



Informal sanitation workers were supported by Practical Action to form a cooperative, which has since been awarded by the Municipal authority for their work providing quality services, dignifying lives, and empowering women.
Photo: Practical Action

MAKING URBAN SANITATION GENDER RESPONSIVE

**Gender and
faecal sludge
management
in Bangladesh**

SUMMARY

To achieve the safely managed sanitation target under Sustainable Development Goal 6, the Government of Bangladesh has developed an Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management and National Action Plan. The plan commits the country to gender transformative approaches. Practical Action's experience of developing an inclusive sanitation system in urban centres in Bangladesh provides useful insights on how this can be achieved. A system that integrates and formalizes services provided by informal sanitation workers serving low-income communities addresses negative consequences of widespread mismanagement of faecal sludge which disproportionately affect women. The integration of the new system with municipal gender action plans, urban poverty reduction strategies, and sanitation governance enables and supports women and other marginalized communities to influence decision making and access emerging employment and business opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Deploy gender sensitive behaviour change communication and community engagement for effective operation of improved faecal sludge management and sanitation systems.
- Expand opportunities for women and other marginalized groups to engage in new employment and business opportunities in sanitation and faecal sludge management. Gender responsive technological innovation and business models, supported by inclusive public policy, can help facilitate this.
- Align municipal sanitation plans, governance structures, and practices with gender action plans and urban poverty reduction strategies to ensure citywide gender-responsive urban sanitation and to mobilize the necessary financial investment.
- Support the operationalization of commitments to gender-transformative approaches as stated in the National Action Plan for faecal sludge management through developing and updating municipal sanitation plans.

INTRODUCTION TO FAECAL SLUDGE MANAGEMENT (FSM) IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has made dramatic progress on sanitation, bringing rates of open defecation down from over 20 per cent in rural areas in 2000 to effectively eliminating the practice by around 2016. However, a ‘second generation’ sanitation challenge remains. Existing toilets need to be well maintained and regularly emptied, and the faecal sludge

Bangladesh's National Action Plan on faecal sludge management commits the country to:

Adopt a gender transformative approach to encourage the participation of female, disadvantaged groups in planning, design, implementation and monitoring of FSM policy dialogues and investment programmes as well as service and value chain.

needs to be safely removed and disposed of. The impacts of poor management of faecal sludge disproportionately affect women, as they are the key users of local waterways where it is often dumped. Around 38 per cent of the Bangladeshi population now lives in urban areas;

as the country continues to urbanize, pressures on faecal sludge management (FSM) systems and on local water resources will continue to increase.

This reality is recognized by the Government of Bangladesh via its Institutional and Regulatory Framework for Faecal Sludge Management and the accompanying National Action Plan. Notably, the latter commits the country to gender-transformative approaches. However, currently there is a lack of clarity on how to turn this promise into reality. At present, women are underrepresented in sanitation governance and almost completely excluded from all employment and business opportunities in this emerging sector.

EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES

For 15 years, Practical Action has worked with low-income communities to develop effective FSM in urban centres across Bangladesh. We work with the informal sector on transformative approaches. This includes empowering workers to formalize their associations, improve working conditions, and develop contractual agreements with municipalities, while providing affordable and quality urban services. The integration and formalization of FSM services within municipal systems, combined with support to women and marginalized groups, enable the development of a more inclusive sanitation sector.

In addition, in 2021 we conducted gender analysis in low-income areas of two Paurashavas (municipalities): Faridpur and Meherpur. A broad range of community members were consulted, including women, men, school-going adolescents, health service users, teachers, public toilet operators, pit latrine emptiers, sanitation service providers, municipal committee members, mayors, engineers, chief executive officers, staff in national ministries, and NGOs.

We find that national and municipal government, and their development partners, must do more to strengthen gender-responsive urban governance within FSM to ensure that sanitation systems and related employment

opportunities are accessible and responsive to the needs of all residents. This brief complements **an earlier policy brief** on gender issues related to public and community toilets in Bangladesh.

