



## Emerging pathways to leadership for people with disabilities in the WASH sector in Bhutan

Leadership qualities have been put to the test by the COVID-19 pandemic. Climate change effects are further magnifying the challenges faced by leaders. Safeguarding the right of people to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) is paramount. To support social cohesion, stability, and resilience during these upheavals, WASH leaders must listen and respond to the diverse needs of rights-holders, including women, girls, people with disabilities, and vulnerable groups.

This learning brief captures the key learnings that emerged from transformative leadership activities with Bhutan's WASH sector, led by SNV in partnership with CBM Australia, the University of Technology Sydney-Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF), Bhutan Network for Empowering Women, and Ability Bhutan Society (ABS). It captures the background, key activities, key concepts, participant's responses to activities, and outcomes, then analyses that information to extract key learnings and recommendations in relation to leadership pathways for women with disabilities, which include:

- the need for preparatory efforts prior to technical training;
- the value of working with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs);
- investment on accessibility and returns on that investment;
- creating multiple avenues for leadership;
- creating linkages and progressive leadership opportunities; and
- importance of participant selection.

### What is transformative leadership?

Transformative leadership is a leadership approach that causes change in individuals and social systems. It creates valuable and positive change in participants with the end goal of developing their personal leadership qualities, to inform and influence the world around them.

With support from the Australian Government, the initiatives targeted government institutions at the national and local levels of Bhutan responsible for sanitation and hygiene, with particular emphasis on female health workers from the eight programme districts, women with disabilities through the disability partners (Ability Bhutan Society), and the selective 'would-be heroes' from four local governments.

## Concepts and approaches adopted under the project

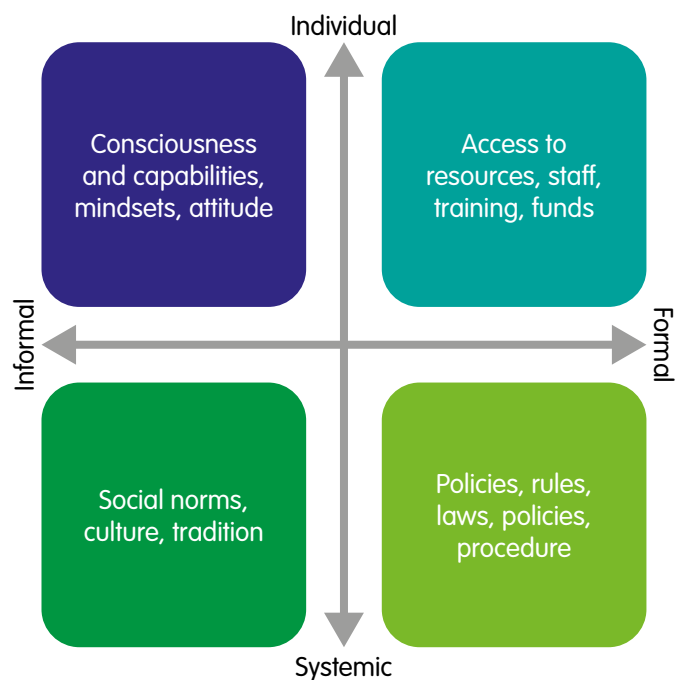
SNV in Bhutan aimed to scale up and consolidate a series of leadership initiatives (Leadership for Change, Making Rights Real,<sup>1</sup> Transformative Leaders) to the wider health, local government, and Civil Society Organisation (CSO) sectors in Bhutan. The project sought to apply key learnings<sup>2</sup> from the UTS-ISF-led research with diverse inspirational WASH leaders in government and civil society to build potential for transformative leadership amongst both female and male leaders for a post-COVID world.

*Key concepts* on gender transformative analysis were presented in the trainings to help participants frame thinking about transformative approaches and their own leadership styles, capacities, and opportunities.

*'Leadership is often seen as a position, and only those in powerful positions can be seen as a leader. However, framing leadership in terms of self-leadership helped transform participants' assumption that leaders are only those in formal positions. In addition, learning how programmes might do more harm than good and the opportunity to understand how interventions can be gender transformative was shared through the gender transformative continuum.'*<sup>3</sup> - Ugyen Wangchuk, GEDSI advisor, SNV in Bhutan

The gender transformative continuum was originally conceptualised by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to highlight the continuum from gender exploitative and unaware approaches to gender sensitive and, ultimately,

Figure 1. Gender At Work Analytical Framework



transformative interventions. This continuum, along with the Gender at Work Analytical Framework – delivered with a disability inclusion lens – framed the transformational leadership training.

