



Practical ACTION

MAKING URBAN SANITATION GENDER RESPONSIVE

Public and
community toilets
in Bangladesh

SUMMARY

In 2021 Practical Action conducted in-depth qualitative research to understand the experiences and priorities of women and men with regard to sanitation in low-income settlements in Faridpur and Meherpur, Bangladesh. Presently, public and community toilets in these two cities are failing to meet the needs of women and girls. Failings encompass toilet design, position, facilities, maintenance, and management. The widespread attitudes and behaviours of men and boys towards women and girls accessing and using public and community toilets constitute harassment and intimidation and need to be urgently addressed. While women's engagement in sanitation governance is supported by policy commitments, in practice, presently women's voices on municipal committees are ignored and muted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The views and priorities of women and girls must inform every stage of public and community toilet development and management**, including direct and active participation of women and girls in design, site selection, construction, operation, maintenance, outsourcing, and oversight.
- **Key priorities for women and girls include:** separate blocks for women/girls and men/boys; entrances for women and girls positioned away from busy areas; regular maintenance and repair; adequate lighting and ventilation; provision and maintenance of bins for menstrual health management products; equal charging rates across genders; women attendants at toilets for women/girls.
- **Widespread behaviour change work is required to challenge the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys** that constitute harassment and intimidation of women and girls while accessing and using public and community toilets.
- **Strengthen the voice of women in sanitation governance.** City mayors must challenge men's dominance in committee meetings, model inclusive chairing where women's views are listened to and taken seriously, and support women committee members to better understand roles and responsibilities and develop leadership and communications skills.

URBAN SANITATION 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. There is a need to ensure that existing toilets are well maintained, regularly emptied, and gradually improved. Still in 2020,

around a quarter of the population had only ‘unimproved’ or ‘limited’ access to sanitation. The burden of this often falls more heavily on women. Meanwhile, Bangladesh continues to experience rapid urbanization: 38 per cent of the population now live in urban areas, and this proportion is expected to continue to rise in coming years. Strengthening *gender responsive urban governance* is a key commitment of government. Municipal authorities, supported by the cross-departmental National Urban Programme, and with assistance from the UN and other development partners, continue to

build public and community toilets to advance urban sanitation in low-income communities.

A municipality is responsible for public toilets according to Schedule 2 of the Paurashava Act 2009:

A municipality shall provide and maintain, in sufficient number and in proper condition, public latrines and urinals for both male and female users, and shall make arrangements for proper maintenance of these facilities and keep them clean.

EXPERIENCE AND IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Practical Action has 15 years of experience working with low-income communities to improve sanitation in towns and urban centres across Bangladesh. We work with the informal sector, empowering pit emptiers to improve working conditions and provide affordable and good-quality urban services. Taking a systems approach, Practical Action works across the sanitation sector, supporting the wider enabling environment and connecting local communities to municipal and national decision-making frameworks.

In-depth qualitative gender analysis conducted in 2021 explored the experiences and priorities of women and men with regard to public and community toilets in low-income settlements in Faridpur and Meherpur. A broad range of community members were consulted, including women and men who use public and community toilets, school-going adolescents, health service users, teachers, public toilet operators, pit latrine emptiers, sanitation service providers, members of various municipal committees, mayors, engineers, chief executive officers, representatives from national ministries, and NGOs.

Summary of the methodology

Method	Detail
Literature review	Municipal, regional, national, and international reports
Site visits	To public, community, shared, school, and health centre toilets
47 focus group discussions	With a broad range of community members and sanitation stakeholders: 138 women, 103 men, 13 girls, 12 boys
8 in-depth interviews	With 2 women, 2 men, 2 adolescent girls, and 2 sanitation transportation drivers (men)
5 key informant interviews	With mayors and engineers from Faridpur and Meherpur, and a municipal secretary in Faridpur
2 participatory workshops	With 54 key stakeholders (10 women, 44 men) from the sanitation sector

Our systems approach, depth of qualitative findings, and contextual specificity build upon and add to

more general guidance in this area developed by other organizations working in the sector.¹



Mapping the sanitation system with stakeholders.
Photo: Practical Action

GENDER INEQUITIES IN URBAN SANITATION

Poor design and condition of sanitation facilities has gendered impacts

In low-income settlements in Faridpur and Meherpur, as in other parts of Bangladesh, different toilet types are in use: household latrines; shared toilets (used by people from a small number of households); community toilets (used by people from around 20 specified households); and public toilets (used by an unlimited number of people and often located in busy central areas). The design, construction, and maintenance of public and community toilets do not adequately meet the needs of women and girls. A lack of menstrual health management facilities, such as disposal bins, impedes access to safe hygiene practices. An absence of ventilation and washing facilities makes toilets unhygienic and unpleasant to use. This is a particular problem for women and girls, who generally spend longer in facilities than men. Both inadequate lighting within toilet facilities and severe unpleasantness, forcing users to find other options, pose particular safety concerns for women and girls.

