Foreign Policy advocates for a gender-transformative approach whenever possible. The GFFO has committed to allocating 85% of its project funding (beyond humanitarian assistance) to gender-sensitive initiatives and 8% to gender-transformative ones by 2025 (BMZ, 2023). BMZ has also created gender action plans (2023-2027) to translate the strategy into tangible actions.

Source: GFFO (2024a & 2024b)

Agencies often use a continuum to benchmark their work on gender equality from gender-insensitive to gender-transformative modes of interventions (see [Fig 1](#) below).



Adapted from MacArthur et al., 2023

Gender-sensitive approaches prioritise practical WASH needs for women, including female-friendly sanitation and convenient water sources, to reduce suffering and save lives. Gender-sensitive WASH approaches tend to work with women and men based on their traditional gender roles. Whether humanitarian programming can effectively challenge harmful social and gender norms and bring about transformative gender change is debatable. Some believe that addressing the root causes of gender inequality, which could involve challenging cultural norms, contradicts humanitarian principles like neutrality, impartiality, and localisation.

Box 3: Closing the Gender Gap in the Humanitarian WASH sector in South Sudan

From 2019 to 2021, the WASH cluster and programmes in South Sudan undertook initiatives to address the gender gap in the humanitarian WASH sector. IOM conceptualised and commissioned RedR UK to study the gender gap and use the findings as the basis for developing associated programmatic guidance and a training package. These materials were developed by RedR UK, with IOM supporting roll-out to WASH cluster programme managers, human resources (HR) staff, and GBV sub-cluster colleagues in the three study locations of Juba, Malakal, and Wau. Furthermore, advocacy workshops targeted senior leaders in the WASH cluster, WASH organisations, HR, security, the GBV sub-cluster, and their partners. The WASH cluster went on to develop a standards checklist promoting gender balance within WASH teams and provided a series of short training programmes, including one focused on addressing the gender gap in staffing. The standards checklist was applied when reviewing WASH cluster proposals for the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF).

Source: Denman and Lipscomb 2020 and IOM, 2020



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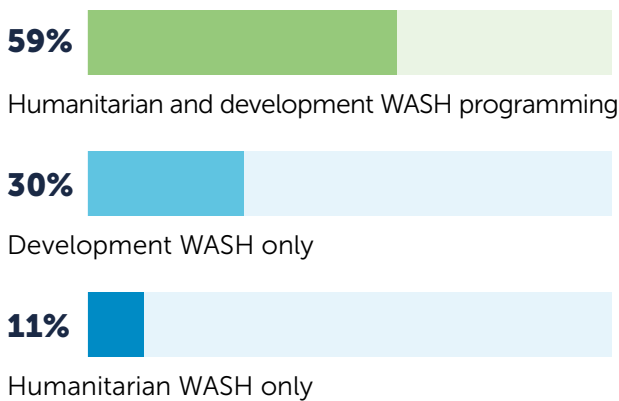
4

Key survey and interview findings

Our survey explored how organisations addressed gender disparities and promoted women’s empowerment in WASH programmes during humanitarian emergencies. The findings are outlined below, along with insights from the key informant interviews. All graphs can be viewed in a separately hosted [Annex](#).

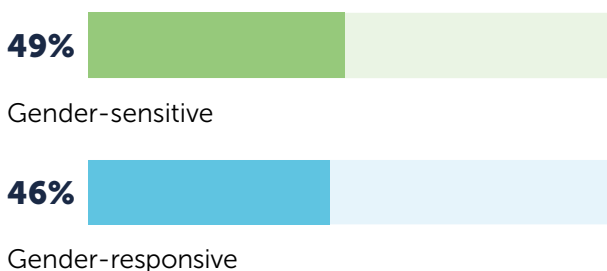
Participants from 37 agencies responded to the survey. Most agencies deliver humanitarian and development WASH programming (59%), humanitarian WASH only (11%) and development only (30%) [see Graph 1 below].

Graph 1. Which type of WASH programmes does your organisation currently implement?



Interviewees suggested that organisations with a dual mandate to work on both development and humanitarian assistance appear more adept at programming for gender equality within their work on WASH. While not all programming was guided by an organisational gender policy, a majority of respondents (49%) categorised their programming as gender-sensitive, and 46% categorised it as gender-responsive [see Graph 2 below].

Graph 2. Overall, how would you rate your humanitarian WASH programmes at present?



Interviewees generally characterised their work as gender-sensitive, emphasising their efforts to lessen the burden on women and girls in accessing WASH services. Such programmes are specifically designed to meet practical needs, such as ensuring safety, comfort, and privacy in WASH infrastructure and services. Those who describe their programmes as gender-responsive also stress the importance of women’s meaningful participation, decision-making power, and leadership in every stage of WASH projects, from planning to execution and monitoring.

