Towards Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) responsive WASH Systems Strengthening

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Purpose of the paper – To inspire thought, action, and investment in strengthening WASH systems, ensuring that the rights of marginalised and excluded individuals are integral to the systems strengthening design, rather than an afterthought.

Audience for the paper - This paper is intended for professionals, policymakers, and practitioners involved in strengthening WASH systems, including government and non-government officials and development partners. It is designed to focus on the practical question of 'how' while also being relevant to those researching, studying, or exploring approaches to improve WASH service delivery and governance.

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Main messages

To sustain well-being, health and prosperity with dignity, we need inclusive WASH systems that provide equitable and sustainable services for all. To achieve this, we recommend:

1. Start by identifying and mapping priority (marginalised) groups for local context and intersectional vulnerabilities.

2. Understand the WASH needs of marginalised groups by collaborating with stakeholders outside the typical WASH sector. This includes engaging with, for example, women's groups, disability groups, or rights-based organisations that bring expertise and experience in working with marginalised groups.

3. Ensure GESI issues are considered across all WASH system building blocks to recognize their systemic nature and identify where action is most needed. This includes policy, institutions, planning, finance, infrastructure, monitoring, regulation, resource management, and learning. For each building block, this note outlines both essential and desirable actions to strengthen gender-equal and inclusive WASH systems.

4. Understand the political economy of the local contexts to inform systemic interventions, as it directly influences the priority, in terms of recognition, influencing power, investment, etc., that marginalised groups receive.

Glossary

Gender[1] - The attributes, behaviours and roles that are socially and culturally associated with masculinity or femininity. Gender is thus a 'social construct' and varies between societies and throughout history.

Sex[2] - The biological and physiological characteristics that designate people as male or female. These sets of characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who are born possessing both, but they tend to differentiate people as male or female.

Gender Equality[3] - The equal opportunities, responsibilities and rights held by all people regardless of their gender. This is often associated only with women, but gender equality is relevant to men, boys and people of all genders. For instance, many men are negatively affected by the constructs of masculinity they are socially conditioned to live by. Supporting different ways of expressing maleness is also a key concern of gender equality efforts.

Gender Equity[4] - The process of being fair to men and women, boys and girls, and importantly the equality of outcomes and results. Gender equity may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for historical or systemic bias or discrimination. It refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes.

Social Inclusion[5] - The process of improving people's ability to participate in society. This happens through ensuring equal terms and opportunities to all people, with a particular focus on those who are disadvantaged in society on the basis of their identity.

WASH system[6] - All the social, technical, institutional, environmental and financial factors, actors, motivations and interactions that influence WASH service delivery in a given context.

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1 UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, (2017),
2 Council of Europe, (n.d.) **"Sex and gender".**
3 UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, (2017), **Glossary of Terms and Concepts**
4 Ibid.
5 World Bank, (n.d). **"Social Inclusion"**
6 Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**.

Contents

Introduction

Access to safe water and sanitation services was explicitly recognised as a basic human right by the United Nations in July 2010[7]. Member countries of the United National General Assembly (UNGA) committed to providing safe water and sanitation services to everyone in their countries. Further, Sustainable Development Goal 6 aims to ensure available and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all by 2030.

The provision of safe water and sanitation services is closely linked to other development goals that include public health, education, poverty alleviation and social justice, and hence it has to be a continuing priority for all countries, irrespective of their development status.

Despite being an established human right, there is evidence that a significant number of people still lack access to water and sanitation. The Joint Monitoring Programme of WHO and UNICEF reports that as of 2022, more than 2 billion people across the world lack access to safely managed water services, and 3.6 billion people lack access to safely managed sanitation services. This disproportionately affects low and lower-middle income countries. Whereby, 71 % and 76% of the population in low-income countries lack access to safely managed water and sanitation services, respectively. In lower middle-income countries, 36 % and 53% of the population lack access to safely managed water and sanitation services, respectively. In fragile contexts, the situation worsens, with only 46% and 33% of the population having access to safely managed water and sanitation services, respectively[8].

What does all this data imply? With less than a decade to go until 2030, not everyone has access to safely managed water and sanitation services. And, generally speaking, people living in areas that have lower levels of development, have poorer access to safely managed services. It may be concluded that income levels, political stability and development affect access to services. This is not to say that all people living in high-income and politically stable countries have access to safely managed services. The marginalised, even in such contexts, get left behind and therefore GESI considerations need to be made across the board in all settings.[9]

This learning note is divided into two parts:

1. Why it is important to consider Gender and Social Inclusion initiatives in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) systems strengthening?
2. How to implement these initiatives - actionable steps across the different elements of the system.

The paper builds on the WASH systems strengthening approach outlined by Huston and Moriarty in their 2018 working paper 'Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks: building strong WASH systems for the SDGs'.