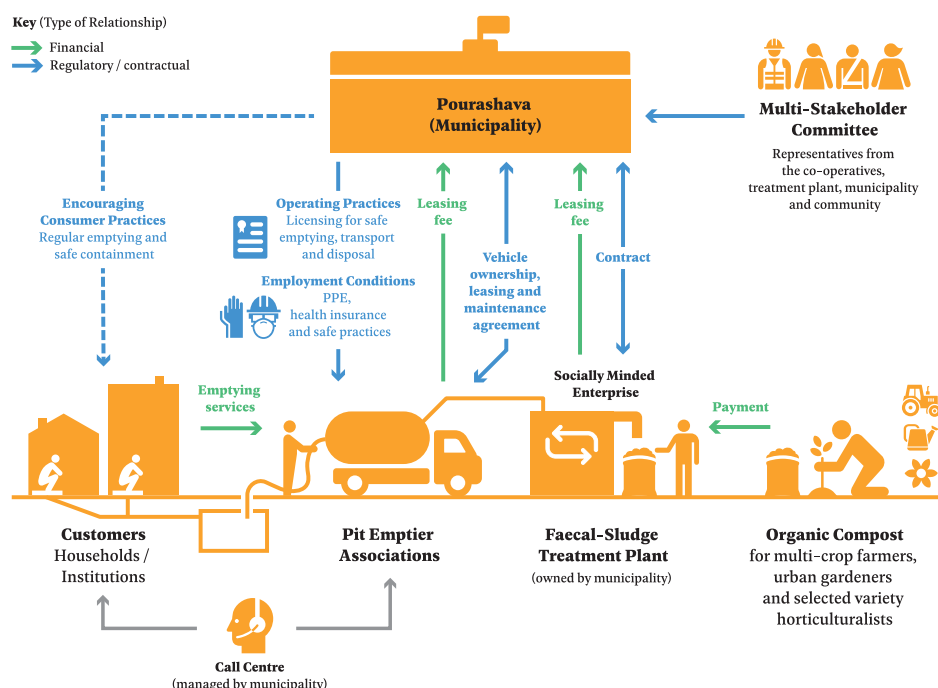
priorities and concerns of often overlooked stakeholders are centred in the systems analysis, including those of women and girls living in low-income communities.

Poor FSM services have gendered impacts

Informal sanitation workers offering pit-emptying services often operate at night, in part due to unsanitary working practices and associated social stigma, and in part due to their informality and dislocation from municipal systems. This situation leads to widespread and covert dumping of faecal sludge in local waterways. But low-income households rely on these water bodies for essential household tasks such as laundry, cleaning, bathing, and,

ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUITIES

A systems approach to analysing urban sanitation and FSM enables stakeholders to broaden their perspectives beyond a narrow focus on the provision of infrastructure. Coupling this with thorough gender analysis ensures that the



for some, cooking and drinking water. As women are responsible for these tasks in the majority of households, they are primarily impacted by this dangerous contamination.

We have the special 'gulper' equipment, which means we can empty the pit from outside without having to get in and get dirty. [...] There is less discrimination now. Householders see that we keep ourselves clean using soap and the protective clothing and they are happier to have us working on their property.

Nuider is a pit emptier who is benefiting from improved technology and integration with the municipality

Behaviour change is essential

Although many households do rely on the services of informal pit emptiers for their household latrines, some pay for connecting pipes that link pits to storm drainage networks. This also results in untreated faecal sludge flowing directly into waterways. Enforcement of regulation coupled with widespread behaviour change is required to address this malpractice. Community members need to be made aware of how the malpractice exposes themselves and their family members – especially women and children – to hazards. Community members need accessible information about any new system, including on how to access improved emptying services and the benefits these bring to all residents. At the same time, a pricing structure that includes concessional charges for extremely poor households would support service uptake among this population segment. Women with intersecting vulnerabilities, such as disability and widowhood, tend to be overrepresented among extremely poor households and therefore concessional pricing is a key part of a gender-responsive approach.

At points where the system interfaces with user demand, technological innovations could help facilitate greater involvement of women in key decisions at household level. High levels of smartphone ownership in urban areas, including among women, mean that there is the potential for women to request pit-emptying services via apps, saving time-poor women hours spent travelling and queuing at municipal offices. Further research is required to understand intra-household dynamics

that determine who takes decisions about requesting emptying services, who pays, and who supervises work on site. These insights will improve behaviour change communication strategies, and they may also support greater decision making about services by women.

Good FSM at public and community toilets is important for women

Community, public, health centre, and school toilets also require emptying services, and more frequently than household latrines. Our gender analysis found that when this service is provided insufficiently, overflowing toilets and tanks are a common occurrence. Again, impacts fall disproportionately on women and girls as social norms around clothing, privacy, and dignity restrict their options in ways not experienced by men and boys. For example, women working away from their homes (for example, street sweepers) have to 'hold on' for long periods of time when public toilets are not accessible. This is both extremely uncomfortable and potentially dangerous to health.

