



Stepping Up: Ensuring sexual and gender minorities are not left behind

Reflections from the Water for Women Fund's South Asia
Regional Learning Event

Kathmandu / December '19

Introduction

The first Water for Women Fund Regional Learning Event was held in Nepal from 2-5 December 2019, titled 'Systems strengthening for inclusive WASH - leaving no one behind'. The Event was jointly convened by the Australian Government's flagship water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program, the Water for Women Fund, together with SNV Netherlands Development Organisation. The Event gathered nearly 50 participants from Water for Women Fund projects and partners across seven countries in South and South East Asia. They were joined by research partners, the Fund management team and Australian government representatives.

In Brief

- The Fund is **starting to generate learning and fill gaps in what we know about sexual and gender minority inclusion** in WASH.
- Sharing of learning between fund Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) is encouraging **new engagement with sexual and gender minorities** in other country programs.
- **Systems thinking provides a powerful way to address SGM inclusion in WASH** in the context of broader patterns of exclusion.

Sexual and Gender Minority Inclusion in the Fund

The Water for Women Fund gender and social inclusion (GSI) framework includes sexual and gender minority (SGM)¹ inclusion, alongside inclusion of people with disabilities and more conventional approaches to gender inclusion.

The UN Human Rights Council recognises sexual orientation and gender identity as characteristics of rights holders, and the deep impact of violence and exclusion:

“The combination of social prejudice and criminalization has the effect of marginalizing lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender non-conforming persons and excluding them from essential services, including health, education, employment, housing and access to justice. The spiral of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion may start within the family, extend to the community and have a life-long effect on socioeconomic inclusion.”²

Specifically on WASH, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation has also highlighted issues including “access to sanitation, menstrual hygiene and toilets for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and gender non-conforming people and an increased risk of gender-based violence.”³

The inclusion of SGM considerations within approximately one-third of country programs (and some research programs) provides an opportunity for development of policy and good practice for SGM inclusion in WASH. The discussion on SGM inclusion at the Fund’s South Asia Regional Learning Event built on two years of engagement, starting with the Fund Inception Workshop, support for SGM inclusion in program designs and guidance on SGM considerations for Do No Harm (DNH).

Sexual and Gender Minority Inclusion at the Learning Event

SGM issues enjoyed relatively high visibility throughout the Learning Event, including during the presentation of posters, field trip activities, presentations and informal discussions amongst Fund partners. The presence of two SGM people amongst the workshop participants – Meera Parida from SAKHA (as part of the delegation from India, working alongside Fund partners Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) and Research Triangle Institute Global India (RTI) and the Fund’s Advisor on SGM inclusion (the author of this brief) – brought lived experience to the event and reflected a commitment to ‘nothing about us without us’.

¹The fund is using the term sexual and gender minorities (or SGM), as LGBTIQ+ does not reflect the diversity of gender, sexuality or sex characteristics in the Indo-Pacific. Language within these communities remains contested, and formulations such as diverse sexual orientation, gender identity or expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are increasingly used. In using SGM the Fund is not highlighting a numerical minority, but rather addressing underlying power structures and norms that exclude marginalised people.

²UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity*, 11 May 2018, A/HRC/38/43, paragraph 57.

³UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation*, 27 July 2016, A/HRC/33/49, paragraph 2.

Acknowledgements

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Edge Effect works with humanitarian and development organisations to ensure that the rights, needs and strengths of people with diverse SOGIESC (aka SGM or LGBTIQ+ people) are addressed. For more information, please visit www.edgeeffect.org

Water for Women is Australia’s flagship water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program supporting improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable WASH projects. Water for Women is delivering 18 WASH projects in 15 countries together with 11 research projects over five years (2018-2022). The Fund supports regular knowledge and learning events with Fund partners to facilitate the cross-fertilisation of ideas and strategies.





'Nothing about us without us.' Emily Dwyer from Edge Effect, Sexual and Gender Minority Inclusion Adviser to the Water for Women Fund presents at the event

Working on exclusion from WASH services and in WASH systems can be enhanced by a broader understanding of the systemic exclusion that sexual and gender minorities experience in many aspects of their lives.