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7   UN. (n.d.). **The Human Right to Water and Sanitation**. Media Brief,
8   WHO and UNICEF, (n.d). **WASH data**.
9   DigDeep Right to Water Project and US Water Alliance, (2019), **Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States**

Part 1: Why?

This section reflects on the systems strengthening approach with respect to addressing the needs of marginalised communities and individuals, why it's crucial to address their needs, and who these groups are in the different contexts.

Systems Strengthening Approach

Several governments and development organisations have realised that the installation of infrastructure alone is not the solution. It is now increasingly believed that "... delivery of WASH services relies on an entire, complex and interlinked WASH system, and that WASH sector reform requires the ability to engage with and strengthen that system as a whole".[10]

A systems strengthening approach to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) has come from the need to have long-term solutions to reach everyone with sustainable basic rights (in this context, the rights to water and sanitation). It intends to work at scale to reach everyone with their human right to sustainable water and sanitation services.

Several frameworks exist to depict and break down the complexity of WASH systems and identify systemic bottlenecks. Such frameworks – often looking at the WASH system through the lens of building blocks - are helpful for identifying systemic bottlenecks and making plans to address them. Principles informed by existing literature on systems change, as well as the experiences of UNICEF, Sanitation and Water for All, IRC, and Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI) in water, sanitation, and hygiene systems around the world aim to complement such frameworks. They aim to provide an overarching narrative by focusing on how to engage with the system – regardless of which framework is used - considering behaviours and philosophies essential for effective systems change.

For this learning note, we will use IRC's praxis and framework (Figure 1). Herein, the WASH system is understood as comprising of actors and factors operating within a political context. The WASH system actors include the people and institutions such as officials from line departments, ministries responsible for water, sanitation, hygiene, local governments, other non-governmental WASH organisations, academic institutions, philanthropists, private sector and politicians responsible for the provisions of WASH services to citizens.

Political economy

WASH system

Education system

Policy & legislation: sector policy & strategy, legal framework, norms & standards, by-laws	**Planning:** planning & budgeting, capacity & frameworks for planning
Institutions: coordination, roles, responsibilities, capacity, sector mechanisms	**Finance:** flows & responsibilities, clear frameworks including life-cycle costs & source identification
Infrastructure: development & maintenance, project cycles, asset management, roles	**Regulation & accountability:** accountability mechanisms, regulatory framework & capacity
Monitoring: framework & routine implementation, service levels, use of data	**Water resources management:** allocation & management of resource abstraction water quality, coordinated efforts

Learning & adaptation: capacity & frameworks to capture and feedback lessons learned, update & adapt various building blocks
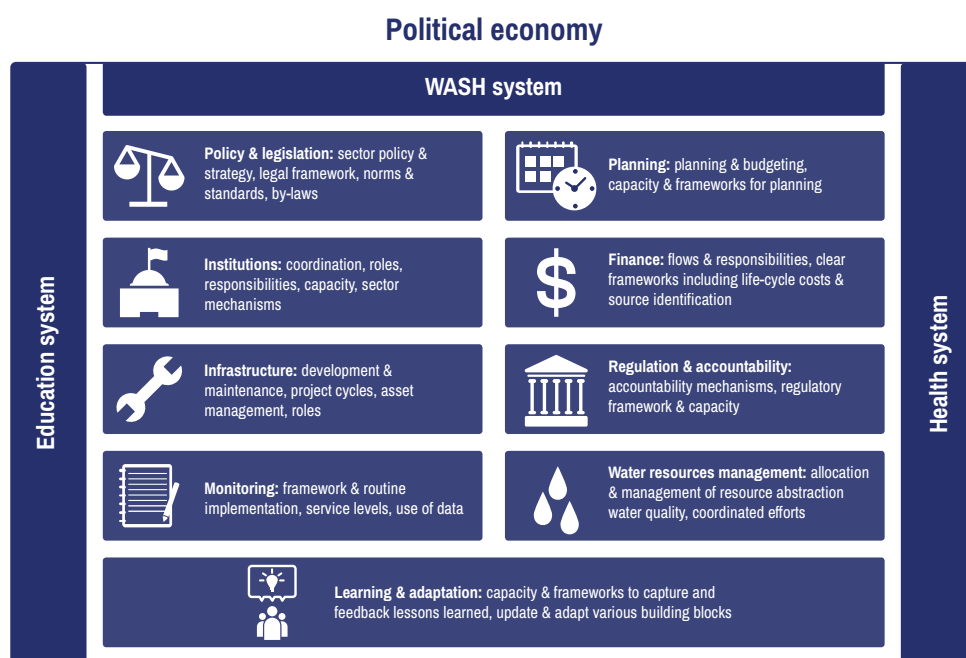
Health system

Figure 1: WASH System, Source: Huston and Moriarty, 2018

10 Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. pp. 11.

