



Engaging men to transform gender roles in WASH

SNV's research into transforming norms and practice in WASH-related care and domestic work in Nepal highlights the importance of redefining masculinity and notions of 'work' and 'family harmony' to facilitate a feminist and inclusive economic recovery. This research brief presents the immediate impacts of an intervention for young men's behaviour change and offers recommendations for incorporating gender transformative approaches in local government-led WASH programming.

Women, young women, and girls around the world bear the overwhelming burden of achieving Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) outcomes at household level. They are largely responsible for household water collection, safe water use, hygiene management, and for the health and hygiene of children, older people, and people with disabilities. Inequitable distribution of WASH-related Care and Domestic (CAD) work in households leads to sub-optimal WASH outcomes and directly affects women of all ages' rights, status, health, safety, financial independence, and life opportunities.

During COVID-19 in Nepal, WASH-related care and domestic work increased for many families due to the return of family members from other districts and work abroad, longer hours spent inside the home, and increased hygiene and health needs of household members.

SNV seized the unique opportunity to undertake qualitative research into gendered allocations of CAD work in this changed environment, working in two locations in Nepal and using a two-stage approach. The research was conducted in 2021-2022. The first stage explored gender norms underpinning WASH-related CAD work distribution during COVID-19 lockdowns. The second stage of the research, which is the focus of this research brief, focused on the development and trialling of an intervention to disrupt and transform gender norms in WASH-related CAD work. This brief explores the development of the intervention approach and short-term impacts, with recommendations for integrating the activity into WASH service delivery and programming in the Nepal context.

Designing the Stage 2 intervention

Workshops involving representatives from rural municipalities, including WASH staff, health workers, representatives from Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPD), and women leaders were held in Dailekh and Sarlahi to co-design the focus of CAD-work interventions to be trialled. These workshops, led by SNV in Nepal's Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) team, involved collective reflection on key learnings from the first stage of the research¹ and successful approaches to behaviour change in context. Through small-group facilitated activities, participants prioritised an intervention targeting young men (under 35) as future leaders, preferring engagement through facilitated discussions and activities, to promote deep reflection for more equitable, respectful, and less violent behaviours related to WASH. Engaging peers and family members was also an identified priority to validate and support young men's journey of change and transform attitudes and behaviours across family and friendship networks.

Stage 1 research data was used to select a CAD work skills development activity on which to centre the intervention and track change. In Dailekh, cooking skills were selected and in Sarlahi cleaning activities were prioritised. Both activities were considered to have the potential for substantive impact on women's WASH workload through the redistribution of work considered by women to be difficult or time intensive, and were considered acceptable tasks by men in the target districts.

Intervention approach and structure

Responding to these priorities, the research team designed a series of workshops that engaged young men to explore their masculinities and involvement in WASH-related CAD work, with the intention of mobilising them to lead broader norms change in their communities. The workshop series was framed as skills development for young men to **contribute to strong and happy families through WASH**. This approach responds to research demonstrating that work exploring masculinities is most successful when appealing to the benefits men will personally gain from change to gender norms alongside rights-based messaging. Improved family relationships, collective responsibility, and



Cloth line exercise to surface experiences of gender-based violence.
Photo credit: SNV/Sabitra Dhakal.

action (referred to as family harmony during COVID-19), and a reduction in family conflict were attractive benefits of norms change identified by young men in Stage 1. The workshops aimed to broaden pervasive compliance-focused conceptions of family cohesiveness to include notions of mutual respect, equality, and shared work, responsibilities, and decision making.

Broken into five modules of 2-2.5 hours each, the workshop series was designed to be delivered over a five-week period, with the mixed engagement of young men and their family members, and religious, community, and other institutional leaders [see Table 1 on next page]. Activities included facilitated discussions, skills development sessions, and practical opportunities to rehearse and validate new skills and role-play new attitudes and behaviours. Homework tasks were set between sessions to consolidate learning and identify and address barriers to change. Sessions were framed around WASH-related activities and examples. Cooking activities in Dailekh, for example, explored the importance of washing hands, maintaining clean cooking pots and utensils, and storing clean drinking water alongside practical skills in cooking and basic nutrition.

