



# 'Do No Harm' for inclusive WASH: working towards a shared understanding

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

Kathmandu / January '20

## 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

- In the face of harmful norms, **doing nothing to challenge inequality does harm**. Do No Harm requires a proactive not passive approach.
- A genuine commitment to Doing No Harm demands that we, as development practitioners, **look at our own conscious and unconscious attitudes**, and the way we use our own power.
- It is more constructive to **focus on harmful norms as the problem that needs to be changed** – not the groups harmed by those norms.



A youth leader explaining CLTS monitoring in Gazipara during a field visit to the Water for Women Project in Bangladesh (World Vision)

## Do No Harm in the Fund

The Water for Women Fund sees an intentional focus on 'do no harm' (DNH) approaches as a critical way of supporting an ethical approach to inclusion. This includes addressing the risk of backlash that comes with supporting representation and decision-making of women and marginalised groups to ensure that no one is left behind in WASH programming. The Fund aims to sharpen collective understanding and practice of DNH as a focus for learning as part of strengthening 'inclusive WASH'.

This Learning Brief aims to advance the Fund's collective learning on these issues by reflecting on the discussions throughout the Event through the lens of these DNH dimensions. This is the Fund's second Learning Brief on DNH.

**To understand Do No Harm, it is important to recognise:**

**Harm occurs on a continuum**  
from smaller, every-day forms of discrimination to more egregious harms.

**Discriminatory attitudes are the underlying cause of harms,**  
which is why the concept of 'transformation starts with ourselves' is key.

**Violence, or the threat of violence, is a daily reality in the lives of women and marginalised people.**  
Our programming actions can alleviate or exacerbate this harm.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors to the Water for Women Fund South Asia Regional Learning Event and to all partner representatives who participated. A particular thanks to SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) for their role in designing, organising and facilitating the Learning Event, in collaboration with the Water for Women Fund Coordinator.

This Learning Brief was authored by Di Kilsby, Gender and Social Inclusion Consultant to the Water for Women Fund. Thanks to Joanna Mott and Kate Orr for their contribution to this Brief.

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.



## DNH at the learning event

The theme of Do No Harm was a thread that ran through the whole Event:

- Amongst the recurring themes during the e-discussion prior to the Event;
- Implicitly and explicitly in poster presentations on partners' work in systems strengthening and through group discussions;
- During the field visits to sites around Kathmandu, both in terms of content and process for collecting information; and
- As the subject of a presentation by this author.

The author gathered further perspectives through informal conversations and follow-up engagement with partners. This Learning Brief is reflective of discussions and presentations throughout the Event, and covers reflections from the participants and resource people attending the Event.

---

## Overview of activities of attending fund partners

The Event brought out a range of DNH strategies in place across Fund activities. Partners highlighted the strong focus each has on strengthening meaningful inclusion of the marginalised, particularly through partnerships with rights-holder organisations (RHOs) – a vital step towards DNH. Intentional efforts to identify the most marginalised groups and an increasing focus on working to uncover unconscious biases were recurring themes. Work towards tackling harmful social norms emerged throughout the presentations. An example was sharing of CSO and research partners' experiences in addressing harmful stigma and taboos as part of menstrual hygiene management efforts.

Some examples of DNH work in Fund projects highlighted throughout the Event included:

- The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) contribution to WASH services that are safe and responsive to the needs of women, girls and marginalised groups in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, [Pakistan](#). IRC are particularly attentive to the needs of highly marginalised and neglected populations, and the development of an inclusive workplace culture to achieve this. As such, they have developed toolkits for 'mainstreaming' work with people with disabilities and gender minorities.
- The Centre for Advocacy and Research (CFAR) and RTI International's (RTI) Call to Action for the rights of transgender people in [India](#), highlighting first-person accounts of harm experienced by transgender people when trying to access toilets. CFAR's partnerships include working closely in allyship with transgender rights organisation, Sakha, using a holistic approach that goes beyond looking solely at WASH needs.
- SNV Netherlands Development Organisation's (SNV) DNH self-assessment and capacity building processes in [Bhutan](#), [Lao PDR](#) and [Nepal](#) and the ways in



Woman with a disability participates in a group discussion to provide feedback on WASH needs in communities in Lao PDR / Photo credit: SNV

“During the Learning Event, we had a chance to gain a clear and better understanding on the Do No Harm concept as a whole and how to apply it in a more effective way for the organization and the project in true spirit”

Sitara Zeb, IRC

which this has powerfully enhanced their GSI and DNH approaches. SNV Nepal raised issues on how to ensure WASH access within households particularly for people with a disability and low-caste groups, including their experiences of dialogue at household level to ensure equitable WASH access for all members of the household.