The development of an integrated system that addresses these shortcomings requires new roles and responsibilities to be articulated, understood, and agreed. Behaviour change communication may be required to support adoption. The system brings together municipal government, private service providers, public institutions such as schools and health centres, capacity-building organizations, and, of course, citizens. For the system to work effectively, adherence to standard operating practices helps bring clarity and improve outcomes for all.



Changing attitudes and practices in FSM can open up opportunities for women. In addition to toilet cleaning, Parul is the President of a new cooperative in Meherpur.

Photo: Practical Action



Members of a women's sanitation cooperative participating in Occupational Health and Safety planning.

Photo: Practical Action

Informal workers provide quality urban services

Our experience of working with low-income communities shows that pit-emptying services provided by informal sanitation workers are valued by households in these underserved neighbourhoods, and particularly by those using shared toilets that fill up more quickly. Practical Action has supported workers to formalize as cooperatives and develop viable business models. These models improve working conditions via training and personal protective equipment. Service agreements with municipalities enable cooperatives to be linked to infrastructure for the safe disposal of sludge. Not only does this address the root causes of open dumping, but, when coupled with community sensitization to address social stigma, it also enables sanitation workers to operate during the day and with pride. In this way, workers can provide affordable, accessible, responsive, and valued services in low-income communities, addressing the gendered impacts of previous practices. Our inclusive FSM model is being taken to scale by the Third Urban Governance Programme, a national initiative led by the Local Government Engineering Department.

My neighbors have started to respect me more. They see that I'm supporting my family through this work [...] People are recognising the importance of the work we do [...] Before, my work was very irregular. Now that I work here and am a member of the co-operative, I have a dependable income.

Aklima produces organic fertilizer from safely treated faecal sludge, which is then sold on to farmers

Emerging inclusive economic opportunities

As the improved sanitation system develops, new business opportunities and new roles within FSM businesses emerge. Participatory market facilitation strategies can proactively support women and other marginalized groups to engage in these. For example, we are seeing new opportunities emerge for women in the initial assessment of pit-emptying jobs: workers advise households and link with municipalities and emptier cooperatives to deploy the most appropriate emptying technology depending on latrine type and sludge consistency. Public-private partnerships in the FSM value chain open up further value-addition opportunities, as faecal sludge is treated to generate organic compost for agriculture and biogas for fuel. Aligning municipal sanitation plans, governance structures, and practices with gender action plans and urban poverty reduction strategies can help ensure that

opportunities are accessible to women. Overall, the shift to daytime operation for pit emptying opens up employment opportunities for women in contexts where socio-cultural norms and safety concerns prevent women from working outside their homes after dark.

Women's voices are not effectively heard in sanitation governance

As documented elsewhere, while policy requires the representation of women on municipal sanitation committees, women representatives struggle to be heard. There is a need to reform how meetings are organized and chaired. The tone and culture are set by mayors. Mayors must model inclusive chairing – giving space to women committee members, listening to them, and taking seriously their perspectives. Complementary training on roles and responsibilities, as well as leadership and communication skills, may be required. More broadly, greater

coordination and co-working is required between municipal committees and wider stakeholders working on sanitation. Currently, municipal committees with a gender remit rarely engage on issues associated with sanitation, despite its fundamental importance to all citizens. Sanitation governance structures need to be linked to urban poverty reduction strategies and gender action plans to improve effectiveness and inclusion.



New technology can create opportunities for women.
Photo: Practical Action

CALL TO ACTION

Although there has been dramatic progress in reducing open defecation in Bangladesh over the last two decades, a 'second generation' sanitation challenge remains. There is a prevalence of poor FSM which results in contaminated local waterways, disproportionately impacting women who are the predominant users.

Importantly, the Government of Bangladesh has committed to gender transformative approaches in FSM. We have identified new opportunities which can improve the quality and inclusivity of urban sanitation services. Sanitation planning and governance structures should be aligned with gender action plans and urban poverty reduction strategies. There are new business and employment opportunities for women and other marginalised groups, but further investment is required to support these innovative business models.

Behaviour change communication is required at all levels of the system – users, services, and governance – enabling women and other marginalized communities to influence decision making and oversight. A gender responsive sanitation system is one that works better for all users. Practical Action is committed to helping the government achieve gender-transformative approaches and to supporting its progress towards safely managed sanitation under SDG 6.



About Practical Action

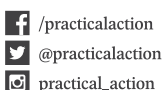
We are an international development organization putting ingenious ideas to work so people in poverty can change their world. Our vision is for a world that works better for everyone.

We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

We believe in the power of small to change the big picture. And that together we can take practical action to build futures free from poverty.

Big change starts small.

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