

Journey to inclusion of youth and women in leadership development, WaterAid Bangladesh

Contributed by Hasin Jahan, WaterAid Bangladesh



Figure 1 – Source: WaterAid Bangladesh

Summary

Bangladesh is facing multi-faceted Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) challenges. The crisis is evident for people living in urban and rural areas. The country’s WASH sector is also disproportionately staffed by male professionals including policy makers. Under representation of women in leadership roles and in the higher-level decision-making positions has often resulted in a lack of gender-friendly policy directives and approaches. Engineers play a major role in the WASH infrastructure development and notably low representation of women engineers often results in design of the infrastructures that may not meet women’s needs adequately.

The power to face these challenges lies in the resilience of Bangladesh’s people, particularly youth and women. Any constructive long-term sustainable solution needs their engagement, involvement and action. To address the emerging challenges of WASH, WaterAid led initiatives

to partner with youth and women – providing them with right resources, platform and knowledge to drive sustainable change and action.

We enabled youth from different background to recognize their power and unleash their potential to solve the challenges that communities face. Three ways that we approached youth engagement to address WASH are:

- involving youth and adolescent girls as volunteers in their own communities to understand WASH and demand rights;
- involving youth volunteers across country to advocate, influence and campaign for WASH access;
- engaging female science, technology, engineering and mathematics students to aspire for WASH careers while breaking social taboos in their career development and be climate activists.

WaterAid believes that recognizing the unique challenges of WASH in different contexts and giving youth and women the opportunity for engagement based on CWIS principles will lead the way for holistic and long-term change in their communities, while giving them the agency of power.

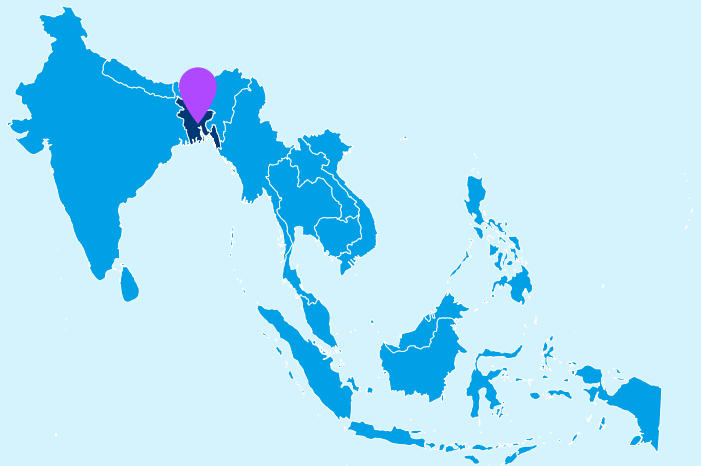
Overview

Geographical information

Country: Bangladesh

Country: Dhaka

City population: 22,000,000



Problem

- Lack of youth involvement in mainstream WASH discourse leading to a generational gap in meeting newer challenges.
- Limited engagement of women engineers in WASH projects, leadership spaces and infrastructure development, creating a significant gap in addressing gender and an inclusive agenda.

Solution

- Partner, collaborate with and involve youth and women in engagements with CWIS principles (i.e. equity, environment and public health, mix of technologies, comprehensive planning, monitoring and accountability, and mix of business models) and a gender lens to enhance their knowledge and leadership, advocacy and community engagement skills so that they participate actively in their communities, take leadership roles and are ready to contribute to the WASH sector in the future.

Problem

Youth and women are large part of the population in Bangladesh who often are not given the opportunities to participate in vital agendas including WASH. The newer challenge in WASH demands inclusive engagement of people from all parts of society, especially the people and communities who do not reside in power centres like Dhaka.

Almost half the 168 million population of Bangladesh are women. Even though women's representation is high in terms of population, their presence is significantly low in the leadership roles in many sectors. The WASH sector, to be specific, is faced with similar issues: low representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions has led to male-centric approaches and solutions, leaving the needs of women unaddressed.