Trial activities

Young men from Sarlahi and Dailekh were recruited for separate trial activities held in September through November 2022. Local NGOs, the Everest Club (in Dailekh), and the Rural Upliftment Association (in Sarlahi), were recruited and trained to facilitate the series in each location, with support from SNV in Nepal's GESI team.

In Sarlahi, the workshop series involved young men from the same hamlet, and the activity was

¹ SNV in Nepal, 'Transforming gender roles in WASH for a feminist economic recovery', *Research Brief*, Stage 1 of 2, The Hague, SNV, 2023, <https://snv.org/assets/explore/download/2023-transforming-gender-roles-fem-econ-recovery-snv.pdf> (accessed 29 January 2023).

Table 1: Intervention modules trialled

| Module | Purpose | Number of participants in each location |
|---|--|--|
| 1 Understanding the family economy, using the Cassava model | Encourage critical reflection of gender roles in paid and unpaid work distribution, promoting more involvement of men in WASH-related CAD and more flexibility for women to do paid work. | Young men (13) and venue representative |
| 2 Equality in the household | Challenge gender-based discrimination, drawing on localised practices of discrimination against women during menstruation to highlight inequality and hygiene implications. | Young men (13), religious leaders (1), and venue representative |
| 3 Respect and non-violence | Explore family power dynamics, building commitment towards ending violence against women, with WASH triggers as a focus. | Young men (13) and venue representative |
| 4 Building family harmony through WASH-related CAD work | Provide an opportunity for young men to rehearse and demonstrate WASH-related CAD skill, new attitudes, and behaviours, and for participants to learn new approaches to collaborative decision making and respectful communication techniques. | Young men (13), family members, local leaders (rights' holder organisations, religious and government), and venue representative Dailekh: 71 people in total, including 28 women Sarlahi: 61 people in total, including 14 women |
| 5 Planning for change | Engage young men in thinking of ways to expand the impact of the workshop beyond their families to community-wide change. | Young men (13) and venue representative |

linked to a Youth-Led Total Sanitation initiative, whereby participants undertook household visits to promote sanitation and hygiene to achieve total sanitation in the village after the workshops. Religious leaders attended the entire event series as the workshop was held in their temple. In Dailekh, the event was held in a health service building and involved men from different hamlets across the district; health workers regularly attended the workshop sessions.

Short-term impacts were monitored using surveys and through facilitated discussions during validation workshops in each location. Participants, family members, and government and community leaders participated in these processes. In Sarlahi, a total of 61 people were surveyed including 12 young male participants, 14 women family members, and 35 men from families and local organisations. Forty-nine people attended Sarlahi's validation workshop,

² The intervention tools and approaches are available in SNV, 'Building young men's active role in WASH-related care and domestic work,' *Masculinities Toolkit*, The Hague, SNV, 2022.

including 12 trained young people, 7 family members (4 women, 3 men), and local leaders. In Dailekh, 19 people attended the validation workshop, including 10 trained youth, 3 local leaders, 1 CSO representative, and 3 family members (all men), and surveys were completed by 12 trained youth and 12 family members (7 women, 5 men). COVID-19-related operational challenges disrupted plans to undertake an initial survey for comparative purposes and for timely documentation of facilitator experiences of individual activities during the intervention. Fortunately, the SNV GESI team was able to attend and observe select workshop activities and validation workshops and speak further with key participants about their experiences.

Findings

Young men in both locations claimed that the workshop series changed both their attitudes and actions in three key areas affecting WASH outcomes: menstrual hygiene, CAD work distribution in households, and attitudes toward violence against women. Most participants displayed more equitable attitudes and behaviours around these issues after the intervention and expressed a desire to share their learning with others in their community. All Sarlahi participants and 9 of the 13 participants in Dailekh, for example, agreed that the intervention motivated them to make a change in their community. In Dailekh, this enthusiasm led participants to create a youth group to promote community-wide change by challenging beliefs that CAD work, and cooking specifically, is a gendered role. In Sarlahi, participants led total sanitation activities in their community, sharing their WASH skills and experience with 22 households after the workshop series.