When the wind blows from the east side, the entire community gets stinky. Our community toilet, with its overflowing pits [...] the bad smell comes out of there [...] in the rainy season, floating faeces are everywhere around.

Purnima,
woman community member



Community and public toilets are poorly designed and maintained.
Photo: Practical Action

Women and girls experience harassment, exclusion, and discrimination

At some public toilets, women and girls report that they are charged more than men. Women and girls also report discomfort and sometimes fear when the entrances are located in busy areas. This is because groups of men and boys congregate and at times harass women and girls entering and leaving the facilities. Some of these public toilets have no separate chambers for women and girls and those that do are often locked and inaccessible. The use of female facilities by men is common and a significant concern for women and girls. This is noteworthy, as the reverse, women or girls using male facilities, was not found in any of the focus group discussions or interviews. Clearly a lot of work is required to address the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys.

Women and girls made very clear and reasonable demands for separate toilet blocks, with entrances away from busy areas, at a distance from male toilets, and that attendants working in female facilities should be women. Women and girls are extremely uncomfortable with the employment of men in these roles. Comprehensive training is required for attendants to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to fulfil their remit effectively, including in the prevention of harassment and gender-based violence. Overall, there is a clear need to improve not only public toilet design but also the selection of public toilet contractors, the terms of these contracts, and their oversight.

We have to keep an eye on whether there is any male waiting in the queue. And, in most cases, we keep waiting for a long time to save our privacy. Eventually we use the toilet at night. As there is no separate toilet for male and female, even at night, we do not feel safe. Sometimes, even at night, the toilet gets crowded, and I am bound to go for defecation in open places far away from my house.

Purnima,
woman community member



A local community toilet.
Photo: Practical Action

Women's voices are not effectively heard in sanitation governance

While Bangladesh policy mandates the representation of women on key local government committees working on sanitation issues, women representatives explained that they struggle to be heard in these meetings. There is a clear need to reform how these meetings are organized and chaired. Mayors are usually the key decision-makers and their leadership sets the tone and culture in municipal forums such as these. To enable women committee members to actively participate in sanitation governance, chairs must cede space to give women committee members the opportunity to speak during meetings, listen to and take seriously their perspectives, and, where needed, support women community members' demands. Where appropriate, this may be complemented by training on the roles and responsibilities of committee members, as well as leadership and communication skills – supporting women committee members to fulfil their functions. Greater coordination and co-working is required between municipal committees working on sanitation and those with a specific gender remit. Currently, gender committees are rarely involved in sanitation issues despite its fundamental importance to all citizens.

Need for further research

Our research in Faridpur and Meherpur touched on issues related to the accessibility of sanitation services and infrastructure for people with disabilities and for people of third gender. Our findings at this stage provide only a very partial view of the perspectives and priorities of these key stakeholders. Further detailed research is required to address this knowledge gap for which partnerships with people with disabilities organizations and third gender rights organizations will be essential. Practical Action openly acknowledges that it has limited expertise in these areas.

CALL TO ACTION

Despite Bangladesh's significant progress in effectively eliminating open defecation, further challenges remain to address gender inequities in public and community sanitation. Presently, there are failures in all stages of toilet provision – from design, to maintenance, to oversight. The needs and priorities of women and girls have been overlooked, with the result that these groups experience considerable barriers to accessing safe urban sanitation.

We call for key stakeholders to put into practice stated commitments to gender responsive governance. Municipal authorities responsible for the provision of public and community toilets must seek to understand the gender-differentiated needs and priorities of users and ensure that these inform toilet development and management. This requires direct and active participation of women and girls at all stages of public and community toilets (including design, site selection, construction, operation, maintenance, outsourcing, and oversight). In addition, widespread attitudes and behaviours of men and

boys that constitute harassment and intimidation of women and girls must be resolutely challenged and addressed via effective behaviour change communication. Lastly, sanitation governance must be more inclusive of women committee members to ensure that their voices are heard. As the city's highest authority, mayors should

support women so that their views are articulated and taken into account by other members and decision-makers. A gender responsive sanitation system is one that works better for all users. Practical Action is committed to making cities in developing countries cleaner, healthier, fairer places for people to live and work.



Practical Action is supporting women to engage in urban sanitation planning.
Photo: Practical Action

Acknowledgement

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Note

1. Notable in this is guidance produced by WaterAid, WSUP, and UNICEF, *Female-friendly Public and Community Toilets: A Guide for Planners and Decision Makers*, available at <<https://washmatters.wateraid.org/sites/g/files/jkxooof256/files/female-friendly-public-and-community-toilets-briefing-note.pdf>>.



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.

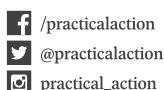
We help people find solutions to some of the world's toughest problems, including challenges made worse by catastrophic climate change and persistent gender inequality.

By 2025, our work with partners will have led to improved water, sanitation, and waste management services for 1 million people living in slum communities and a further 2.4 million systems beneficiaries.

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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