The Gender at Work Analytical Framework<sup>4</sup> was used by training participants to identify opportunities in formal, informal, individual, and systemic levels to inform action plans. One participant noted that 'the Gender at Work Analytical Framework and the action plan drawing gave us a clear picture and plan for implementation in our own jurisdictions after getting to our own districts.'

**Transformative leadership training** sought to:

- build an understanding of transformative change;
- support participants to understand the impact of gender, inclusion, and power relations on women's leadership development, including leadership of women with disabilities and women from sexual gender minority groups;

<sup>1</sup> The focus on local government motivations was informed by the Make Rights Real approach, which applies user-centred design to engage local government 'would be heroes' in progressive realisation of the human rights to water and sanitation. For more information on the approach, read Carrard, N., et al., <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/12/2/378/htm>.

<sup>2</sup> These learnings related to how to achieve systems strengthening, self-transformation/leadership, enhancement of partnerships with Organisations of persons with Disabilities (OPDs) and Right Holder Organizations (RHOs), how to enhance direct engagement with persons with disabilities and how to build capacity of local leaders and health workers to implement gender and social inclusion initiatives at community levels.

<sup>3</sup> Read the work of UNFPA and Promundo for more information about the gender transformative continuum, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/tools.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> A. Rao, J. Sandler, D. Kelleher, and C. Miller, *Gender at work: Theory and practice for 21st century organizations*, London, Routledge, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315693637> (accessed 28 November 2022).



Leadership training for female health workers. Photo credit: SNV.

- create shared understanding of different organisational leadership models and challenges to women’s leadership;
- identify potential areas for transformative action in Bhutan and develop action plans; and
- create processes to enhance women’s leadership for change.

**Relevant key activities** were:

- leadership training and skills development for thirteen women with disabilities;
- creation of social media support groups for Women with Disabilities in WASH (WeChat; WhatsApp, Facebook);
- Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) ‘change’ of leadership participants;
- profiling transformative leadership with local media to influence wider norms and perceptions; and
- strengthening linkages with Bhutan-WASH sector.

## Participant feedback

In the leadership and gender and disability training evaluations, participants noted:

- increased knowledge of leadership, gender, and disability issues from a rights-based approach;
- becoming aware of their own leadership approaches and styles;
- learning how to strengthen their leadership further;

- sharing of ideas and plans on how to share knowledge and skills more broadly;
- increased awareness and knowledge on how to plan for inclusion of diverse community members in WASH; and
- benefits from hearing of others’ leadership experiences.

Participants said:

*I got new ideas about national policies for differently abled persons, because I have never explored the fields that we covered in this training.*

*I learnt about respecting the rights of every individual.*

*I learnt that achieving human rights should happen at community level.*

*The training was very useful as I was able to identify my leadership style and key strengths and weakness as a leader.*

*The workshop was productive, and the knowledge gained on water, sanitation, and hygiene, gender, and people with disabilities will be shared with my organisation, as well as to the nunneries.*

*The training raised issues that exist in our community and helped us to think about developing action plans.*

SNV staff monitored how participants took their learnings forward, noting that there was great enthusiasm to try to implement learnings immediately. Mutual support for women with disabilities was strengthened through the training, impacting on elements of their lives outside the WASH sector. For example, one participant (a woman with disability who owned a small business) applied her learning on self-leadership to leverage the relationships and networks she needed to expand her business. SNV staff noted that the social media platforms created under the project have been sustained by the women leaders with disabilities who participated in the project – with them taking over the administration and functioning of the sites.



## Outcomes

Following focus group discussions and key informant interviews in November 2022, it was discovered that some of the training's immediate learning outcomes had been maintained, with both successes and challenges in putting that learning into practice.

Overall key *outcomes for women with disabilities* included increased chances for leadership, networking with and support from other women with disabilities, understanding of their innate capacity for leadership, and a rise in their self-assurance and assertiveness on their rights.

Participants reported having increased confidence, self-realisation of leadership capacities, and abilities; reduction in shyness; more opportunities coming their way as they grew confidence in their own leadership; confidence to share their experience with others; an ability to advocate for the rights of women (and children) with disabilities; and confidence to self-identify in public as a woman with disabilities.

*Actions* resulting from the trainings varied widely and included awareness raising, networking, decision making, and influencing others. Participants reported active sharing of the knowledge and skills they attained through the training through social media and within their families, communities, and social networks; increased confidence to advocate to WASH sector authorities on gender equality and disability inclusion; and noticeable impact of that advocacy reaching down to community levels (for example the mobilisation of resources to construct accessible indoor toilets in one community).

*I advocated to the relevant stakeholders, officials and individuals on gender equality and disability inclusion, which resulted in raised awareness and further information sharing down to the community through them.*

*We achieved 100% toilet coverage for elderly, pro-poor, women headed households and households with people with disabilities.*

## Key learnings and recommendations

**Significant preparatory efforts are required to build trust with the participants and to build a culture of trust within the group, even before programme activities are implemented.** Some of the women had gone through trauma and intersectional discrimination.