A minority of organisations indicated that elements of their WASH programming are more transformative in their ways of working, addressing unequal attitudes, gender norms, and power relations within and beyond WASH-related behaviours, activities and services – the most common examples of which are challenging the gendered division of labour and changing norms around menstrual hygiene management.

While most organisations collect gender disaggregated data, only 19% say they always perform a gender analysis [see Graph 3 below].

Graph 3. How do you monitor gender in WASH programmes?



One interviewee reported recent experience with a rapid conflict and gender assessment in Ukraine.

Activities such as consulting women individually, performing accessibility and safety audits with service users, barrier analysis, or social/power mapping are acknowledged as good practices, but interviewees reported limited experience of their implementation.

To address girls' and women's basic WASH needs, common activities include consulting them on the design, placement, and management of toilets, bathing and laundry facilities, waste disposal, and water supply, with safety and security as key considerations.

Interviewees report that often user-centred design is followed to ensure facilities are female-friendly. Separating toilets and bathing facilities by gender and age is standard procedure. Lighting, toilet cleanliness, and smell were all identified as important factors affecting toilet usage, although routine quality checks of facilities vary (unlike water quality checks). Women are consulted to ensure personal hygiene kits meet their specific needs, including choices for menstrual hygiene and items like potties and torches, different sizes of water containers and so forth. More specific WASH needs including those related to incontinence, disability, postpartum, menopause, and older age are often neglected for both men and women. Staff report relying on their own previous experience of what works – in terms of planning and design processes for toilets, water points, handwashing and bathing facilities – with the risk that such experience is tainted by gender-stereotypical assumptions about the potential user.

Common activities promoting women's participation and leadership in WASH include supporting their involvement in WASH management via committees and community decision-making (50% of respondents), as well as encouraging male community members to support women's active role in WASH decision-making (17% of respondents).

Agencies frequently have targets for women's involvement, such as a 30% minimum representation in water user committees or a specific number of women trained as hygiene promoters. Despite achieving quota targets, interviewees observed a lack of confidence in women in voicing their opinions in public

meetings, limiting their active involvement.

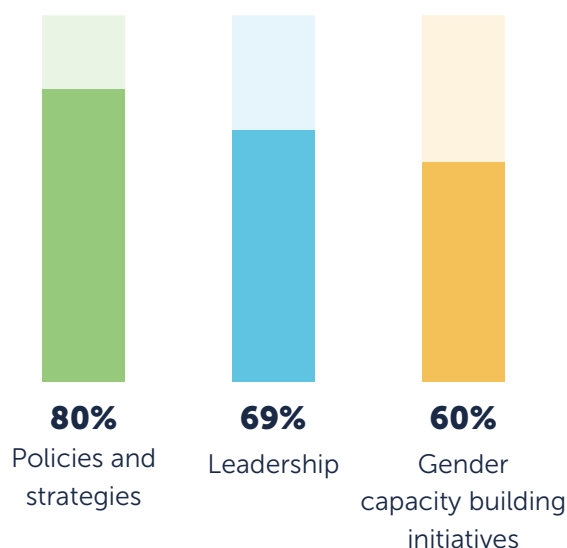
A strategy used by various agencies focused on male staff engaging in conversations about gender norms and WASH decision-making with individual men in their homes. One-on-one discussions are resource-heavy and time-consuming, making them difficult to implement on a large scale.

Several agencies have advocated for national policies and programmes that promote equitable and gender-responsive WASH access (19% of respondents), or training for national policy makers on how gender affects WASH and how to address associated inequalities (33% of respondents). Interviewees said they are employing strategies like Making Rights Real in developmental initiatives to foster "gender heroes" within the local government and to shift attitudes and norms towards a localised agenda.

According to the survey, some WASH programmes are designed to challenge traditional roles and responsibilities associated with domestic WASH work and unpaid care, including activities like fetching water, cleaning toilets, and managing children's hygiene. Only a small number of survey respondents and interviewees mentioned expanding women's economic roles, such as opportunities for WASH-related businesses.

Organisations demonstrate commitment to gender equality through their policies and strategies (80%), leadership (69%), and gender capacity building initiatives (60%) [see Graph 4 below].

Graph 4. How is your WASH team's commitment to gender demonstrated?



Interviewees emphasised the importance of increasing visibility of gender equality within organisations, proposing the recruitment of gender specialists, increased representation of women in WASH teams, and the promotion of more women to leadership roles in humanitarian organisations.

