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## Gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector leaders – whether in WASH clusters, ministries, local government, or civil society organisations – have played a crucial role in addressing the COVID-19 crisis and safeguarding their populations. Their role is particularly important in ensuring that the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups are represented and heard.

This learning brief shares findings and reflections from a study of gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of the study was to explore how leaders are responding in this challenging time of COVID-19 to,

- ensure the needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups are represented and heard, and
- find ways to transform personal perspectives, norms, and systemic patterns towards gender equality.

Taking a positive deviance approach, the study engaged with nineteen leaders from Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and Nepal who were identified as positively contributing to gender transformations in the WASH sector.

### Approach

We undertook a qualitative, strengths-based study informed by gender transformative leadership concepts.

Leaders involved in the study work in a range of organisations and play diverse roles in the WASH sector.

Finally, the study took a transformative approach to research, committed to the idea of conducting research with leaders (instead of research on) and to facilitate celebration and reflection. The study considered interviewed leaders' (i) personal values and traits; (ii) leadership style; (iii) actions; and (iv) outcomes, as influenced by a range of enablers and barriers (see Figure 1).

## What is gender transformative leadership?

'Gender transformative leadership seeks to cultivate individuals, including decision-makers, who empower themselves and their organizations to pay close attention to gender power structures and discriminatory practices—both formal and informal—in order to advance gender equity in their organizations as well as in the communities and constituencies they serve.'<sup>1</sup>

### Gender transformative leaders (in Bhutan, Lao PDR and Nepal) who contributed to the study



**Ambika Yadav**  
Sarlahi District Coordinator  
SNV in Nepal



**Kriparam Thapa**  
WASH Officer  
Thatikand Rural Municipality  
Nepal



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Accountant and Secretary  
Lao Disabled People's  
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Project Coordinator  
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**Men Singh Lepcha**  
Community Health Assistant  
Ministry of Health  
Bhutan



**Suchitra Chaudhary**  
School teacher  
Member, Disabled People's  
Organisation Network  
Nepal



**Chomsy Ngamvilay**  
Deputy Head  
Atsaphone Dist. Health Office  
Savannakhet Province  
Lao PDR



**Namgay Pelden**  
Gup (local elected leader;  
sub-district level)  
Bhutan



**Sunil Kumar Das**  
Joint Secretary  
Planning and Development  
Assistance Coordination  
Division, Ministry of Water Supply  
Nepal



**H.E. Dechen Wangmo**  
Minister of Health  
Government of Bhutan



**Rajesh Sahani**  
Member of Disabled  
People's Organisation Network  
Nepal



**Toumkham Phetsalath**  
Deputy Head  
Champhone Dist. Health Office  
Savannakhet Province  
Lao PDR



**Douangchai Southammavong**  
Deputy Head  
Lao Disabled Association  
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Teacher, Education Dept  
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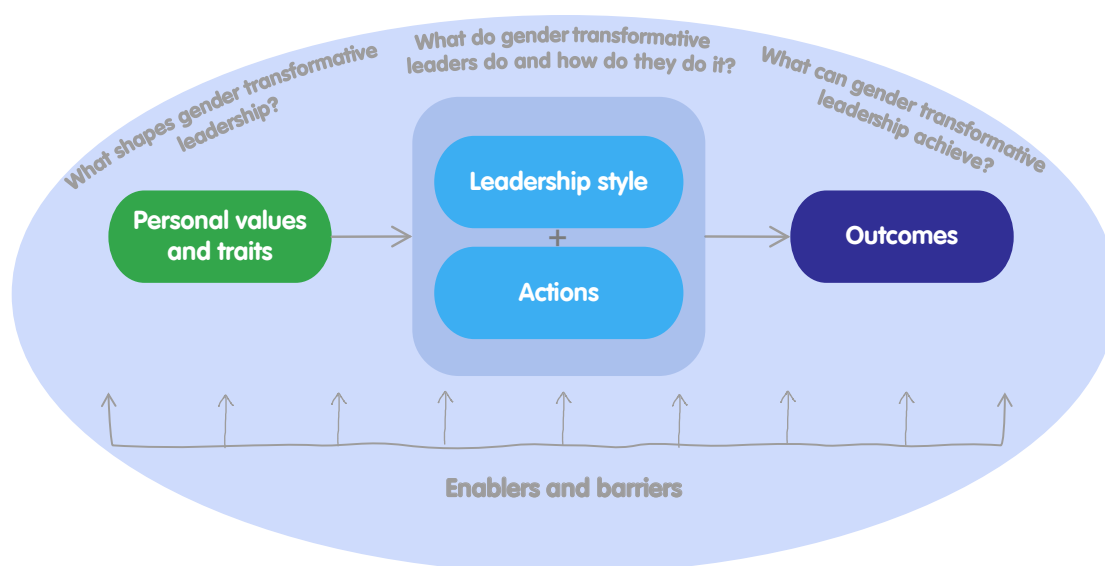
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**Rinchen Wangdi**  
Chief, Public Health  
Engineering Division  
Department of Public Health  
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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, 'Transformative Leadership: Leading for Gender Equality and Women's Rights' as cited in Jhpiego Corporation, *Gender-transformative leadership, a participatory toolkit for health workers*, Maryland, Jhpiego Corporation, 2020, <https://www.jhpiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/GTL-Full-Toolkit.pdf> [accessed 30 October 2020].