The nine building blocks of a WASH system are shown in Figure 1. Based on our learnings over the years, we have slightly modified two building blocks to explicitly mention services (with infrastructure) and climate change with water resources management. The building blocks are Policy & Legislation, Planning, Institutions, Finance, Infrastructure & Services, Regulation & Accountability, Monitoring, Water Resources Management and Climate Change, and Learning & Adaptation. The political economy refers to the external environment comprising of the "...political context, national economy, effectiveness of governance, demographic pressures and other influences that are outside..." but influence the WASH system and surround all building blocks[11]. Similarly, the health and education systems sit alongside the building blocks due to their interactive nature with WASH systems both nationally and at the institutional level.

Gender Equity and Social Inclusion and Systems Strengthening

When addressing sustainable services, we cannot ignore the social and structural inequalities that persist across various contexts and how this affects a population's access to a service or system. Often the social and structural imbalances are overlooked when designing or improving WASH services, and too often, these imbalances are overlooked in system design or improvement. This learning note emphasises that effective WASH systems strengthening requires integrating social and technical initiatives, with Gender Equity and Social Inclusion (GESI) as a core component. Marginalised groups are frequently excluded from planning and decision-making processes, perpetuating inequality. Exclusion, of even a few, impacts overall public health, economy, environment and well-being.

GESI initiatives aim to address inequalities and empower the marginalised by addressing systemic power imbalances and enabling their involvement in planning and decision-making processes. This approach shifts the power dynamics from "for", "with" to "by", fostering agency among marginalised groups, such that they are able to demand their rights and hold duty bearers accountable.

The political and economic landscape of a country influences how GESI is prioritised. Contextual aspects such as the political mandate, economic status and stability, and the level of decentralisation affect decisions related to inclusion, representative leadership, and affirmative action. Political instability, in particular, increases the risks for marginalised groups, underscoring the need for tailored approaches to systems strengthening that consider these dynamics. In planning systems strengthening, considering the political economy is crucial not only as a standard practice, but also from a GESI perspective to leverage and influence accordingly.

To ensure WASH services reach everyone, especially marginalised groups, collaboration must be deliberate and extend to a diverse range of stakeholders including:

- Government departments focused on women and children, minority affairs, people with disabilities, etc.
- Grassroot organisations working with/by individuals from marginalised communities.
- Non-government organisations working on human rights, gender, women's rights, people with disabilities, minorities, or among communities who are socially marginalised.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION						SOCIAL INCLUSION
	Exclusion Perpetuates inequalities.	**Blind** Ignores inequalities.	**Aware** Acknowledges inequalities, but does not address them.	**Responsive** Acknowledges and considers specific needs.	**Transformative** Addresses the causes and works to transform.	
	Exploit		Accomodate		Transform	

Figure 2: The scale or levels of GESI initiatives. Adapted with permission from: Pederson, A., Greaves, L., and Poole, N. (2015). 'Gender-transformative health promotion for women – a framework for action', Health Promotion International, vol. 30, no. 1, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25231058.

11 Ibid. pp. 18.

- Think tanks involved in legislation, policy and finance recommendations for marginalised communities.
- Rights-holder groups for collaboration.
- Knowledge creators (universities and research organisations).

Acknowledging diverse WASH needs tied to social identities is essential for GESI integration within systems strengthening. Research has found that WASH systems can bring in GESI initiatives to varying degrees, emphasising the importance of deliberate, inclusive efforts in planning and implementation. For example, GESI can often be seen along a scale like the one shown in Figure 2.

This learning note adopts the stance and offers advice to make programmes gender responsive. This is defined as considering and addressing inequalities experienced by people of different genders and social groups and proposing specific actions towards being gender transformative.

Understanding Who Is Marginalised

As we discussed above, access to water and sanitation varies across communities and individuals, often reflecting where control/power (the power to influence) lies socially within different contexts.

Marginalisation[12] arises from multiple and intersecting factors (Figure 3), including:

- **Gender** – women and girls face unique challenges because of their primary role in water collection which can impact health, education, and economic opportunities. They also have specific needs. The lack of services at the time of menstruation and pregnancy can further affect their health, ability to work, and education. Similarly, transgender individuals face challenges in accessing public toilets, due to the lack of inclusive facilities that cater to their needs. It is important to note that there are different forms of gender-based violence linked to access and use of WASH services.
- **Age** – Children and the elderly have distinct needs,