- Thrive Networks' (Thrive) focus on issues of unfair burden of workload for women. Across their two programs in [Cambodia](#) and [Vietnam](#), Thrive has identified poor or near-poor, elderly, people with disabilities particularly women and children under 16, and single person-headed households as priority groups. Thrive spoke of working to create 'safe spaces for reaching the last mile'.
- WaterAid's conceptual framework in use across their three Fund country programs ([Timor-Leste](#), [Myanmar](#) and [Papua New Guinea](#)) to assess GSI work on a continuum, including identifying and avoiding potential harmful practices.
- World Vision [Bangladesh](#)'s work to develop a protocol for working with sexual and gender minorities (SGM). This includes a highly responsive approach, building on their growing awareness of emerging issues, and developing an approach to address incontinence - an issue associated with much harmful stigma.

Research partners [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#) and [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine \(LSHTM\)](#) highlighted the importance of ethics in research. LSHTM discussed using the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a guiding framework, while IWMI reflected on the history of conflict in water sharing and the failure of private systems to respond to workload impacts on women, particularly single women.

Across their two programs in Cambodia and Vietnam, they have identified **poor or near-poor, elderly, people with disabilities** particularly women and children under 16, and **single person-headed households as priority groups.**

---

Research partners [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#) and [London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine \(LSHTM\)](#) **highlighted the importance of ethics in research.**



A senior nurse with a patient and her baby at a healthcare facility in Myanmar / Photo credit: WaterAid



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

“I can really see now how important it is to learn that ‘doing nothing is also doing harm’. In Nepal, we have had a lot of DNH training over many years, but now it seems being silent is also something to think about. During my recent field visit, I heard some things that happen in our work areas; it was difficult to explore and dig out the why. I can see this even at the decision-making level. Now I am keen to learn more and this can help in our work in the communities.”

Ratan Budhatoki, SNV Nepal

## Overarching learning

### Doing nothing is doing harm

The theme of ‘doing nothing is doing harm’ was perhaps the one that resonated most with participants. Due to imbalances of power and opportunity in society, which are also reflected in WASH systems, failing to address inequality will inevitably reinforce and reproduce it. Therefore, challenging and addressing inequalities requires a proactive DNH approach. A guest-speaker from a Nepalese disabled people’s organisation highlighted the indignities and health issues she suffered from a ‘business as usual’ approach to WASH, ie. a lack of attention to accessible design for toilets in public spaces. She described the difficulties she experiences leaving her house when public WASH facilities are not accessible. Giving attention to those being left behind is fundamental to doing no harm and achieving water and sanitation for all.

### Ensuring meaningful participation

Supporting meaningful participation is critical to doing no harm. CFAR’s SGM partner organisation, Sakha, referred to the harm implied through tokenistic actions, such as development agencies taking photos of transgender communities to give the impression of ‘participation’. There was a strong feeling expressed that ‘this hurts most of all’, particularly when needs remain unmet. A participant from CFAR commented, “We can have participation, but *meaningful* participation is the need of the hour”.

## Transformation starts with ourselves

Partners highlighted the value of using the ‘transformation starts with ourselves’ principle, such as through internal organisational reflection on GSI attitudes, including unconscious biases. IRC shared that they had ‘focused on a transformative approach that starts from ourselves’, which included identifying individual, project and organisation-level responsibilities for GSI; conducting GSI sensitisation and DNH training for all staff; and employing two women with disabilities and one person from a gender minority. They saw these steps as a ‘precursor for DNH’.



By drawing on experience in Cambodia and Bangladesh, this research project will examine WASH policies from a disability inclusive and gender perspective, looking at their outcomes for women and girls with disability and female caregivers / Photo credit: LSHTM / WaterAid Cambodia

“ [starting with oneself] makes one think about our own actions/in actions when we see harm (in its multiple forms) both in our project areas and within our own teams. From a system strengthening perspective, as the people within the system, the risk with not reflecting upon and discussing openly our own attitudes and beliefs, is that we could be perpetuating the harmful attitudes and norms we are trying to change within the communities where we are working on inclusion/exclusion.”

Event participant

Creating the opportunity for individual and reflective practice is an important enabler for practising this principle. The Fund Coordinator is working to support this opportunity through the development of the Towards Transformation in WASH Self-Assessment Tool, which supports organisations to reflect on their practice from a GSI lens.

## Data for addressing unintended consequences

The importance of qualitative data was emphasised, to understand the realities of the lives of marginalised groups and to avoid unintentional harm. The Event’s field visits identified an example of unintended consequences. Members from poorer families of a school hygiene club were either missing club sessions or foregoing meals and other essentials to pay club fees. Participants also reflected on an experience shared where the water collection workload of women was eased when water connections were made, but the women then became overburdened with new responsibilities such as washing men’s clothes, which previously men had done for themselves while bathing at the water source. For this participant, this story highlighted that ‘the whole cycle has to be understood to bring transformation.’

The field visits were also a reminder that **it is not possible to gather accurate or deep information on sensitive issues through a quick visit**, and that DNH considerations are central to the process of data gathering.