Menstrual hygiene

The menstrual hygiene component of the workshop series had a significant impact on participants; it was described as one of the most challenging yet rewarding segments of the workshop series in both locations. Participants expressed strong awareness and support for menstrual hygiene after the workshop series. Comments from Sarlahi participants included a description of menstruation as a gift of nature, a declaration that women should not be ashamed of menstruation, and that menstruation is an issue the whole family should know about. In Dailekh, young men's comments on the topic focused

on the need for greater menstrual hygiene and sanitary pad use.

In both locations, men's new learning about menstruation purportedly led to women's increased access to sanitary pads. Several young men and a local leader described buying pads for their wives and daughters because of their learning and advising other men to buy sanitary pads for the women in their family. While positive, consideration must be given to how to promote women's agency and mobility to independently access sanitary pads.

Men also became advocates for the end to exclusionary practices linked to menstruation as a result of the workshop. In Sarlahi, for example, a young man publicly advocated for an end to discrimination of menstruating women in public life during the validation workshop, calling on a religious leader in attendance to 'stop saying that going to temple during menstruation is a sin'. Engaging women more actively in the menstruation module would promote both their voice and agency alongside men, while also addressing concerns of one local leader in Sarlahi that young women 'continue the social customs of menstruation more than young men', excluding themselves from family and public life when menstruating.

Division of responsibility for CAD work

A common theme in validation workshop discussions in both locations was the recognition that WASH-related CAD activities are the shared responsibilities of men and women and that doing these tasks is not shameful. One Dailekh participant explained that 'doing the household chores doesn't make anyone powerful or powerless'. Another from Sarlahi stated 'earlier I thought that housework was done only by women, but now I don't think so'. In Dailekh, the practical benefits of cooking skills were celebrated as a critical life skill or survival skill; young men frequently travel outside of the community for seasonal labour opportunities and cooking skills equate to money saved on purchased meals.

Household monitoring undertaken by the facilitators two weeks post intervention in Sarlahi supported men's claims of doing more WASH-related CAD work. Men were found to be doing a range of activities including making tea, cooking food, cleaning the toilet, washing clothes, washing the dishes, and cleaning the house and surroundings. Several men also listed tasks related to children, including bathing them,

washing their clothes, and taking them to school alongside increased involvement in subsistence activities usually done by women. This is a significant shift away from gender norms in Sarlahi. In Dailekh, 4 out of 7 women surveyed agreed and 3 partially agreed that young men participants were more active in cooking after the intervention.

Leaders in both locations explained new realisations, prompted by the workshop, of the ways households can take advantage of women, and ways they can rectify gender-based disadvantage, as follows:

My daughter-in-law is employed [in paid work]. When I used to do housework, she used to request me not to do it. At that time, I thought that my daughter-in-law was a good woman. After participating in this seminar, I realised that I was wrong to be happy when my daughter-in-law didn't let me do the household chores. (Male religious leader, Sarlahi)

I have started washing clothes even if they belong to my wife after attending this workshop series, realising that it need not be washed necessarily by a woman. (Male Ward Chair, Dailekh).

Violence linked to WASH-related CAD work

Happier, less stressful households and greater respect for women were reported outcomes of the intervention. Leaders in Sarlahi spoke of the importance of equal treatment between women that are newly 'married-in' to families and existing family members. Shared decision-making and collaborative CAD work practices were changes purportedly adopted by several participants in both locations. Young men in Sarlahi described being less abusive to relatives and women in general and using a 'sweet voice' to resolve issues. They also expressed less tolerance for violence. For example, one man stated, 'I have developed the idea that violence is not acceptable under any circumstances.' Comments from women included reduced hesitation and fear when asking for CAD work assistance from young men in Dailekh and greater love and respect between married couples in both locations.