requiring support to access and use WASH facilities.
- **(Dis)ability** – Individuals with disabilities (physical or intellectual) may face challenges accessing WASH services, expressing their needs or requiring support to access WASH services.
- **Health status** – Those with conditions like HIV or leprosy often face stigmatisation and are unable to use services.
- **Sexual orientation** - Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBTQ+) individuals may experience exclusion from services.
- **Race, Caste and Ethnicity** – Systemic discrimination against certain groups, in terms of their race, caste, ethnicity and/or tribe, may limit their access to services.
- **Religion** – Religious minorities can be structurally excluded from services.
- **Economic status** – Lower-income households often receive substandard services despite higher relative costs.
- **Legal status** – Refugees or those without legal documentation face barriers to services.
- **Geography** – Remote or hard-to-reach areas, often tied to ethnicity or economic status, tend to have limited service access.
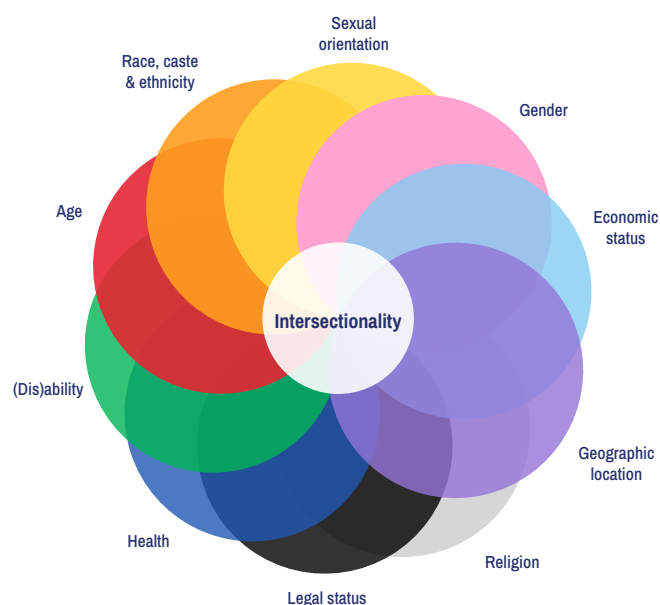

Figure 3: Visual representation of overlapping social identities

12   In this note, we have focused on vulnerabilities that are enduring and uniquely experienced by certain groups over others. Temporary vulnerabilities that maybe experienced by everyone are out of the scope of this paper.

These factors often intersect, creating compounded forms of discrimination. This phenomenon is called intersectionality. Intersectionality is a complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups[13]. For example, a woman from a marginalised caste/class who also has a disability, is more likely to face discrimination in terms of access to rights and opportunities.

Marginalisation varies by context, and must be understood in terms of the specific cultural, geographic, and socio-political dynamics of each region and/or country. Furthermore, the above-mentioned list is not exhaustive; other localised forms of marginalisation may also influence access to essential services for certain individuals or communities.

UN Photo / Jean-Marc Ferré

Systems Strengthening with GESI and the Human Rights Approach

Ensuring basic human rights for everyone is at the core of this approach. The GESI-responsive systems strengthening approach prioritises basic human rights principles, focusing on preventing discrimination and promoting equality. The goal of GESI-responsive systems strengthening is to achieve sustainable water and sanitation services for all, and to address systemic inequities so that they cease to exist. Key principles include:

- **Maintaining transparency** in the information collected, gathering targeted data, and including the systemically marginalised in knowledge creation.
- **Participation** involves actively ensuring the participation of marginalised communities in all processes – planning, implementation, monitoring, etc. - as well as dedicating resources and creating conditions to facilitate their participation.
- **Knowledge creation** involves ensuring marginalised groups contribute to and benefit from learning and adaptation initiatives.

Since 2015, the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council have recognised both the right to safe drinking water and the right to sanitation as closely related but distinct human rights. International human rights law obliges states to work towards achieving universal access to water and sanitation for all, without any discrimination, while prioritising those most in need. The human rights principles expected for states to follow are:

a. Non-discrimination and Equality
b. Access to Information
c. The Right to Participation
d. Sustainability and Non-Retrogression

Source: **Realising the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation: A Handbook** by the UN Special Rapporteur Catarina De Albuquerque

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13 Merriam-Webster (n.d). "**Intersectionality**". Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. Accessed 2025.

Part 2: How?

Systems strengthening initiatives intend to reach everyone with basic sustainable services, this section explicitly captures the aspects that need to be considered to ensure the initiatives are deliberate in reaching everyone.

This section builds on existing literature (provided in the references) on activities, tools, frameworks, and papers on inclusion of GESI in WASH, climate resilience, health, and other development programmes and the experiences of the authors. The intention of this section is to provide a GESI-responsive systems strengthening approach, which adopts a holistic, programmatic perspective. It suggests activities for the implementing organisation, as well as for donors, policymakers, the government, community members, and other stakeholders, both before and beyond the implementation phase.

The Building Blocks: How to Include GESI in the WASH System?

To ensure sustainable services for all, especially marginalised groups, we emphasise the need to be more deliberate about embedding GESI in WASH systems strengthening. While, some WASH system building blocks frameworks recognise GESI as a distinct building block in the WASH system, we believe that GESI cuts across the various constituent building blocks of the WASH system. In the following section of the paper, we have attempted to unbundle what GESI means in each of the building blocks.