Others downplayed the significance of focusing on gender equality, attributing it to the responsibility of female WASH staff – who are personally invested in championing gender equality and women’s empowerment – rather than a technical skill or an organisational commitment.

Ongoing training for building staff competency and commitment to gender equality does not appear to be a mandatory feature of most humanitarian WASH practice.

Notably, few interviewees reported that their organisations offer inductions or training in gender equality. Interviewees recognised the value of past job experience, but also expressed the need for more opportunities for practical training, like real-time gender mentoring, and straightforward WASH-specific guidance, such as checklists, to ensure gender issues are addressed in all activities.

Addressing organisational culture issues like the preference for all-male teams (especially early in humanitarian response), as well as challenging offensive stories, jokes, and discussions of sexual matters is crucial.

Graph 5. What do you typically monitor on gender?



Of programme monitoring tracks access to improved WASH for both men and women.



Examines women’s safety while accessing community WASH services.

According to interviewees, focus group discussions (FGDs) are an effective method for obtaining qualitative data about WASH facilities from women who use them.

With 78% of respondents relying on safeguarding policies and procedures to implement Do No Harm, the focus on gender equality might be overshadowed by prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) concerns.

The work of gender advisors has expanded to include safeguarding, providing PSEA training, evaluating partner capacity for PSEA, and supporting investigation of cases. Even so, interviewees consistently mentioned their heightened awareness of the risk of violence or intimidation connected to WASH services design, implementation, and management, particularly in the context of cash or voucher-based assistance.

Agencies often rely on community feedback or complaint mechanisms for reporting these risks. While some interviewees touched on other potential harm, such as increased unpaid care work for women or resistance from men when women take leadership roles in WASH committees, these topics were not widely discussed.

Three main challenges to advancing gender equality in WASH programmes include insufficient funding and personnel (75%), lack of gender-related skills and confidence among WASH staff (47%), and absence of partnerships with organisations championing women’s rights (42%).

Time pressure, budgetary constraints, and personnel limitations are obstacles to integrating gender equality into humanitarian WASH initiatives, according to interviewees. Systematic collaboration with women’s groups is absent in many humanitarian WASH programmes.

Few agencies seek input from women’s groups, sexual and gender minority rights organisations, and pro-feminist men’s groups to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment in WASH initiatives. This can mean agencies side-step opportunities for more gender-transformative change.

5

Discussion

Participants in surveys and interviews pointed out that gender equality in humanitarian WASH needs to be addressed at multiple levels (as shown in **Fig. 2**).

We will discuss these levels in turn below. By addressing gender equality at all stages, agencies can develop a comprehensive intervention that systematically focuses on changes at multiple interconnected levels (See **Fig. 3** and **Table 3**).

Fig. 2: Levels at which gender equality must be addressed.



A) Humanitarian setting

Survey respondents and interviewees emphasised that the stage of the emergency, the work locations, and the people involved often affect gender equality in humanitarian action. For instance, specific world views, knowledge, and cultural or religious perceptions are decisive variables.

The level of gender transformation varies across different contexts, with pastoralists or conservative rural communities showing a contrast to refugee camps or urban IDPs.

- **First Response (1-3 months):** Respondents indicated that a gender focus is not always visible or seen as an immediate priority by the first responders in humanitarian WASH, particularly in rapid onset emergencies. The main concern is addressing the minimum WASH requirements for all. As a result, both female beneficiaries and staff members may be left out of the early response phase.
- **Humanitarian assistance (2-12 months):** Options for gender-responsive WASH programming expand in the later stages of a response. Nevertheless, interviewees highlight that short project/funding cycles may impede humanitarian actors' capacity to successfully implement these actions.
- **Transitional assistance:** Longer-term responses or transitions from humanitarian to development programmes provide an opportunity for gender-transformative approaches, given the extended time frames and ongoing organisational presence. However, staff rotation can hinder progress by losing gender equality advocates.

Fig. 3: A pathway towards gender transformation according to the stages of a humanitarian WASH response



For examples along the pathway see [Table 3](#) below

Table 3: Illustration of a path towards gender transformation according to the stages of a humanitarian WASH response