During the Sarlahi validation workshop, a mother of a workshop participant shared a story about change in her household resulting from the workshop. In doing so she revealed the potential of the workshop series to reduce WASH-related

violence at a household level through a more equitable division of CAD work, as follows:

My son used to walk around without doing household work. Sometimes he would even beat his wife, which would lead to family quarrels. Because of this, my daughter-in-law and I used to fight, and neighbours always called our family a bad family. Our family has been known as a quarrelsome family. My son has changed since participating in this training. My son has started helping me and his wife with the housework, which has brought peace and happiness to our family, and the villagers are surprised and ask me about the change in my son. (Mother of participant, Sarlahi)

Changes experienced by women

Men's increased CAD work engagement was reported to provide opportunities in some families for women to expand on their cash-based economic activity, take on non-traditional unpaid roles, and have their health and welfare better supported, all factors underpinning more inclusive economic recovery from COVID-19. In separate examples in Sarlahi, women were described as leading cattle out to graze and doing household finances, both tasks typically done by men. In Dailekh, one woman shared how her husband's increased responsibility for CAD work enabled her to meet growing demand within her cash business:

He [my husband] looks after the household chores and this allows me to look after and run the small hotel³ [serving tea and snacks] that we have. I can meet the increasing demand for tea and snacks among the officials of the ward office and the school kids. (Young woman, Dailekh)

In another story from Dailekh, a woman highlighted the ways more equitable WASH-related work distribution can positively impact women's health through her own story:

I can look after our daughter (6 months old now) and heal from sickness properly as my husband now cooks for me and does the household chores without any support from me. (Young woman, Dailekh)

Support for change by family and friends

In Dailekh, young men's increased role in CAD work was seen by several family members and leaders as an important antidote to young men's perceived anti-social behaviour, including

³ In the context of Nepal, cafés or any kind of eatery in the country is colloquially referred to as 'hotel'.



Participant in Dailekh preparing dinner for his family. Photo credit: SNV.

wandering around and getting drunk, abusing drugs, doing nothing tangible, and being unemployed. This perspective is reflected in the following quote by the wife of a participant: 'I can walk with pride in the society as people don't make fun of my husband being unemployed and doing nothing anymore'.

In Sarlahi in particular, the older generation were enthusiastic about the intervention leading to more respect for older people in the family, and supported new behaviours including taking advice from others, practising mutual respect, and sitting together to discuss CAD work roles and family decisions. The described potential for men to gain greater self-respect and community standing from their role in WASH-related CAD work sat in strong contrast to the expected backlash, as identified in Stage 1, of men losing their dignity, friends, and influence.

Multiple stories were shared of young men influencing other men in their family network. In Dailekh, for example, a young man described how he taught his nephew how to cook so that he could share the responsibility of cooking with his mother. Another spoke of getting all the male family members, including the young man's father, brother, and grandfather to join him to learn how to make roti from women in the family. However, several participants spoke of the need to prove their skills first and demonstrate the benefits of men's CAD work engagement to other family members before the latter learnt to accept and embrace a more gender-fair work distribution at home.

Gaining women's support for young men's increased CAD work responsibilities was challenging in Dailekh. In some cases, women provided conditional support.

When my wife is not at home, I cook food. It's OK with my mother. But when my wife is at home, my mother still stops me from cooking. (Young man, Dailekh)

Young men's survey results indicated that fathers in Dailekh were perceived to be more supportive of their sons doing CAD work in the household than mothers. Further, only a quarter of women family members attending the validation workshop agreed to the survey question that their thinking had changed about men's CAD work responsibilities, half agreed to partial change, and the remaining quarter felt there was no change. This indicates the need for further targeted engagement with women family members in participating families.

Young men continued to face ongoing and disabling social pressure around their gender roles in CAD work. More than a third of young men participants in Sarlahi and half of young men in Dailekh agreed that the fear of other men's opinions and reactions affected their willingness to do CAD work. Experiences were shared of being called a girl, teased, being subjected to sarcastic comments from neighbours and relatives, and being yelled at when doing CAD work.

Stories of positive change and support were also shared. A family member in Sarlahi credited the workshop for giving young men skills in motivating neighbours. Another claimed that 'neighbouring families started working together after watching our work.' Several participants and family members shared stories of increasing personal and family resilience – of family members standing up for new practices and roles, and of proudly discussing their son's increased role in CAD work with neighbours.