Drawing on the framework outlined in the paper, ' Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks: building strong WASH systems for the SDGs' by Angela Huston and Patrick Moriarty, the WASH system comprises of nine interconnected building blocks. Actions targeting one building block often impact others and "...the boundaries between building blocks can be fuzzy..."[14] . Thus, certain initiatives can strengthen more than one building block. Similarly, an initiative focused on a specific building block may have a lasting impact on other building blocks. For instance, allocating dedicated financial resources (Finance) to support capacity-building initiatives (Institutions)

can enhance community-led data collection (Monitoring). The following section unpacks how GESI can be applied within each of the building blocks to holistically strengthen WASH systems.

Policy and legislation

"The policy and legislation building block comprises the mechanisms by which a government sets out its vision for the sector (policy) and determines the legal framework for achieving that vision (legislation)." [15]

This building block is linked to the translation of the internationally agreed human rights to water and sanitation into country level policies, legislations and guidelines. While policies often target universal access to water and sanitation services, marginalised groups are frequently left behind. To address this, policies need to:

- Set specific goals and targets to reach those often left behind, addressing their differential needs and challenges.
- Clearly state the mechanisms through which to achieve the above-mentioned goals and targets, while ensuring inclusion at all stages of the process in delivering services to marginalised groups.
- Policies must also state measures to ensure transparency and accountability at all stages. Often there are inclusive policies but awareness of the same is absent. Thus, there need to be official documents stating the mechanisms to take them from the desks of policy makers to the community.
- Inclusive policy formulation is challenging (and can be inadequate) without the inclusion and involvement of members of marginalised groups. The GESI approach to strengthening the building block of policy and legislation is thus closely related to the existence of other enabling policies that ensure participation of diverse stakeholders in policy and legislation formulation, making sure that diverse needs and challenges are addressed. For example, in Kenya, legislators along with civil society organisations are working on addressing

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14   Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. pp. 19.
15   Ibid. pp. 20.

the issue of sextortion[16] and bringing in a law against it[17]. Measures to ensure that the richness of diversity is captured requires measures such as affirmative action, capacity building and awareness raising (See section on strengthening the building block of Institution).

- Governments (national, provincial, or local) typically lead this process, but other actors - donors, utilities, service providers, NGOs and other organisations engaged in WASH - should adopt GESI-aligned organisational policies, guidelines and standards, and stated targets, goals and processes to reinforce inclusivity in their WASH activities.

- The table below lists some ways in which GESI can be realised in the building block of Policy and Legislation.

Table 1. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the policy and legislation building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• Human Rights to water and sanitation are translated into national level legislation and policy. • WASH policies, standards and guidelines address GESI-related needs and have relevant provisions for the same. • GESI targets/goals (e.g. reduce gender gap) are stated at national/ sub-national levels. • Multi-stakeholder engagement is part of policy development and formulation. • Processes are defined to enable participation, especially of those marginalised at various stages of decision-making. • For effective implementation of policies, legislation, and programmes, GESI-related processes are clearly stated. • Mechanisms are defined to communicate demands, feedback, suggestions from communities and other stakeholders (community representatives/ CBOs/CSOs) to inform policy formulation.	• International policies on elimination of discrimination (such as Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) are ratified. • Policies actively promote women's and other marginalised communities' leadership and participation. • Relevant policies beyond WASH (education, social protection, social justice, etc.) actively promote participation of women and other marginalised groups. • Policy makers engage with local/regional/national rights holders groups (e.g. women's empowerment organisations) to learn from their experiences on gender equity goals as culturally/ contextually defined.

16   Sextortion is defined as sexual corruption, it is a gendered form of corruption in which sex, rather than money, is the currency of a bribe. (Water Integrity Network).
17 Luseka, E., (2024). "**The Intersection of WASH and Gender**".

Institutions

"The institutions building block refers to the formal organisational arrangements in a country and its WASH sector; the capacity and resources that each organisation has to perform its role, and the coordination mechanisms amongst the organisations."[18]

Institutional arrangements vary by country and within countries, in the case of decentralised governance, requiring clarity on roles and responsibilities (i.e., who does what). Often women and marginalised groups are excluded from decision-making and treated or viewed solely as 'beneficiaries' or consumers of services. On average, women hold only 18% of jobs in water utilities[19], and are also the minority in government WASH jobs[20]. In addition, less than a third of countries report having high participation of women in rural water supply management[21]. A GESI-aligned approach towards WASH systems strengthening necessitates representation across formal and informal institutions, networks[22], platforms, and at various levels and functions of institutions.

Realising inclusive participation requires more than policy mandates; additional measures, such as affirmative action and capacity building need to be put in place. Affirmative action in the form of quotas can bring marginalised groups into decision-making spaces, while capacity building initiatives can empower them to contribute meaningfully. Similarly, support mechanisms such as training for career enhancement of ethnic minority groups in formal institutions, can foster diverse leadership, promote acceptance of differing viewpoints and inspire others. In the same vein, technical skill-building and training for women in water and sanitation service-related jobs, such as infrastructure repair, can foster ownership of community assets, thus ensuring sustainability of infrastructure and services.