	First Response	Humanitarian assistance	Transitional Assistance
Design	Define pathways in a Theory of Change to reach gender equality results, with a focus on long-term impact.	Conduct an accessibility and safety audit, seeking input from local women's/ feminist organisations.	Continuously gather feedback from individuals of all genders and incorporate their suggestions into programme development.
Gender analysis	Perform a rapid gender analysis to capture the priorities and needs of people of all genders.	Develop an action plan for programming, resourcing, and budgeting, informed by the analysis.	Carry out ongoing and systemic analysis of the context before, during, and after crises.
WASH services	Promote equitable access to WASH services for all genders by integrating gender perspectives into all programme design and implementation.	Make gender-focused activities a core part of WASH programme delivery, like offering training and jobs for women, and engage men to encourage women's meaningful involvement in WASH decisions. Adopt user-centred design processes when designing or selecting technologies (e.g., latrines).	Activities need to be expanded to address the core issues of gender inequality, including gender norms and customs. Increase the involvement of diverse groups in determining the type and standard of WASH services provided. Ensure senior directors and managers are accountable for creating a gender-equal workplace.
Human resources	When recruiting WASH staff, prioritise expertise and experience while also emphasising a commitment to gender equality. Employ expert knowledge to provide technical gender support. Analyse staffing data by gender and other diversity categories. Ensure external contractors and implementing partners receive training on PSEA and adhere to codes of conduct.	Prioritise gender-balanced teams with diverse backgrounds by offering flexible work arrangements for parents, employing staffing quotas, and other strategies. Integrate gender equality objectives into individual performance evaluations for all employees. Make paid and voluntary opportunities equally accessible for both female and male community members.	Boost the number of women and minorities in the workforce and create a clear path for them to rise to leadership roles. Evaluate workplace gender equality progress using external assessments like EDGE Certification. Overcome discriminatory attitudes and cultures among staff.

	First Response	Humanitarian assistance	Transitional Assistance
Accountability and feedback	Establish accessible feedback/ complaints mechanisms.	Conduct an accessibility and safety audit, seeking input from local women's/ feminist organisations.	Continuously gather feedback from individuals of all genders and incorporate their suggestions into programme development.
Training	Implement a programme of regular gender-focused training for staff and partners, which includes both formal sessions and practical on-the-job components.	Provide gender self-assessment, coaching, and mentoring to enhance WASH staff's understanding of gender equality.	Ensure regular peer-to-peer reflection circles and sessions.
Partners	Mapping stakeholders, networking, and sharing information with WROs and WLOs (formally and informally), including through inter-agency coordination.	Convene feminist local civil society and humanitarian actors to support programme design, implementation and monitoring.	Invest in WROs and WLO partners with financial and political backing.
Budget	Prioritise gender considerations in the initial response by setting aside funds for activities like gender analysis, developing gender-specific capacities, and establishing advisory positions.	Monitor how funds are used to achieve gender equality outcomes, including diverse teams, partnerships with gender-focused organisations, and dedicated programmes for gender equality.	Push for sustained investment in staff, time, and partnerships to achieve gender equality.
Do No Harm	Adhere to PSEA, child protection, and safeguarding policies, and incorporate gender-based violence interventions into WASH programming.	Track any unintended consequences, including resistance and backlash, within households and communities.	Monitor changes in WASH-related workloads, decision-making power and economic empowerment.
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning	Disaggregate and analyse data by sex, age and disability. Integrate gender equality indicators into results frameworks. Use gender tags to indicate gender activities.	Gather qualitative data, for example, through participatory research. Break down data by considering overlapping identities, like older women or women with disabilities.	Integrate gender equality indicators into evaluations. Use inclusive and participatory indicators to enhance the monitoring of transformational gender equality outcomes.

Inspired by the framework in Skakun and Dietrich (2022)

B) Organisational

- **Mandates:** Interviewees from organisations with diverse mandates and multi-sectoral programmes, particularly in health, nutrition, and cash transfers, often reported having gender transformative initiatives. This suggests that these organisations may have access to better tools and strategies that could inform their WASH programming. While smaller organisations or projects may face limitations in implementing gender mainstreaming and targeted actions, the level of management support for gender equality is a key factor in overcoming these challenges.
- **Gender policy/strategy:** A strategy that highlights an organisation's dedication to gender equality appears useful. It strengthens the internal logic of the agency's work on gender equality and helps staff communicate, support, and validate their actions. By implementing this strategy, the organisation can prioritise and allocate resources to achieve gender equality. Although not all interviewees possess a formal organisational gender policy, one promising example demonstrated an equity and inclusion strategy that considered gender, age, and disability in an intersectional manner.
- **Feminist leadership:** Organisations like Oxfam, Plan International, and Action Aid, known for their feminist approach, have implemented feminist leadership principles. For example, Action Aid's principles encompass self-awareness, self-care, caring for others, bias dismantling, inclusion, power sharing, responsible and transparent power use, accountable collaboration, respectful feedback, courage, and zero tolerance. As Batliwala explains (2022):



Feminist leadership is no longer about biological females (or those who identify as women), playing leadership roles, but about integral changes in the way leadership is practised, no matter what the gender identity of the practitioner.