Impacts of engaging local leaders

Leaders expressed a mix of strong support for men's new CAD roles, respectful communication skills, and familial outcomes alongside concerns for men's increased voice and activism. These concerns reflected existing hierarchical norms within multi-generational households and society more broadly, which largely focused on younger people respecting and obeying older people. While religious leaders, for example, were keen to align new learnings with religious practice, claiming that 'doing the household chores jointly or men

doing the household chores doesn't impact the religion, rather consolidates the religion', they also expressed concern about social change. Empowering male youth could bring 'distortions to society', as youth were likely to disrupt tradition. This response is likely linked to the unexpected and very public accountability demanded by young men for the temple's purported mistreatment of menstruating women.

Some leaders converted learning into action in their own life. For example, one described discussing equality and CAD work division in their own household, and a woman leader described starting to share CAD work with men in her own family. Further, a teacher in Sarlahi described how she engaged students in conversations to drive broader change: 'I talked to all my students and encouraged them to think that CAD work should be done by all the family members together and the students have been talking to their families about this'.

Differences between Sarlahi and Dailekh

Intervention results show that while the intervention was successful in engaging and motivating the male youth contingent in Dailekh, it may have been less successful – relative to Sarlahi – in promoting peer, family, and community support for CAD work redistribution.

Linking the intervention trial to Youth-Led Total Sanitation activities in Sarlahi may have increased the credibility of young men's actions and provided some protection against social criticism while they practised new WASH-related CAD roles and knowledge. Post training, young men had a direct engagement with 22 households in the target location, supporting them to learn better sanitation and hygiene practices, including hand washing, safe water storage, keeping the house clean, and bathing daily during menstruation. Delivering the workshop series to men in the same hamlet may have also strengthened the peer network and collective identity of participants, reinforced during Module 4, which was held in their own hamlet. By contrast, Module 4 activities in Sarlahi may have involved many people unknown to the participants as the workshop series involved participants from more than one hamlet. Other factors affecting relative successes between the districts could be explained by the skills of facilitators or the participant selection.

Big things grow from small things

Significant attitudinal and behavioural changes were observed in families of intervention participants. The ripple effects of these changes are felt more broadly; extended family, neighbours, friends, and community leaders were noted to discuss the issues, try new practices, and in some cases stand alongside the young men and advocate for change. The challenge remains however, to find cost-effective ways for WASH services to maintain and build momentum for these new behaviours and attitudes in existing and new contexts.

The key to ongoing support for norms change is local government funding and commitment. Fortunately, local government service support for the activity is strong in both target locations. SNV already has plans to work with local government in Dailekh, at their request, to assist in the design and planning of a programme to address gender norms that will include this intervention and explore other opportunities such as behaviour change communication campaigns, street theatre, and other engagement modalities. SNV will also work with local government to explore opportunities for young male participants to share their experiences with each other in local and national level events, to build their confidence and commitment, and develop an active network of young men working on these issues.

In Nepal, SNV will advocate for broader adoption of this intervention in other local government areas, aligning their advocacy to local government budget and planning cycles. Further they will work at national level, engaging stakeholders including the National Planning Commission, National Women's Commission, the Ministry of Women and Children, and Civil Society Organisations in a sharing event to highlight benefits, lessons, and potential applications of this intervention and approach for WASH, inclusive recovery from COVID-19, and gender equality.

Importantly, lessons from the trial will be addressed in the revised toolkit and approach. These include the need for greater engagement of women in the menstruation module and in steering and informing the direction of men's activities to promote gender equality. It will also include guidance on working with religious institutions to maximise support for change and minimise pushback.

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Beyond the Finish Line – Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services

BFL – Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services in Nepal (2018-2022) aims to improve the health, gender equality, social inclusion, and well-being of 40,000 people in the rural districts of Dailekh and Sarlahi by supporting inclusive, sustainable, and resilient rural water supply services and hygiene promotion.

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Cover: Male participant doing the dishes after attending SNV's workshop series. Photo credit: Susheel Shrestha for SNV.



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For more information

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