A GESI approach also involves creating an enabling environment for marginalised groups to participate and be heard. This includes awareness campaigns on inclusion and diversity, and sensitivity trainings for institutions, and practical measures such as childcare facilities, ramps, separate toilets, and other provisions. The absence of these measures can impede the participation of people from marginalised communities. In order to address the social mindset, integrating GESI in an age-appropriate manner from an early age in schools should be considered. The WASH information, education, and communication initiatives need to be aligned with the GESI approach.

The table on page 14 lists some essential and desirable measures to adopt a GESI approach in strengthening the building block of institutions. These steps are to be taken by government organisations, civil society organisations, community-based organisations, non-government organisations, service authorities, service providers, donors, in their activities to reach everyone with sustainable WASH services.

18 Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. pp. 19.

19 Average taken from 64 water and sanitation utilities in 28 economies (World Bank, 2019).

20 In almost a quarter of countries, women hold less than 10% of government WASH jobs. 109 responding countries in GLAAS 2021/2022 data (UN Water, 2022).

21 UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water. (2022). **GLAAS 2022 Report**.

22 Examples of women-led water networks include - African Network of Women Professionals in WASH, Women for Water Partnership, Women in Water Diplomacy Network South Asia Young Women in Water.

Table 2. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the institutions building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• Institutions, including ministries, line departments, elected governments, and civil society organisations ensure representation, or even participation of women and other marginalised communities, in all processes (policy formulation, planning, decision-making, implementing, monitoring, and more) and multi-stakeholder platforms (with the help of quotas, dedicated spaces, collaborations with rights holders organisations) across all levels and functions. • Capacity building and training initiatives to encourage and facilitate participation of women and other marginalised communities exist. • An environment for raising awareness and sensitisation of the wider community (such as duty-bearers, service providers, civil society organisations, media, business, policy makers and population at large) against discriminatory practices and on the importance of GESI is created through education. • Information, education and communication (IEC) activities and behaviour and behaviour change communication materials developed need to be aligned with the GESI approach. • Barriers to participation (in the workplace/ platforms/ meetings) are addressed through investments in childcare, enabling infrastructure such as ramps and toilets, scheduling meetings at convenient times and locations, and so on.	• Capacity development on tools such as GESI-responsive budgeting is carried out. • Trainings are provided to women and members of marginalised groups on rights, duties, and opportunities to make their voice heard. • GESI is considered in intra-organisational policies, such as increasing team diversity, promoting leadership by members of marginalised communities at different levels, providing career enhancement opportunities for women and other marginalised groups in the workforce (certifications, trainings, professional enhancement, exposure, creation of opportunities).

Planning

"This is the foundation for implementation of policies to achieve universal access to sustainable services."[23]

Policies alone cannot reach their goals without effective implementation processes, starting with inclusive planning. A GESI approach to planning involves asking what has been planned, for whom, and by whom:

- **What has been planned** - Does it address the needs and gaps faced by marginalised groups? Does the sector policy/guideline/strategy prescribe considerations of the marginalised groups?
- **For whom** – Do the planned investments consider the needs of women, children, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups?
- **By whom** – Are diverse voices meaningfully represented in the planning process accounting for local power dynamics than may exclude certain groups*?

*As mentioned in the building blocks on page 7, existing power dynamics may prevent all from sharing their needs. Thus, for truly representative planning, it is important to understand the power dynamics in the community, and ensure space for those who are normally left out in the local context (this could include women, people with disabilities, certain social/ethnic groups, etc.)

Avoiding tokenistic participation is essential[24], as superficial inclusion can lead to gender-blind or exclusionary outcomes (Figure 3). Effective planning requires assessing the quality of participation and ensuring that all stakeholders are genuinely represented.

All organisations, government, non-government, and private, involved in WASH should take a GESI approach in planning to ensure their plans are equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the most marginalised. The following table elaborates on the results of planning with a GESI lens.

Table 3. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the planning building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
- Inclusive and participatory (multi-stakeholder) planning processes exist at key (administrative) levels in government and non-government organisations, enabling members of marginalised groups to participate meaningfully. - The plans to ensure equitable access, with specified targets, timeframes and responsibilities. - The inter-departmental planning to leverage other development programmes specific to marginalised communities to ensure holistic provision of services. - Plans to address the impact of climate change on marginalised communities (such as basic services for the urban poor, who face (first/most) challenges of water being too much, too little and/or dirty and sometimes too expensive).	- Planning processes are participatory across **all** levels. - Periodic review and improvement of action plans are carried out with a GESI lens. - Community representatives, CBOs/CSOs are involved in the periodic reviews.