- **Staffing:** Men largely make up the workforce in both WASH and humanitarian sectors. Interviewees frequently characterised the humanitarian as a tough, technology-focused male. The number of women working in the WASH sector and holding leadership positions in humanitarian organisations is lower than it should be. Some think that women are less well suited to humanitarian assistance or working in challenging contexts. Women interviewed highlighted the positive impact of having more female representation in WASH teams, as male colleagues often fail to recognise the depth of gender and power inequalities. Other interviewees felt it was crucial to challenge traditional male norms, attitudes, and work practices, emphasising the importance of feminist leadership by all genders. Acknowledging that sexual harassment and gender-based violence affect humanitarian workers within their own workplaces, female staff are calling for urgent reforms across the humanitarian sector.
- **Other WASH workers:** Interviewees emphasised the necessity of enhancing the working environment for female WASH workers, particularly those hired from camps. The humanitarian system should recognise and reward the unpaid work of women volunteers who promote behaviour change, support vulnerable households, and maintain sanitation facilities. All contractors, including external firms, require PSEA training and codes of conduct to protect women working on construction sites. WASH programmes should identify women-led companies as potential contractors.
- **Gender specialists and training:** Those agencies with dedicated Gender (or Gender and Protection) specialists, with expertise and designated responsibilities, are more frequently located in headquarter

than country offices. Including gender-specific performance targets for every staff member could foster a more comprehensive sense of accountability regarding gender. Sustained efforts are required to build the competency and commitment of all staff to gender equality. Despite GFFO's support for the Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap), which deploys gender advisors to aid humanitarian country teams, none of the interviewees stated using this initiative. Furthermore, training would improve our ability to recognise and respond to the needs of gender minorities and the importance of the inclusion of SOGIESC-diversity in humanitarian aid. This gap currently leaves people excluded.

- **Partnerships:** To effectively advance local decisions about programming and resource allocation in humanitarian work, transferring power and privilege to local organisations is essential. Women's rights organisations are a key focus for the localisation agenda as responders in humanitarian situations. Even though they are relevant, projects don't consistently include gender equality organisations, for example, as sources of expertise for designing projects that meet the specific needs and priorities of crisis-affected women and girls. By uniting a broad range of actors, including gender-related partnerships, WASH Clusters can contribute to protecting and advancing the rights of women and gender minorities. This involves tackling harmful gender norms that impede women's access to and control over WASH resources. Youth are also underrepresented in some WASH programmes and yet, as youth are often agents of social and cultural changes, youth-based organisations could play a key role in gender equality.

C) Programmatic

- **Gender analysis:** To ensure effective humanitarian action, GFFO recommends integrating a gender analysis at each stage of emergency response, recognising the unique needs of women, girls, men, boys and people with diverse SOGIESC. While some agencies have created rapid gender analysis and action plans, this isn't a common practice. Gender considerations in WASH programming are frequently based on general beliefs or past experiences, not on a careful analysis of context-specific gender norms. Programme planners and implementers must see a gender analysis as more than a "tick-the-box" exercise.
- **Cross-sector/ cross- cluster collaboration:** WASH teams cannot work on gender equality and women's empowerment in isolation. By working together, different sectors can pool their knowledge, resources, efforts, and expertise to effectively address gender equality. Working together with experts in Protection, Education, and Health is crucial. Furthermore, sectors demonstrating success in promoting gender equality within their organisations or programmes, such as nutrition, hold potential for broader learning.
- **Gender responsive project designs and budgets:** Oxfam generally recommends allocating a minimum of 15% of funds for gender in emergencies. Proposals for humanitarian response are generally written and submitted quickly. Despite the recommendations, project proposals often neglect gender equality activities, failing to allocate sufficient budget or staff to implement them. As the response unfolds, adapting and changing plans may be difficult. WASH programming may overlook gender equality measures, treating them as an additional project needing separate funding.
- **WASH services:** Respondents report taking a number of steps to make WASH programmes more gender-sensitive, most commonly by meeting practical needs associated with menstruation. Respondents didn't highlight other specific WASH needs women face at different stages of their lives, including pregnancy, postpartum, menopause, and old age. Agencies aimed to meet women's practical needs by bringing water sources closer to shelters and homes, which would shorten the time women spend collecting water and enhance their safety and security while doing so. Though making water collection easier and faster for women might appear beneficial, framing it this way can also solidify the expectation that this is a task naturally assigned to women and girls. Few organisations work to change the assumption that women are responsible for water collection or

try to make WASH chores a more shared responsibility by engaging men and boys. While addressing basic WASH needs is essential, it doesn't automatically change gender roles or behaviours. We need to actively work towards transforming these norms. Agencies are taking steps to increase women's roles in WASH decision-making bodies or to support their economic wellbeing, thus challenging traditional gender norms. Examples also illustrate how to incorporate gender equality and women's empowerment into WASH system strengthening and policy influencing efforts with national authorities ([see Box 4 in Annex A](#)).