The engineering sector plays a significant role in WASH infrastructure development. Historically, this sector has always been male dominated in Bangladesh. Women's enrolment in engineering is extremely low, and there are anecdotal experiences from those who are in the sector about facing challenges throughout their career. Women make up only 28% of the workforce in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Men vastly outnumber women in most STEM fields in universities and only 2,1% women choose engineering as their major area of study. Moreover, engineers mostly aspire to have jobs which are sophisticated and are dominant in the market, such as real estate or energy. Careers central to WASH are often undervalued by engineers and this mind-set needs to be changed, to bring more qualified professionals on board.

Communities in remote areas often trust their own community members to conform to new hygiene behaviours and leave their long-held practices, for example: managing periods, not considering child faeces as faeces, and not adhering to water and sanitation safety protocols.

Solution

Three ways that WaterAid approached youth engagement in solving today's WASH crisis innovatively:

WASH tea garden community women volunteer active towards changing traditional practices

WaterAid engaged over 25 girls and women as WASH volunteers in the remote regions of Sylhet to bring transformational change in the beliefs of superstitious and long-held menstrual practices to safe and healthy menstrual health management (MHM) practices. In hard-to-reach areas, isolated from the rest of the world the tea garden communities were reached with WASH facilities; however, to instil good hygiene practices, youth from same communities were engaged. The youth volunteers had the drive, potential and ability to change the mind-set of their fellow community members. Women volunteers were convinced to be part of this initiative due to their understanding of the problems. The initiative enabled these volunteers to learn key lessons on being empowered, becoming socially active while enhancing their knowledge and community mobilization skills. This led to leadership development at community level and brought in a bottom-up approach, getting the women and their respective communities to be more open

to talk on issues like periods, which involve highly contested social taboos in a country like Bangladesh. The same WASH volunteers were also active during the COVID-19 pandemic in raising awareness at grassroots levels promoting hygiene protocols as shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.



Figure 3 – COVID-19 awareness raising. Source: WaterAid



Figure 4 – Making a handwashing- station. Source: WaterAid

Youth-led WASH campaigns leading to local level change to influence policy and practices

WaterAid launched a youth platform consisting of over 1,000 connected male and female volunteers, across 16 education institutes in Rangpur and Khulna in Bangladesh. The aim of connecting youth was to raise their voice and engage them in critical issues of WASH to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6. At the forefront of this platform was the aim to bring about inclusive engagement of youth, and to partner with them to respond to community level WASH challenges. The platform works to build key skills of youth, enhancing their capacity and knowledge to become change agents, advocating for sustainable sanitation and water champions, and actively playing a role in climate change dialogues, while aspiring towards CWIS approaches. These volunteers have been equipped with knowledge and skills through comprehensive training on WASH agendas; their capacity in advocacy, campaigning (Figure 5), networking, public speaking skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills makes them ready for future advocacy.



Figure 5- World toilet day campaign. Source: WaterAid

Jolkona initiative: aspiring WASH careers for young women engineers

Jolkona initiative aims to encourage more women to embrace engineering as a career and to motivate them to take up leadership roles in future, WaterAid has started working with the niche sector of aspiring young women engineers in the country with the CWIS approach, increasing their technical knowledge base and bringing in their active participation in the WASH and climate change sector. Through the “Jolkona” (water drop in Bengali) initiative, WaterAid has boosted the importance of STEM and leadership development by engaging 40 women engineers through both online and offline platforms which has enabled them to understand intersectionality of WASH and climate change better, contribute their time and voice towards WASH and climate agendas within the country and beyond. We aim to focus on transforming these enriched minds to become CWIS champions in this field, with their knowledge enhanced, leadership skills developed, participation increased, and voices being heard. All these are believed to motivate and inspire them to become future leaders in WASH sector while enabling them to contribute towards reducing the gender gap in WASH policies and practices.