Causal loop diagrams (often used in systems thinking) help show the interactions that reinforce marginalisation, but also highlight opportunities to engage in creative program design that may disrupt negative feedback loops (pictured below).

The CFAR poster highlighted stories from Meera Parida and eight other trans women. The poster challenges stereotypes, demonstrating that trans women can have many professions and interests, but access to public sanitation is often unsafe or non-existent:

“When we use a public toilet, we feel very uncomfortable; people stand around, pass rude comments and laugh at us”

(Samikshya)

“I work as a field coordinator

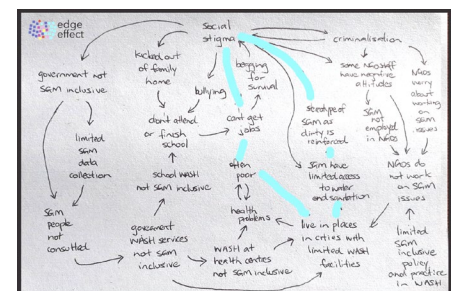
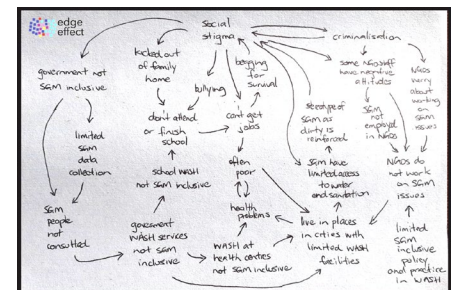
... so I often need a toilet. If I request any household to use their toilet, they sometimes allow me or else refuse, and I have to go back home to relieve myself”

(Sanjana Behera)

“I am an Uber cab driver and when ... I need to use the toilet I find none available for me so I am forced to go back home and then again make my way back to the city. In the process I lose many clients”

(Rani Kinnar)

The challenges became clearer to participants during the Learning Event field visit to a municipality near Kathmandu. Nepal’s constitution recognises gender and sexual minorities, and municipal-level population data included 20 people in the ‘other’ category (in addition to women and men) in a sub-municipality in which a public toilet block had been built. However during the subsequent visit to the toilet block, when asked about usage of the facility by third gender people, staff there dismissed those 20 people as a data collection error.



Two attending organisations **more deeply engaged** at this stage of the Fund are CFAR in India and IRC in Pakistan.

CFAR's engagement with transgender people is systematic, **"involving them in all processes from the inception of the project as key 'movers' and agents of change."**

The Fund's SGM Adviser presentation situated work with sexual and gender minorities within systems approaches. Working on exclusion from WASH services and in WASH systems can be enhanced by a broader understanding of the systemic exclusion that sexual and gender minorities experience in many aspects of their lives. Causal loop diagrams (often used in systems thinking) help show the interactions that reinforce marginalisation, but also highlight opportunities to engage in creative program design that may disrupt negative feedback loops. These opportunities are easier to see if development actors focus on the social norms that underpin SGM exclusion: heteronormativity, cisnormativity, gender binarism and dyadism. This also involves turning the spotlight back on development organisations, and undertaking transformational work to understand and challenge how those norms may be at work in development practice.

Heteronormativity is the assumption that sexual relations are (or should be) heterosexual, reinforced through regulation of acceptable social behaviour or institutions. For example, the assumption that families have a heterosexual relationship at their core, or that abuse toward people with different sexuality is acceptable.

Cisnormativity is the assumption that everyone's gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth: if your birth certificate says male, then you are and will always be a man, if your birth certificate says female, then you are and will always be a woman. This assumption erases transgender people (who may know themselves to be a woman or a man, even if they were assigned a different sex at birth) and gender diverse people.

Gender binarism is the assumption that there are only two genders that need to be accommodated in the world (for example in the provision of toilets). This erases people who may identify as cultural 'third gender' groups and people whose gender identity is non-binary (between or outside of the two usual options of woman or man).