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the research



## Key findings

### Personal values and traits: What shapes gender transformative leadership?

Most of the personal values and traits emerging from the interviews aligned with the literature on transformative leadership.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> We found strong evidence of a learning orientation, self-reflection and social justice values, and identified humility, courage, trustworthiness, and altruism as common values.

*'One needs to want to lead with an attitude to learn.'*  
- H.E. Dechen Wangmo

*'A leader should be brave.'* - Toumkham Phetsalath

*'Selflessness, equal treatment, activeness and kindness are the characteristics of leadership.'* - Suchitra Chaudhary

Common traits included the ability to inspire, motivate and mobilise others, be a role model for others, be trustworthy and have excellent communication skills, whilst working with dedication and commitment. In addition, optimism in the face of challenges, which had a positive effect on others, was seen as an important trait in the leaders interviewed.

Some leaders felt they needed to prove themselves, which can lead to a double burden and additional pressure for them to fulfil their leadership roles. At times, these pressures fuelled impostor syndrome. This was particularly true for women leaders or leaders with a disability, suggesting the continued prevalence of social norms prescribing leadership as predominantly men's domain.

*'I wanted to show the community that people with disability can do everything.'* - Rajesh Sahani

### Leadership style: What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

Gender transformative leaders were found to lead by example and pursue equality in their professional and personal lives. Gender transformative leaders were goal and vision oriented, and sought to build consensus and be persuasive. They convinced people to see that gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) is important. They did not elevate their own status. They were aware of and managed backlash. Many felt energised by criticisms and did not shy away from them.

<sup>2</sup> E. Brown, E. Ekoue, and V. Goodban, 'Transformative leadership for women's rights in Africa: Learning from Oxfam's work', *Agenda*, 33:1, 2019, pp. 21-37.

<sup>3</sup> N. Kristof, 'What the Pandemic Reveals About the Male Ego', New York, *The New York Times*, 13 June 2020, [https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/opinion/sunday/women-leaders-coronavirus.html?mc\\_cid=8e575d00b4&mc\\_eid=7d6bff3c8c](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/opinion/sunday/women-leaders-coronavirus.html?mc_cid=8e575d00b4&mc_eid=7d6bff3c8c) [Accessed 15 July 2020].

<sup>4</sup> CARE, 'Where are the Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them', *Care Insights*, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> B. Cattlin, 'Female leaders during Covid-19: do women lead differently?', London, *IG*, 22 June 2020, [https://www.ig.com/uk/news-and-trade-ideas/female-leaders-during-covid-19?mc\\_cid=8e575d00b4&mc\\_eid=7d6bff3c8c#information-banner-dismiss](https://www.ig.com/uk/news-and-trade-ideas/female-leaders-during-covid-19?mc_cid=8e575d00b4&mc_eid=7d6bff3c8c#information-banner-dismiss) [Accessed 7 October 2020].





*'Convincing higher-level stakeholders is difficult, but when they experience people's situations in the field first-hand, they are assured and convinced to change things.'* - Sunil Kumar Das

*'When I face obstacles and criticism from others while working, it gives me more energy.'* - Rampabitra Shah

*'I have never stopped raising my voice for women and marginalised communities in my society as well as in my home.'* - Ambika Yadav

Leadership styles were primarily empathetic. In the response to COVID-19, they prioritised vulnerable and disadvantaged people (women victims of gender-based violence, elderly, people with disability); and supported their staff to ensure their wellbeing. Leaders focused on others and prioritised direct engagement with vulnerable or marginalised people. Their style was underpinned by teamwork and they led with an 'open door' policy for new ideas and collaboration. Leaders demonstrated that they were inclusive: they involved and gave others voice, and sought others' input and participation.