- **Guidance/tools:** While there are resources available on gender equality in WASH programming, respondents said WASH staff have difficulty adapting generic guidance to their specific situations. As one interviewee noted, those who write the checklists aren't necessarily those who implement the guidance. While some interviewees highlighted the need for contextualised checklists, others thought a checklist is a meaningless exercise that does not change the 'world view', consciousness, or commitment of WASH staff to a feminist approach. To create more gender-sensitive and transformative programmes, staff need access to innovative learning opportunities that build their competence and confidence in addressing gender equality issues throughout the project cycle.
- **Monitoring mechanisms with indicators:** Monitoring mechanisms recognise the need for sex and age disaggregated data to describe the people accessing WASH services. Gathering this data in humanitarian settings is said to be difficult. Interviewees found data collection to be a lengthy process. To collect qualitative data, some interviewers use group discussions, creating separate groups for women to speak without men being present. According to interviewees, feedback and complaints are used to understand any unintended impacts of programming. Respondents also raised the question of whether the collected data is used effectively in practice. Some respondents observed that, for various reasons, there isn't always the flexibility to adapt programming in response to monitoring data.

D) Personal

Staff attitudes and experience contribute to, or prevent, more equitable humanitarian WASH practice. Even mentioning 'gender' can trigger resistance or exhaustion in some WASH staff. For some, 'gender' in WASH programmes simply refers to menstrual hygiene or toilets designed for women. Few consider attention to gender equality as an opportunity for a change in their own personal world view or promote ways of working that are more collaborative, non-hierarchical and reflexive.

➤ Examples of gender-sensitive and responsive WASH programming



Viva con Aguga & GIZ Sports for Development

The Gender Stereotype Game, created by Universal Languages for Behaviour Change (UL4BC), uses engaging activities like sports, art, and games to encourage inclusive discussions about gender. This game, adapted from GIZ's Sports for Development toolkit, uses physical activities like yoga, boxing, or squats to prompt reflection on gender biases and stereotypes. Participants are asked to connect statements like "household chores," "no crying," or "financial responsibility" to an appropriate exercise and discuss their reasoning, with facilitators guiding the process. These discussions provide a space for participants to explore, challenge, and ultimately find solutions to gender norms within their own lives and communities.



Soap-making – Tearfund Yemen

Tearfund is partnering with local organisations to teach women how to make soap as a way to earn money. This represents a potentially transformational approach in such a fragile and conflict setting.



Women Water Warriors – Welthungerhilfe India

Welthungerhilfe and their partner Parmarth Samaj Sevi Sansthan trained Jal Sahelis or women water warriors on water resource planning, management and conservation. These women have repaired handpumps, built check dams with government allocations and organised 'shramdan' or voluntary contributions by the community to revive traditional ponds in villages.



Promoting education for girls – Somalia, Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe

Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, with the Centre for Peace and Democracy, made sure schools had separate toilets for boys and girls and gave teen girls coupons for hygiene kits, including menstrual products. This helps ensure girls can attend school regularly and challenge traditional gender norms.



Breaking the silence around MHH – WASH United & Malteser International, DR Congo

Malteser International utilises the MHM Education Guide, created by WASH United, to clarify menstruation and empower girls to confidently and hygienically manage their periods. Empowering young girls in humanitarian settings through menstrual hygiene management education is crucial for their wellbeing and self-assurance. Through initiatives like school and girls' club training, Malteser aims to equip women and girls with the knowledge and resources to confidently and hygienically manage their periods.



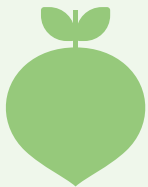
Inclusion of men in the production of reusable sanitary pads – Malteser International

Training men in reusable sanitary pad production offered numerous advantages. By challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, it demonstrated that men can also contribute to areas traditionally associated with women, promoting gender equality. This engagement promoted empathy and understanding among men concerning women's health issues, resulting in heightened awareness and sensitivity within the community. This ultimately contributed to breaking down societal taboos and the stigma surrounding menstruation, creating a culture of openness and support between genders.



GESI Accelerator Fund – World Vision Iraq

In Iraq, World Vision and academic institutions have collaborated to equip 100 women with financial literacy, life skills, and water supply design training. By offering training, micro-grants, and coaching, World Vision has supported 100 women to start and grow their own WASH businesses, aiming to increase the number of women entrepreneurs in the sector. Under the leadership of these women, three new WASH committees will be formed.