To maximise the advantages of programme activities, safe venues to discuss these topics must be created. While considering the fact that women with disabilities have full schedules, active lives, and numerous responsibilities, time and resources must be set aside to make this possible. Increased time and resources to create the foundations for trust is an important investment that should be built into all future leadership programmes.

### **Work in full and equal partnership with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) is essential.**

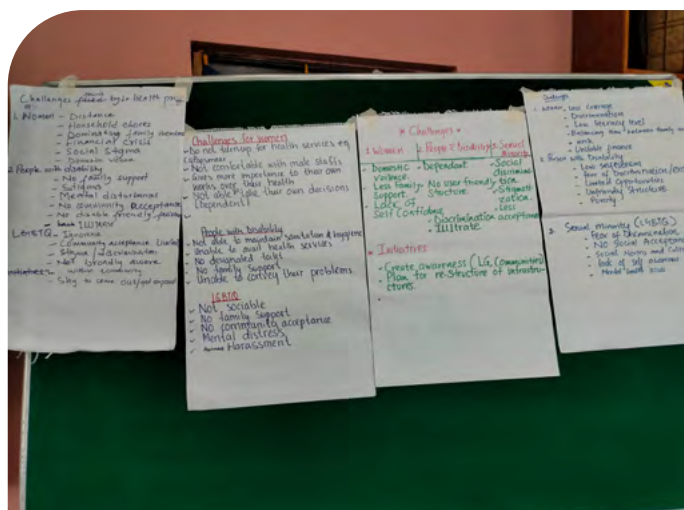
SNV worked closely with Ability Bhutan Society because it had the networks, members with lived experience, and prior connections to many of the participants that were crucial to fostering the culture of trust required for this programme. Finding individuals who could benefit from the experience being offered through the program required the input of ABS during the participant identification and selection processes.

### **Maximise participation and foster a sense of sincere commitment to disability inclusion by investing in accessibility.**

The programme made a significant *investment in ensuring accessibility* to all activities through providing travel to trainings, braille-transcribed materials, sign language interpretation, local language translation, easy-read and understand concept delivery methodologies, and pacing of training sessions to allow for high participation, as well as *rest breaks* between sessions, *options for oral and diagrammatic feedback* and through accommodating dietary requirements. This investment promoted genuine commitment to disability inclusion and allowed for maximum participation.

### **Make optimal use of the multiple avenues created under the programme for networking and engagement to enable different types of leadership opportunities to evolve.**

The support networks via social media (WhatsApp, WeChat, telegram, and Facebook) enabled women with disabilities to access ongoing peer support, as well as extend their networks. This was particularly useful for those who were still developing confidence and/or had fewer other opportunities to engage outside their communities. The social media networks have been continued post training, with participants as key contributors and moderators. Similar programmes in the future would benefit from *replicating this approach*.



Example of action plan brainstorming. Photo credit: SNV.

**Engage in careful participant selection and strategic partner engagement to ensure success.** Some participants noted that *'the involvement of relevant stakeholders really helped'*. Having the right people in the room goes to *careful participant selection and strategic partner engagement*. The programme selected participants who had shown potential to leverage the experience, which was central to success.

### **Link the programme's women with disabilities participants with local government authorities in health and education and in their communities, and promote them as experts in their own right.**

This provided them with the opportunity to bring their lived experience of gender and disability to discussions, so that they might be called upon in future. It had a significant impact on the local authority participants, some of whom *reported shifts in their perceptions and attitudes* towards gender and disability issues and reflected this in their work.

**Harness linkages and relationships made by creating progressive leadership opportunities for the same group of participants.** This would enable them to leverage the networks they have made through the programme – particularly with local government authorities. *Possible mentorship relationships* could be supported in future, leading onwards to short term *internships*.

**The planning and implementation of actions plans was challenged** by time constraints through the project. Future projects would be advised to provide longer time frames to support women to develop their personal action plans, and support to help them achieve their goals.

## Acknowledgments

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

Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) - Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All (2018-2022) in Bhutan aims to progress equitable and universal access to safely managed sanitation and hygiene for at least 214,596 people across eight districts in Bhutan.

### SNV

SNV is a mission-driven global development partner working across Africa and Asia. Our mission is to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems, which enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

### Photos ©SNV

**Cover photo:** A woman in one of Bhutan's remote villages sharing experiences and leading the way to support her daughter with a disability



SNV in Bhutan, 'Emerging pathways to leadership for people with disabilities in the WASH sector in Bhutan', *Learning brief*, The Hague, SNV, 2022.

### For more information

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