Lessons learned

From the initiatives taken, WaterAid feels highly confident that community-led volunteers can bring sustainable change in behaviour. This is a unique way of providing opportunities for leadership to the volunteers and strengthening their agency for power and change in the communities, which can result in a long-term sustainable practice.

The Youth for SDG platform has created opportunity for underprivileged and marginalized youth, who are situated away from the metropolis and power centres. Institutions which may not be nationally recognized can still harness creative minds and a pool of energetic change-makers who can transform and bring the water and sanitation agenda to the forefront. A great example is one of the Youth for SDG 6 volunteers from the first cohort, Hashem Badhon, from Rangpur, who founded a platform “Arise Help for Children” whose work around WASH issues has been well recognized and he was awarded in the health and hygiene category on International Volunteers Day 2021.

Through the Jolkona initiative, WaterAid has been able to capture major lessons which re-emphasizes the aptitude of young engineers to solve future engineering problems. It is possible to use various lenses, emphasizing the gender lens which is often missing in the WASH sector. Young women engineers are enthusiastic and have bold personalities, are ready to learn and willing to grow as future WASH and climate leaders and advocates of CWIS principles.

The lessons learned and interventions from WaterAid’s experience proves that if youth are helped and women recognize their potential, the power they possess can bring catalytic change. Bringing innovative engagement and inclusive ways that are inspired by CWIS principles can make them future-ready leaders, who can contribute towards wider national and local policy and practices that will fulfil the goal of leaving no one behind.

Useful links

<https://www.wateraid.org/bd/get-involved/youth-for-sdg-6> (Youth for SDG 6 | WaterAid Bangladesh)

Further reading and references

- Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2018
- Challenges of Women in Science: Bangladesh Perspectives, K Chowdhury
- Center for Development and Employment Research (CDER) report “Bangladesh Employment and Labor Market Watch 2018”
- WaterAid Youth Engagement Strategy 2019–2020

About the author

Hasin Jahan, Country Director at WaterAid Bangladesh is a pioneer WASH professional. She is recognized as an influential WASH leader who promotes gender equality and youth empowerment. She has spoken on FSM in TEDx. She has a distinguished presence in the national media and policy dialogues. She published a book titled 'Girl Be yourself – a roadmap to success in professional and personal life' (in Bengali) about women's career aspirations.

About the institution / organisation

WaterAid is a global organization that has been working for over 30 years in changing lives for the better in 28 countries around the world. We work to offer clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene to underprivileged people globally, through convincing governments to change laws, linking policy makers with people on the ground, pooling knowledge and resources, and rallying support from people and organizations from different corners of the world- altogether making lasting change happen in a massive scale.



www.wateraid.org/where-we-work/bangladesh

About the IWA Inclusive Urban Sanitation Initiative

IWA's Inclusive Urban Sanitation initiative responds to a huge and growing public need - safe sanitation in combination with access to safe drinking water and hygiene underpins good health. The aim of this initiative is reshaping the global urban sanitation agenda by focusing on inclusive sanitation service goals--and the service systems required to achieve them - rather than the traditional singular focus on expanding sewer networks and treatment works. This forms part of IWA's larger agenda to promote inclusive, resilient, water-wise, and sanitation-secure cities.

About the Inclusive Urban Sanitation Stories

The Inclusive Urban Sanitation stories are documenting some of the policies, practices, and approaches that demonstrate how stakeholders especially those in urban areas (e.g., public sector, operators, academics, regulators, and other key actors) are taking part or contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which require water and sanitation concepts and norms to look beyond technology and the usual focus on building infrastructure. Increased focus is on safety, inclusion, environment, public health, and multiple technology solutions tailored to different geographies and socio-economic contexts for building climate-resilient cities. The stories aim to inspire urban stakeholders to discuss ways for advancing inclusive urban sanitation, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

inspiring change

iwa-network.org
iwa-connect.org

IWA
the international
water association