The gender transformative leadership styles identified at the time of the research aligned with those emerging in literature. Literature referred to during the study highlights styles that are:

- motivating, caring, participatory, empathetic, communicating with humility;<sup>6</sup>
- curious and with attention to integrity;<sup>7</sup>
- focused on prevention, do not underestimate risks, and a prioritising long-term social well-being over 'popular decisions';<sup>8 9</sup> and
- emotionally intelligent, democratic, willing to listen, and focused on others.<sup>10</sup>

### Actions: What do gender transformative leaders do and how do they do it?

All the leaders shared compelling stories of actions they had undertaken to ensure that their work is gender transformative and supports social inclusion. Examples included:

**Improving WASH services for all during the pandemic:** Ambika Yadav from Nepal promoted GESI-friendly foot-operated hand washing stations in public places, and supported vulnerable communities to quarantine.

<sup>6</sup> N. Kristof, 'What the Pandemic Reveals About the Male Ego', *The New York Times*, 13 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/opinion/sunday/women-leaders-coronavirus.html> (accessed 10 August 2021).

<sup>7</sup> T. Chamorro-Premuzic and A. Wittenberg-Cox, 'Will the Pandemic Reshape Notions of Female Leadership?', *Harvard Business Review*, 26 June 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/06/will-the-pandemic-reshape-notions-of-female-leadership> (accessed 29 September 2020).

<sup>8</sup> L. Fioramonti, L. Coscieme, and K. Trebeck, 'Women in power: it's a matter of life and death', *Social Europe*, 1 June 2020, <https://socialeurope.eu/women-in-power-its-a-matter-of-life-and-death> (accessed on 29 September 2020).

<sup>9</sup> V. Blaser, 'To Succeed, Global Pandemic Response Must Bolster Nurse Leadership and Challenge Widespread Gender Inequities', *Vital*, 6 July 2020, <https://www.intrahealth.org/vital/succeed-global-pandemic-response-must-bolster-nurse-leadership-and-challenge-widespread-gender> (accessed 30 September 2020).

<sup>10</sup> B. Cattlin, 'Female leaders during Covid-19: do women lead differently?', 22 June 2020.



**Enabling women's participation in the workplace:** Namgay Pelden from Bhutan initiated the construction of a breastfeeding room for the convenience of breastfeeding mothers visiting the office.

**Supporting younger women in the workplace and gender mainstreaming:** Chomsy Ngamvilay from Lao PDR advocated for and supported female staff to move up into higher roles and leadership positions in the District Health Office.

**Involving men in gender activities:** During a Menstrual Hygiene Day celebration in a community, Men Singh Lepcha from Bhutan invited men to tie a red bow around women's upper arms to honour them. He said, 'it is not just about telling men, but also about involving them.'

**Placing the vulnerable at the centre of the response:** Dechen Wangmo from Bhutan mobilised her team at the Ministry of Health to call up every single person aged 60+ in the country to ensure their safety during the pandemic.

**Encouraging men's participation to manage resistance:** Madan Kumar Barma from Nepal faced challenging resistance to gender transformation and so brought both men and women in one place and started discussions on gender equality together. The engagements effectively changed men's perceptions about discrimination against women.

These examples align with the literature that highlights leaders' capacities to build the sustainability and transformative agency of networks and organisations, and enact leadership as a 'collective' rather than reductively as an individual.<sup>11 12</sup>

### Outcomes: What can gender transformative leadership achieve?

Many different types of outcomes were mentioned, particularly in achieving placement of vulnerable groups at the centre of responses, and reaching all people with improved WASH services including hand hygiene to support COVID-19 responses.

Increased leader's self-confidence, particularly among women, was commonly reported, as was a sense of personal satisfaction, more commonly expressed by men.

Leaders' effects on others, through mentoring and capacity building was seen to build an intergenerational legacy of gender transformative leadership.

*'I am sure that my leadership will give them an example and they [staff] can mainstream gender into their work more in the future.'* - Chomsy Ngamvilay

<sup>11</sup> E. Brown, E. Ekoue, and V. Goodbank, 'Transformative leadership for women's rights in Africa', 2019.

<sup>12</sup> CARE, 'Where are the Women?', 2020.





*'My work [...] made people realise the importance of diversity of voices in the decision-making rooms, particularly on the importance and value addition of women leaders.'* - Namgay Pelden

*'I feel proud that local government has been focusing their activities to most vulnerable community because of our facilitation.'* - Madan Kumar Barma

The ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that societal outcomes associated with pandemic-era transformative leadership are still emerging. Articulating achievements was also uncomfortable for some participants with a tendency towards humility and modesty.

Reported outcomes aligned with findings on achievements from gender transformative leadership and gender transformative programmes more generally, which spanned changes in:

- social norms and public perceptions of women leaders,<sup>13</sup> and
- formal and informal decision-making practices, and tangible improvements in access to quality services, such as water, education and healthcare.<sup>14 15</sup>

This research also highlighted the value of having all genders engaged as leaders in the realisation of women's rights.<sup>16 17 18</sup>

### Enablers and barriers

**Enablers** included access to education and training, support in the domestic and professional spheres as well as from external organisations and networks. Having role models and mentorship was helpful as were leaders' personal experiences of disadvantage or direct contact with those in disadvantaged positions.