Dyadism is the assumption that everyone's sex characteristics fit into medical and social norms for female or male bodies. This erases intersex people, for whom this is not true, and can lead to human rights violations such as non-consensual genital surgery.⁴

Overview of activities of attending Fund partners

Different Fund partners are at different stages of engagement with sexual and gender minorities. Two attending organisations more deeply engaged at this stage of the Fund are CFAR in India and IRC in Pakistan. Both organisations are working with gender diverse people, who may understand themselves to be transgender, non-binary or part of culturally specific 'third gender' groups known as khwaja sira (in Pakistan) and hijra (in India).

⁴See www.ihra.org.au for more information

CFAR has been working with SGM communities since 2005, and drew on existing relationships. Soumya Mishra describes CFAR's engagement with SGM CSO SAKHA and transgender people as systematic, "involving them in all processes from the inception of the project as key 'movers' and agents of change" and explains that "the transwomen were clear that before they engaged with WASH, they wanted to sensitize everyone – both the urban poor communities and stakeholders – about their identity and the existential crisis they face."

After initially addressing discrimination by sanitary collection workers through successful lobbying and sensitisation activities, Soumya Mishra said that CFAR and SAKHA "decided to launch a campaign to make all toilets that are in public spaces including shopping complexes, schools, colleges and government offices to be trans-inclusive".

IRC's project currently being implemented across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan, is newer to working with gender diverse people. The hiring of a transgender staff member proved to be a turning point for IRC's inclusion of transgender people in WASH activities. Although Pakistan has had legislation to

“This experience has really highlighted to me how much change is possible when we push boundaries a little.”

David Clatworthy from IRC, reflecting on the hiring of a transgender staff member



Participants on day one of 'Systems strengthening for inclusive WASH - leaving no one behind' from 2 - 5 December, 2019 in Kathmandu, Nepal

protect transgender people since 2018, khwaja sira are widely stigmatised and excluded, and IRC's Sitara Zeb explains that they "took steps to understand staff attitudes and cultural barriers". This involved focus group discussions and key informant interviews, and led to "sensitisation sessions with all IRC Pakistan staff for developing the conducive and safe environment not only for transgender persons but for persons (women) with disabilities as well". This transformative process has opened up new discussions in the team, and has also facilitated connections with the khwaja sira community.

Other organisations are exploring ways to integrate SGM communities into ongoing programs, including World Vision in Bangladesh who have included SGM people in community engagement activities, and SNV in Bhutan who have a developing relationship with key SGM CSO advocates.

“Sometimes, when there is a project, [transgender people] are used for taking photos etc. and then the deliverables are fulfilled.”

Meera Parida from Sakha

“[CFAR] don't see everything in terms of project deliverables. When we talk about inclusion, we look at the range of issues. **We are a friend, and we try to help them out.** We have also facilitated SAKHA to build a broader alliance with other organisations and networks representing other marginal groups such as persons with disability, the elderly, single women and adolescents.”

Soumya Mishra from CFAR



Meera Parida from SAKHA shares insights into her experience at the learning event

Overarching learning

Balance between taking risks and doing no harm

A question at the Learning Event was whether the Fund has the balance right between taking risks and doing no harm (DNH). While DNH is a key Fund principle, the fear of doing harm can lead to inaction, with the effect of leaving a marginalised group further behind. Working with sexual and gender minorities may involve risk for those people, and risk for development actors who may fear damaged relationships with government or other partner organisations. There are ways to mitigate risk, for example by working with SGM CSOs or experienced advocates who can assist development actors to make decisions informed by the SGM community priorities and willingness to accept risk. Development actors committed to rights-based development may also need to challenge themselves at times, and explore ways to use convening or connecting power to open up space for SGM inclusion discussions. As coined at the Event: be brave, but not silly.

'Nothing about us without us'

Genuine engagement with SGM communities is essential. Meera Parida from SAKHA spoke at the inclusion session, calling for genuine engagement with marginalised or forgotten groups rather than tokenism. Soumya Mishra, from CFAR described a partnership in which they are conscious of not taking up too much space, instead “facilitating strategic and capacity building processes” and SAKHA’s role is “providing leadership to shape the process of transformation by



“Leaving no one behind.” Meera and members of the transgender community lead World Toilet Day celebrations in partnership with Water for Women partner, CFAR / Photo Credit: @cfarindia

Soumya Mishra said that CFAR learned that when hijras “volunteer to do community work they are often discouraged [by their gurus] and told to save up their energy to service more clients and make more money. **We have to sensitise their gurus or the head of the family and ensure that they are also enthusiastic about the project so that they do not thwart our initiatives.”**

driving the many activities and the advocacy”. While there are principled reasons to take these steps, there are also practical reasons, that SGM communities may not be open to outsiders. By building genuine partnerships with SGM CSOs or hiring SGM staff, Fund CSOs are demonstrating a commitment to the SGM community that may open doors that have long been closed.

