Transgender-inclusive sanitation: Insights from South Asia

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Introduction

The WASH sector is focusing upon the 2030 global ambition of achieving universal access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all by 2030. But the needs of transgender people, however, have so far been neglected: ‘the use of public bathrooms, which are often sex-segregated, has been associated with exclusion, denial of access, verbal harassment, physical abuse and sometimes even the arrest of transgender and intersex individuals’ - Catarina de Albuquerque

It is estimated that 0.3% of the adult population in Asia and the Pacific may be transgender, that’s almost 10 million people.

Transgender people are:

“Persons who identify themselves in a different gender than that assigned to them at birth. They may express their identity differently to that expected of the gender role assigned to them at birth. Trans/transgender persons often identify themselves in ways that are locally, socially, culturally, religiously, or spiritually defined” (WHO).

HIGHLIGHTS

- The requirements of transgender people are neglected in the WASH sector.
- However, there are several initiatives to include transgender people in sanitation programming in South Asia.
- Three case studies (from India and Nepal) have been analysed and presented in this poster and a related paper*.
- Key recommendations to guide future practice are to:
  - Engage with transgender people as partners at all stages of an initiative
  - Acknowledge that transgender people have diverse identities, histories, and priorities
  - Recognize that the language of gender identity varies across cultures and generations
  - Consider sanitation within the overall experiences and realities of transgender people
  - Do no harm: Avoid further stigmatisation or exposure to vulnerability

Case: Gulariya, Nepal

In Nepal, transgender people have been visible in society for centuries. However, the last 10 years has seen increased movement towards more legal recognition and protection, driven by LGBT rights advocates.

INGO Practical Action in partnership with the local NGO Environment and Public Health Organization (ENPHO), funded by DFID (now complete) incorporated trans-inclusion into their ODF focused sanitation work in Gulariya Municipality.

A public toilet constructed in the bazaar, close to the police office and the district hospital, was made with a separate facility for men, women, and an additional cubicle for third gender people. The initiative was prompted by local discussions with third gender individuals who had mentioned their challenge in using either men’s or women’s facilities.

Case: Manipur, India

Transgender community leaders in Manipur are using access to sanitation as not just a goal in itself but also a means for furthering other forms of inclusion including economic inclusion and empowerment for transgender people.

The trans advocacy group in Manipur decided to prioritize improving access to toilets in educational institutions, in workplaces, and in other public settings. Following reports of harassment from transgender students, the group prioritized creating some new third gender or transgender specific facilities (re-designating existing facilities) and providing some gender-neutral toilets, to ensure that transgender individuals had an alternative option.

Alongside provision of additional toilet options, the transgender community group prioritized awareness raising of transgender people, discrimination, and transphobia.

Recommendations

The case studies highlight the daily struggle to safely and regularly access public sanitation facilities facing transgender women, transgender men, and third gender people in South Asia.

Key reflections emerge:

Working with and consulting transgender people as partners at all stages themselves is critical to understand their realities and requirements (for sanitation or whatsoever), ensuring their inclusion and jointly designing the most appropriate solutions for their particular context.

It is important to acknowledge that transgender people are not a single homogeneous group but rather have diverse identities, histories, and priorities. Similarly, the language of gender identity is not fixed, varying across cultures and between generations.

Considering sanitation within the overall experiences of someone’s life and reality is essential to help to provide a vehicle for wider inclusion. It will also help avoiding further stigmatisation or exposure to vulnerability that inadequate interventions may lead to.