*'I am in this position because of the leaders who trusted my capacity and ability. I could complete the tasks assigned by my boss when I was a technical staff [...] I also have learned from other senior women leaders at the provincial health department, who have been my role models'* - Souksakhone Kothliengthong

<sup>13</sup> S. Mulder, T. McDiarmid, and L. Vettori, *Public Perceptions of Women as Political Leaders: A Multi-country Study*, Victoria, International Women's Development Agency, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> E. Brown, E. Ekoue, and V. Goodban, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> S. Soeters, N. Carrard, M. Grant, and J. Willets, 'Leadership and voice: More than 'add women and stir'', *Water for Women: Gender in WASH - Conversational article 3*, Sydney, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3yJ4eRQ> [accessed 10 August 2021].

<sup>16</sup> E. Brown, E. Ekoue, and V. Goodban, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> S. Soeters, N. Carrard, M. Grant, and J. Willets, 'Leadership and voice: more than add women and stir', 2019.

<sup>18</sup> K. Meagher, N. Singh, and P. Patel, 'The role of gender inclusive leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic to support vulnerable populations in conflict settings', *BMJ Global Health*, 2020.

*'I am here in this position because I received great support from my family, teacher Douangchay and my boss. My friends and people who know me well have supported me as well. They accepted my ability, accepted who I am and are willing to support me.'* - Silivanh Khamsingsavath

**Barriers** included the difficulty of overcoming gender and social norms, for themselves and for others, meaning that leader's experienced backlash and resistance to change. Institutional challenges around policies and guidelines were faced, and female leaders had to work harder to fulfil both old and new leadership roles, negative perceptions of female leaders and lack of confidence.

*It is very difficult to overcome traditional norms and overcoming gender stereotyping especially in the rural settings.* - Rinchen Wangdi

*Being a male and sometimes representing women is deemed as artificial to the public.* - Ugyen Wangchuk

## Conclusions and visions for the future

Leaders shared the one change they would make if they could magically snap their fingers and make a change to better enable leadership that seeks equality and inclusion. Five priority themes for change were identified (Figure 2).

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a renewed urgency for thinking and doing things differently in the WASH sector. These came through strongly in the leaders' words and actions. As we rebuild our societies and economies and continue to champion the delivery of essential WASH services, we must do so in a way that actively advances gender and social transformation towards more equal and inclusive societies.

Our engagement in this research provided fresh insights into the critical and varied roles that gender transformative leaders can and do play in facilitating more gender equitable and socially inclusive WASH systems, policies and services. The leaders we interviewed opened our eyes to the rewards, challenges and benefits of transformative leadership, showing us what is possible.

Figure 2: Priority themes to enable gender transformative leadership



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Contents of this learning brief had been reviewed and endorsed by leaders involved in the research study.

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## Writing and production team

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This brief was prepared by Diana Gonzalez, Naomi Carrard and Juliet Willetts (ISF-UTS), with contributions from Gabrielle Halcrow (SNV) and Jose Mott (Water for Women Fund Coordinator), and edited and designed by Anjani Abella (SNV).

## Beyond the Finish Line

Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) is a five-year rural water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) programme (2018-2022) in Bhutan, Lao PDR, and Nepal. The programme strengthens WASH services by making these more inclusive, accessible, and sustainable through the application of gender equality and social inclusion approaches.

The Beyond the Finish Line programme is an Australian aid initiative funded by Water for Women and implemented by SNV on behalf of the Australian Government.

## SNV

SNV Netherlands Development Organisation is a not-for-profit international development organisation that makes a lasting difference in the lives of people living in poverty by helping them raise incomes and access basic services. Focusing on three sectors – Agriculture, Energy and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) – SNV has a long-term, local presence in 24 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

## ISF-UTS

The Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney works with industry, government and the community to develop sustainable futures through research and consultancy. ISF-UTS seeks to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach to its work and engage partner organisations in a collaborative process emphasizing strategic decision-making.

Photos: ©SNV

**P1:** Ambika Yadav sharing COVID-19 prevention measures and tips with community members in Sarlahi (SNV/Meeting Point)

**P4:** Ambika Yadav drawing water from the family's well-maintained hand pump (SNV/Meeting Point)

**P5:** Chomsy Ngamvilay mentoring health care facility staff in Savannakhet province (SNV/Philippe Aramburo)

**P6:** Gup Namgay Pelden sharing her ideas about gender transformative leadership with SNV Gender Advisor in Bhutan (SNV/Tshechu Dorji)

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