Get to know and work within community dynamics

IRC’s Sitara Zeb noted that their initial assessments in villages did not reveal khwaja siras living there. To include them, IRC needed to take into account that khwaja siras tend to move between districts where they are from and larger towns or cities where they live. But still, engaging with khwaja siras can be challenging: “Usually they do not give time to NGO personnel as they have different cultural and sub-culture systems.” These include the presence of a ‘guru’ or ‘mother-figure’ to whom a group of khwaja siras or hijras may owe allegiance in return for shelter and support. Soumya Mishra said that CFAR learned that when hijras “volunteer to do community work they are often discouraged [by their gurus] and told to save up their energy to service more clients and make more money. We have to sensitise their gurus or the head of the family and ensure that they are also enthusiastic about the project so that they do not thwart our initiatives.”

SGM inclusion at subnational levels

SGM CSOs are often resource-constrained, staff-constrained and capital-city-based, meaning that much of their advocacy is focused on national-level or province-level legislation and policy. However mapping of WASH systems at the Learning Event highlighted the extent to which municipal, sub-municipal and neighbourhood level decision-making influences community service provision. The challenge is that SGM CSOs may not be present at those grassroots levels all around the country, and community members may be heavily marginalised or may choose to conceal SGM aspects of their lives. A consequence can be that inclusive policy at national or province level is not reflected in local decision-making, which may remain exclusionary or be poorly informed about SGM issues. Fund CSOs need to remain vigilant, looking for safe opportunities to explore SGM inclusion at local levels.

Reflections for wider learning

Meaningful partnerships take time and effort

The SGM Adviser's presentation also highlighted challenges in establishing genuine partnerships with SGM CSOs, including:

- SGM CSOs may want a longer-term approach than aid projects allow, and this may especially be the case where there are risks for the community in taking part in projects.
- International NGOs (INGOs) may make demands of SGM CSOs that cannot be met, because of resource limitations. Sometimes INGOs make requests for SGM CSOs to review documents, attend meetings, or undertake community engagement without compensation.
- SGM CSOs are often activist organisations, sometimes at odds with their own governments and other key institutions. These are the governments and institutions that INGOs often see as essential partners, and working with the SGM CSO may seem too risky.
- Many SGM CSOs focus on human rights and may have limited development or WASH experience. For INGOs this means additional resources to support CSO participation.

Going beyond gender minorities

There is a tendency for sexual and gender minority inclusion to focus on gender rather than sexuality. Cultural non-binary gender minorities are an established part of society in many parts of South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific, for example khwaja sira and hijra in South Asia, waria in Indonesia and leitis in Tonga; predominantly these groups are people who are assigned male at birth but who understand themselves to be women or live within stereotypical norms of women.

Sexual minorities – including people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or other forms of diverse sexuality – often do not have this limited recognition and risk more intense violence and discrimination if their sexuality becomes known. Consequently development actors starting to work on SGM issues tend to focus on gender minorities as there is somewhat less risk, and work with sexual minorities can be much harder to accomplish.

Another under-addressed group is intersex people, people with diverse sex characteristics and the I in LGBTQ+. Intersex people may face discrimination within families, medical and other institutions, and non-consensual genital surgery, along with other issues, may lead to WASH issues. Intersex people are often not included within SGM CSOs and Intersex-specific advocacy groups are emerging in some regions.

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Find out more at
waterforwomenfund.org

Water for Women Fund, SNV, Edge Effect and DFAT, 'Stepping Up: ensuring sexual and gender minorities are not left behind', Learning brief – *Systems Strengthening / Leave No One Behind*, 2020, Melbourne, Water for Women Fund.