South Sudan – Vets Without Borders

Cultural norms in South Sudan create disadvantages for women in terms of educational opportunities and property ownership, such as land and livestock. Interventions aim to allow women to control land use for income generation. Women have become skilled in constructing mini-irrigation systems near hand-dug wells, with gardens providing women with an income by selling various vegetables in the local markets. Women control the income from vegetables, giving them power to make choices.



Supporting WASH measures – International Organization for Migration (IOM)

GFPO supports IOM activities to improve women's and girls' access to WASH in humanitarian crises worldwide. In this context, women are specifically involved in decision-making processes and are trained to take on responsibilities and leadership roles in the projects.



Training Godmothers – Das Hunger Projekt, Senegal

Individuals known as "godmothers" are trained in this project, which works in collaboration with the Podor Health District. These women play a central role in health education and awareness-raising as mediators and voice carriers to reduce maternal and child mortality. A 3-day WASH training session was held for 30 godmothers in 2023 to promote good WASH practices.



Moving towards female health and hygiene at scale - seecon impact and Cewas

In June 2024, seecon impact and Cewas collaborated with multiple partners to launch the Female Health & Hygiene (FHH) Accelerator for Kenya, Uganda and Ghana. This initiative supports 10 social enterprises in the FHH sector by providing technical expertise, business development assistance, networking opportunities, and financing support. The programme empowers participating enterprises to penetrate BoP (base of the pyramid) markets, partner with public sector clients, and build the operational capacity needed to scale. By fostering breakthrough examples of scalable FHH businesses, the accelerator aims to inspire a new wave of changemakers committed to making health and hygiene products and services accessible across the region.

6

Priority recommendations to strengthen gender equality in WASH

Informed by discussions with humanitarian professionals, we offer prioritised recommendations for strengthening the gender equity of German humanitarian WASH assistance. The German WASH Network can significantly contribute to gender equality in humanitarian WASH programming through several key approaches.

Respondents recommended cultivating an approach to address the 4 levels in tandem:

1

At the setting level: The German government and development organisations already demonstrate excellence and expertise on feminist development. The German WASH Network can push the humanitarian sector to be yet more active in promoting gender equality. This requires a tailored approach that allows for adaptability, while prioritising gender sensitivity, a minimum standard set by donor guidelines.

In the transition from emergency response to transitional assistance and development projects, German WASH Network members can advocate for transformative approaches that actively address social norms, social dynamics and structures.

2

At the organisational level: Organisational gender policies and on-the-job training can work together to foster gender equality within an organisation. Employing more people with gender expertise in WASH humanitarian work would not only improve programming but also create more leadership opportunities for women and gender minorities.

By providing technical inputs, the German WASH Network can enhance the capabilities of smaller organisations that lack their own resources and plans. For instance:

- Offer customised training solutions, tools, and guidelines for humanitarian contexts, such as Gender Analysis tools and gender self-assessments (as created by Water for Women (Mott et al., 2021)), promoting Do No Harm principles and Psychological First Aid for field workers, advocating for the inclusion of SOGIESC-diversity in humanitarian WASH, and conducting accessibility and safety audits.
- Serve as a hub for knowledge and information related to the topic, such as supporting research on how to make WASH interventions more gender transformative. By fostering the exchange of ideas, the Network can aid in documenting and sharing best practices and effective working methods.
- Make sure German WASH Network meetings include dedicated time for participants to learn from each other and share experiences on gender equality issues.

3

At the programme level:

- Earmark funds for specific activities in order to highlight the importance of greater financial support for gender equality interventions in humanitarian WASH programming.
- Mandate gender analysis and monitoring so that WASH programmes are required to consider local contexts for better acceptance and feasibility.
- Expand gender-targeted activities, while simultaneously integrating transformative approaches, so that we can challenge underlying factors such as gender norms and relations.

- Design WASH programmes tailored to the needs of all individuals throughout their lives, considering the unique requirements of people with diverse SOGIESC (Dwyer, 2024), people with disabilities and older people (Richard and Kiani, 2019) as well as people with incontinence (House and Chatterton, 2022).
- Provide guidance on partnering with local youth and women-led organisations, like that produced by Water for Women (2022), to enhance WASH actor capacity alongside long-term investments in institutional strengthening and women’s leadership.
- Enhance the monitoring of gender equality and women’s empowerment in WASH initiatives by:
 - repeating the survey used for this study to compare results over time;
 - identifying and tracking WASH Network members’ good practices;
 - creating a public repository to share best practices, policies, guidelines, and tools;
 - monitoring international trends and potential policy requirements related to gender and social inclusion; and
 - prioritising and harmonising indicators across various stakeholders and contexts, aligning them with gender indicators from the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP), to strengthen the evidence base. Indicator suggestions are presented in the table below:

Sample input indicators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # of projects informed by gender analysis • % of project budget allocated to gender targeted activities • # female WASH staff recruited and deployed • Existence or # of active and meaningful partnerships with women rights / women led organisations. • % of staff completing gender equality training / continuing professional development
Sample outcome indicator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # and % of women/men/other using improved water, sanitation, hand hygiene and bathing facilities • % of individuals who reported that the sanitation location they used most often in the last four weeks was clean, private, and safe, by sex and age (JMP) • % of individuals who felt unsafe at the sanitation locations they used most often in the last four weeks due to fear of being harmed or assaulted by someone, by sex and age (JMP) • % of individuals who believe that women and girls in their community face the risk of being physically harmed or assaulted when accessing sanitation locations, by sex and age (JMP) • % of individuals reporting feeling safe from being physically harmed or assaulted while accessing WASH services, by sex and age • % of women and men who think they should share household WASH tasks • # hours/days spent by women/men/other on household WASH roles • # of women/other genders in leadership positions within WASH committees • % of women and girls of menstruating age reporting they do not face restrictions around MHM

At the personal level: The network can help members analyse their work and the world from a feminist perspective. Increasing awareness and knowledge of gender equality issues, coupled with a feminist leadership approach, empowers WASH professionals to better understand how their attitudes and behaviours affect both projects and colleagues. This helps us recognise that promoting gender equality in WASH programmes requires more than just technical solutions.

7

Conclusion

In summary, the findings demonstrate that agencies are already integrating gender equality into their WASH programmes. This discussion paper highlights examples of good practice and lessons learned in gender equality and women's empowerment. While agencies are making strides in gender-sensitive WASH through funding, expertise, partnerships, and data collection, there is a strong desire and ambition among organisations to go further. We've offered ideas on how to boost the effectiveness of humanitarian and transitional WASH services, specifically for girls and women, and strategies to transform WASH organisations and WASH professionals.



Annex A

Box 4: Technical Meeting Regional WASH Workshops to Strengthen Humanitarian Preparedness and Response Capacity – Zambia 2024

An online session was organised to discuss gender-sensitive WASH with participants. Breakout groups provided the following examples of gender-sensitive WASH programming:

Zambia	A gender analysis was undertaken to assess pupils' toilet requirements, taking into account the views of young learners from ages 2 to 12. The analysis suggested separate toilets for boys and girls, situated in a safe location, featuring private and accessible cubicles, adequate lighting, and proper management. These facilities should include provision for menstrual hygiene and sufficient cubicles to avoid long waiting times. Monitoring use of facilities include FGDs and KAP studies.
Zambia	Introducing spaces in schools to facilitate open MHM dialogues. Both boys and girls were welcome to join the group, and discussions were open to all. Even though there was no segregated space, even shy students who initially hesitated to speak felt comfortable discussing the topic with boys present.
Malawi	Latrines were constructed for a maternity station in a health care facility at a camp in Malawi. The design focused solely on infrastructure data. After a month of observation, it was found that the toilets were not being used, and open defecation was still happening. Pregnant women initially refused to use the latrines because they feared the design might harm their babies, highlighting a communication breakdown. Adjustments were made to the design to make the latrines appealing to women.
Zambia	There is a push to challenge traditional views and misconceptions about menstruation, fostering a culture where everyone feels empowered to talk about it openly. For example, over 200 girls are currently using the Oky period app. Magazines like Sky Girls Zed, published bi-monthly, specifically target teenage girls. This magazine has a section focused on MHM, dispelling myths and providing information about periods and their management. Girls were asked to share their own insights, including tips and tricks.
Cameroon	A school WASH project in Cameroon was initially designed to use a single toilet design for boys and girls. Since the girls outnumbered the boys and wanted unique designs for their toilets, the plan needed adjusting. Monitoring was linked to a toilet cleanliness competition between boys and girls, which the girls always won.
Zambia	A German football club supported a WASH project in Lusaka, building separate toilets for boys and girls, FSM treatment plants, and incorporating social activities, like football games, to engage students. Initially, football activities were only for boys, leading to complaints from girls. Girls joined in the football games that were played around WASH activities.
Nigeria	During a project to construct latrines for internally displaced persons in northern Nigeria, women voiced a need for privacy walls around the toilets, seeking to maintain their modesty. The implementer refused the request, opting instead to construct the toilets in a separate, far-off location, yet made sure they were well-lit. The project was deemed a complete failure due to women having to travel a greater distance. The light allowed men to easily see girls and women. Reports of assault and rape led women to stop using the toilets.

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