23 Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. pp. 24.
24 Arnstein's participation ladder, see: **Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation**.

Finance

"Sustained service delivery for everyone requires all the elements of a WASH service to be funded over their entire life-cycle."[25]

Policy priorities must be adequately financed to move from planning to implementation. Adopting a GESI approach to finance requires dedicated budgets for targeted investments in hard-to-reach areas, or subsidies for those who cannot afford to pay for the services, or price affordability benchmarking. Many countries across the world have implemented such a strategy. For instance, under the Government of Bangladesh's Pro-Poor Strategy, the ultra-poor households are identified and then provided subsidies for urban water and sanitation services, while other countries have implemented cross-subsidising tariffs for urban water and sanitation services. The UN suggests limiting the cost of water and sanitation services to 5% of household income to ensure affordability.

Inclusive budgeting tools, such as gender or disability budgeting, can address the diverse needs and concerns of marginalised communities, provide focused and necessary support, increase government accountability, and promote equality in access to basic services.

In addition to supporting marginalised communities with targeted interventions, making institutions, planning, monitoring, learning and adaptation processes inclusive **and** representative, requires investments. For example, there are financial resources required to organise capacity building workshops, to build ramps for physical accessibility, or to purchase special software that allows people with a visual disability to work on computers. All of which require intentional planning and financial investment. Without these, inclusion risks being tokenistic.

Further, the capacity of the community and community-level decision-makers needs to be enhanced so that they can track sanctioned and utilised budgets, planned investments, and actual expenditures. This will enable them to seek accountability from service authorities accordingly.

While governments are the primary actor to adopt GESI measures in WASH finance, private and community-led initiatives should also adopt measures to address inequality. Some of these are provided in the table below.

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25   Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. pp. 21.

Table 4. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the finance building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• There are dedicated budgets for equitable and accessible WASH services to reach everyone (including capital expenditure, operation and maintenance, direct, and capital maintenance costs). • Affordable tariffs (price benchmarking) of services, providing support (subsidies) to low-income households is ensured. • There are dedicated budgets for institutional strengthening on GESI, such as for capacity building, and awareness raising. • Dedicated resources exist to facilitate participatory planning and decision-making (such as childcare support/facilities, transport allowance). • There are dedicated budgets to address the impact of climate change, disaster preparedness for women and marginalised communities.	• Budget tracking exercises by community representatives or civil society organisations are undertaken to capture allocations and expenditures to address inequalities in access to services. • GESI-responsive budgeting processes are adopted across different levels of governance (from local to central). • Budgets are available and utilised to ensure a GESI workforce (training, capacity building) in institutions. • Subsidies (taxation), incentives, and support are provided to encourage businesses led by members of marginalised communities.

Infrastructure and services

"Infrastructure is the essential physical component that actually delivers the service. It comprises not only hardware but also the mechanisms and processes for developing new infrastructure and maintaining existing facilities."[26]

Infrastructure must address adequacy, accessibility, and usability, incorporating GESI considerations. Infrastructure designs, for households, public and private settings, should meet the needs of women, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. Without these considerations, services may be inaccessible, leading to wasted investments. Local socio-cultural norms need to be considered to ensure infrastructure aligns with local practices and will be used. Infrastructure design should involve rights holders and civil society groups, and should not be done in isolation by technocrats.

Inclusive infrastructure is necessary not only at the receiving end for service users, in households or extra-household settings, but also at the very beginning – for instance, in the policymaking or decision-making stages – in government, private or community offices. This ensures the participation of people from marginalised communities in offices of service authority, service providers, or other roles in water and sanitation service delivery. Thus, it incorporates toilets in households, segregated functional toilets in service authority offices, functional handwashing stations in schools, and ramps in utilities.

Including marginalised voices in planning and implementation of service delivery ensures accessible and usable infrastructure. It is also an opportunity to engage them in the service delivery mechanism, by engaging them in livelihood generation activities along the service chain. For example, in the state of Odisha in India, women and transgender groups are running Septage Treatment Plants[27].

The earlier mentioned key stakeholder groups must prioritise these steps to achieve sustainable, inclusive WASH services.

The following table lists some of the ways in which Infrastructure and Services can incorporate GESI principles.

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26   Ibid. pp. 24.
27   IWA, (2022), **Transgender led operation and management of septage treatment plant (SeTP) in Cuttack Municipal Corporation, Odisha, India**

Table 5. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the infrastructure building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• Infrastructure planning and development processes include the participation of women and marginalised communities to incorporate their diverse needs (including climate resilience). • Necessary linkages to finance mechanisms are included in infrastructure development plans to identify and provide for those who cannot afford infrastructure and services. • Targeted service delivery to the underserved is prioritised. • Services delivered to all, especially marginalised communities, are based on established technical standards (ideally incorporating climate-resilient designs). • Independent monitoring of infrastructure and services is carried out using tools such as social audits and open discussions, through the engagement of independent CSOs and/ or community representatives. • Accessibility, safety, cleanliness, privacy in design and maintenance of services (including menstrual hygiene management) in institutional and public settings is ensured.	• Infrastructures supporting gendered needs and other social needs (such as disability access) are available outside of the home to enable all people to participate fully in society.

