Gender assessment study towards gender transformative WASH

[Dhaka, March 28, 2024] WaterAid Bangladesh, funded by the Embassy of Sweden, initiated the WASH for Urban Poor (WASH4UP) project in 2018, now in its second phase from 2023 to 2026. The project aims to reduce gender-based discriminations and inequalities in WASH intervention, enhance accountability of local governance to gender inclusive services, and strengthen national policies for climate-resilient and inclusive WASH services. To accelerate gender-transformative change and sustainable development, WaterAid commissioned a gender assessment for WASH4UP’s second phase focuses on practical gender needs and strategic gender interests of the stakeholders of the project. In today’s briefing to the press, WaterAid shared the major study findings to disseminate these through media among the relevant stakeholders in the sector for their understanding and actions and the wider audience in Bangladesh for their information.

Bangladesh has made substantial improvement in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), however, still lagging towards ensuring gender transformative WASH both at urban and rural setting. Historically, WASH services considered as women’s responsibility to meet the water and sanitation needs of the household. Despite their crucial roles, women and girls in urban poor communities face significant gender inequality in WASH. They are often left out of decision-making, consulted less, and stigmatised by social norms and taboos related to water, sanitation, and hygiene, both at home and in the community.

The study was presented by Mr Md Mahadi Hasan, Manager, Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning, WaterAid Bangladesh. He informed that the study was conducted in low-income community of four city corporations and three municipalities covering 550 household samples which includes 330 women and 220 men. Out of 550 surveyed respondents, 10.4% reported having family members with disabilities. About 20.55% of participants (among them 91% are women and 9% are men) consider themselves as marginalised. The respondents who feel marginalised highest, considered gender-based discriminations

---

1 The gender transformative approach challenges unequal gender relations and discriminatory norms and practices, which are typically biased in favour of men. It also aims to change those norms and practices that discriminate against men and by which men can feel overburdened.
as a form of marginalisation (61.9%) because of their gender identity. Additionally, 41.6% cited economic factors as the cause, highlighting issues related to economic inequalities, poverty, or limited opportunities and 7.1% mentioned disability as a reason, indicating challenges or discrimination related to their disabilities.

Mr Hasan shared that the assessment examined a range of thematic areas, i.e., gender-based WASH practices, inequality, discrimination, social norms, gender equality, women’s empowerment, gender-based violence, awareness, power dynamics, resource access, and meaningful participation. The study revealed that women and girls bear the primary burden of water collection (75.3%) and household hygiene responsibilities (79%).

Around 63% respondents use shared toilet at community, of which, 89% stated that they have no access to gender-friendly toilet facilities. Moreover, nearly all respondents (93%) reported a lack of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities in the existing toilets and WASH areas. It also pointed that traditional gender roles prevail with women shouldering household chores and water collection (87%). The stigma around menstruation makes open discussions difficult, as nearly all respondents (96%) do not talk about menstrual issues with adult male members of their family.
The study showed that gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant issue as 9% of women respondents reported experiencing different forms of GBV, of which, 66% (6% of total women respondents) reported verbal abuse and 14% (1.5% of total women respondents) experienced physical assault while collecting water. Shockingly, almost all GBV incidents (99.5%) go unreported.
It clearly showed that the men predominantly control water resources (75%) and decision-making authority. This leads to issues of harassment and violence for women and limited access to hygiene resources (40%). The study found that women's participation in water-related decision-making at the household and community levels is limited. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness about the involvement of women, adolescents, and persons with disabilities in WASH committees.

Mr. Hasan mentioned that considering the overall findings, the assessment identified the major gaps and challenges within the domain of gender transformative WASH agenda keeping in mind the SIDA's feminist principles and approach of gender mainstreaming. Some of the major gaps portrays that women are positioned as vulnerable rather an active change agent, challenging gender norms and practices. There are gender bias role distribution leading to time poverty of women, limiting participation in the income generating activities and decision-making processes. Men and boys as effective change agent are not engaged yet. There is lack of gender responsive project design, and gender responsive budgeting.

Based on the findings from this comprehensive assessment, WaterAid presented action-oriented recommendations to enable gender transformative WASH strategies. They are: (a) Incorporating a comprehensive gender equality perspective into national policies and frameworks; (b) Enhancing collaboration with key agencies and stakeholders to promote gender-responsive services and climate-resilient WASH initiatives; (c) Introducing non-negotiable gender checklists and guidelines for project design and implementation; (d) Conducting periodic gender analyses at service and community levels to inform decision-making and action; (e) Support and protect against gender-based violence; and (f) Fostering collaboration among communities, local authorities, and stakeholders to prioritise WASH sustainability.

Reflecting on the significance of gender in WASH issues, Ms Hasin Jahan, Country Director, WaterAid Bangladesh, said, “Our societal norms need to be changed for the advancement of women and ensuring gender equity. Women should be given space and importance for decision making at the family, community and institution levels for bringing positive changes”.

Page 4 of 5
Mr Mostafizur Rahman, National Programme Officer, Climate and Environment, Embassy of Sweden, added, “Solutions are at our hand, we just need to extend our support for making an equitable and just society where people of all gender will have equal access to services and facilities”.

—End—

For more information, please contact:

Fayazuddin Ahmad, Advocacy & Campaign Lead, WaterAid Bangladesh
Email: fayazuddinahmad@wateraid.org

Mostafizur Rahman, National Programme Officer- Climate and Environment
Embassy of Sweden, Email: mostafizur.rahman@gov.se