---

Of particular relevance for the WASH sector is that **WASH systems still tend to see intra-household issues as 'private' and beyond their remit**. However, this is one of the key places where inequities are likely to persist even where coverage appears to have been achieved, and where unintended harm can occur as a result of WASH initiatives.

### Sensitivity and ethics in data collection

The field visits were also a reminder that it is not possible to gather accurate or deep information on sensitive issues through a quick visit, and that DNH considerations are central to the process of data gathering. Participants reflected on the need for ethical processes, including comprehensive consent processes, full explanations of what information is being sought and why, the voluntary nature of participation and ability to withdraw without negative repercussions, the importance of privacy for the interviewee, and referral systems in case of disclosure of abuse.



Meet and greet session with provincial level Women's Union, Thrive Staff, DRD and members of Quy Nhon People with Disability Club in Quy Nhon, Vietnam / Photo credit: Thrive Networks

## Reflections for wider learning: challenges and opportunities for the sector

This section highlights some of the key Do No Harm strategies expressed by the Fund's GSI Advisers in attendance at the Event, and also reflected, either explicitly or implicitly, through many of the Fund projects.

### Adopting a 'norms-based approach' to inclusion

A significant challenge is the normative (and therefore invisible) nature of inequality and injustice, including the levels of deprivation and violence experienced by women and marginalised people. Of particular relevance for the WASH sector is that WASH systems still tend to see intra-household issues as 'private' and beyond their remit. However, this is one of the key places where inequities are likely to persist even where coverage appears to have been achieved, and where unintended harm can occur as a result of WASH initiatives. A much greater investment in 'capacity building' is needed in the critical internal work of transforming attitudes and norms among people in the WASH system.

An emerging theme that attracted interest during the Event was the concept of a 'norms-based approach' to GSI and DNH in WASH. This focuses on challenging and changing social norms and the beliefs that underpin them, and that serve to maintain existing power imbalances. It moves the focus away from looking at marginalised groups (those harmed) as being a problem for the WASH (and wider) system, to seeing the norms and power-holders (in whose interests the harms are perpetuated) as the problem and the place in the system where change should happen. A norms-based approach may also help in applying a more intersectional lens, which acknowledges the diversity of people within any identity group. It may also help to avoid splintering different marginalised identities people into 'silos', which creates a risk of 'fatigue' in the sector in dealing with what may seem like many separate issues.

### Building partnerships with Rights Holder Organisations(RHOs)

RHOs, who are deeply knowledgeable about the realities of marginalised people and the causes of harm, can be central to transformative capacity building processes and to facilitating the realisation of the enormous potential of the people they represent. At the same time, it is important to understand and respect that the resourcing of many RHOs is extremely limited. As awareness grows of rights issues relating to marginalised people, their representative organisations can become increasingly overstretched. Presentations from resource people at the Event highlighted that RHOs need not only resourcing to enable them to undertake project activities, but also core funding and investment in respectful, supportive organisational development to help them meet their own rights agendas. Building trust is key, with power relations in partnerships carefully thought through in any partnership brokering process. Supporting, resourcing and promoting the work of RHOs is one of the most powerful things donors and civil society organisations can do to transform systemic inequities in WASH and beyond.

### Putting the 'last mile' first

The issue of balancing trade-offs between achieving easy targets (so-called 'low-hanging fruit') and working with those considered more 'difficult to reach' was discussed. The risk with serving the needs of the 'easier to reach' first is that it can increase harm and relative marginalisation for those 'left behind', making the challenges in meeting their needs even greater. Focusing on the easier to reach leaves unchallenged the inequities in both the WASH system and the social system in which it exists. Leaving the marginalised behind does not 'strengthen', let alone transform, either system. If more marginalised voices are at the table – at the centre rather than the periphery of the WASH system - then they become much less 'difficult to reach'.

### Strengthening data collection and analysis

The importance of qualitative as well as quantitative information, gathered through sensitive, participatory processes that are not purely instrumental or extractive, cannot be underestimated. Such processes, including the use of dialogue tools, can generate insight for informants as well as projects, and can surface beliefs and practices normally hidden by taboos or other norms, as well as unintended consequences of WASH interventions.

An emerging theme that attracted interest during the Event was the concept of a 'norms-based approach' to GSI and DNH in WASH. This focuses on **challenging and changing social norms and the beliefs** that underpin them, and that serve to maintain existing power imbalances.

The **importance of qualitative as well as quantitative information**, gathered through sensitive, participatory processes that are not purely instrumental or extractive, **cannot be underestimated.**

Find out more at [waterforwomenfund.org](https://waterforwomenfund.org)

Water for Women Fund, SNV and DFAT, 'Do No Harm' for inclusive WASH: working towards a shared understanding', *Learning brief – Systems Strengthening / Leave No One Behind*, 2020, Melbourne, Water for Women Fund.