Monitoring

"...covers the capture, management and dissemination of the information required to effectively manage WASH services at all levels." [28]

Monitoring is essential to assess service reach and identify who is being left behind. Capturing disaggregated service-level data (e.g., access, quality, quantity, affordability) by gender, disability, social, ethnic, marginalised groups helps reveal patterns and enables decision-making to target resources and address gaps.

A GESI approach to monitoring will also include indicators to assess inclusivity in Policy, Institutions, Infrastructure. For example, it checks whether policy-making and decision-making processes are inclusive, whether the WASH workforce is representative, whether the infrastructure in government, service authority, service provider, and other key offices is inclusive so that members of marginalised groups can participate.

Monitoring also refers to the process of monitoring data collection and use. Adopting a GESI approach to monitoring involves the engagement of members of marginalised groups in data collection – ensuring the data reflects their realities. Data must also be available and accessible to all (including members of the marginalised groups) for use in policy making, planning, budgeting, and monitoring progress, at various levels.

The following table illustrates steps for monitoring to be GESI compliant.

Table 6. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the monitoring building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• GESI-specific monitoring indicators are included in WASH service monitoring. • Stakeholders, like rights holders groups working on rights of women, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups, are engaged in the monitoring process and in deciding on the indicators. • Disaggregated data is collected and reported (gender, age, disability and other context-specific vulnerabilities – such as ethnicity, religion, HIV, refugee, internally displaced person, indigenous person status, etc.) to inform planning and budgeting processes. • Data (including on use of budget) is accessible and available in a usable format. • Both quantitative and qualitative data (such as participation or engagement of members of marginalised communities in decision-making) are collected.	• Data is validated by the stakeholders. • Qualitative data, such as on household division of labour, asset ownership, social accountability tools used, complaints received and addressed, is collected and used in planning. • An annual GESI analysis of the data collected is carried out, to identify gaps in service provision, to inform planning and decision-making. • GESI indicators on WASH are included in the measurement of progress on GESI in the national context (for instance, in terms of empowerment, gender transformation, and social inclusion). • Available data is aligned with the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) indicators on GESI, enabling comparison and contribution to the larger global data set.

28 Huston A. and Moriarty, P. (2018). **Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks : building strong WASH systems for the SDGs**. p. 22.

Regulation and accountability

*"....formal regulatory mechanisms and enforcement processes as well as other mechanisms to hold decision makers, service providers and users to account and ensure that the interests of each group of actors are respected. It also includes accountability that goes beyond formal mechanisms to include behaviour of different actors and their obligations in civil society."***29**

Marginalised groups often lack the power to influence service authorities at different levels. Regulation and accountability in WASH extends beyond service levels, tariffs, and environmental pollution; it includes the accountability of authorities towards the most vulnerable, ensuring these households have basic and safe services that are affordable to them.

Making monitoring data available and accessible to service authorities, civil society organisations, and to the public at large is critical for accountability. Building awareness on rights, grievance redressal platforms and social accountability mechanisms can empower and aid marginalised groups in holding service providers and duty bearers accountable. Some essential and desirable ways for incorporating GESI in Regulation and Accountability are given in the table below.

Table 7. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the regulation and accountability building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• There is a dedicated authority that regulates services (including social and economic aspects of the service) to ensure that everyone, especially marginalised groups, is covered and receives services that meet standards at affordable prices. • The service provider is held accountable by both the regulating authority and communities/households to deliver GESI-responsive services that meet established standards. • User-friendly and confidential (where required) complaint redressal mechanisms exist that prioritise complaints from marginalised communities. • Necessary initiatives are in place to ensure awareness of rights, as well as complaint redressal and escalation mechanisms, enabling service users to demand accountability. • Social accountability mechanisms, such as social audits, are institutionalised in programmes to ensure accountability in services and decision-making. • Transparency of plans and budgets at all levels is maintained. • Monitoring data is publicly available and made accessible.	• There is an independent performance review of service authority and service provider functions. • GESI targets are stated in the contracts of service providers or job descriptions of duty bearers. • Mechanisms exist to incentivise service providers to invest in addressing inequity.

29   Ibid. pp. 22.

Water resource management and climate resilience

"refers to the coordination and control of how water is allocated to different sectors. A strong system includes methods or protocols for addressing conflicts and encouraging cooperation."[30]

Climate change intensifies the hardships of marginalised groups, who often live in vulnerable areas facing issues of excessive, insufficient, or contaminated water. Addressing these risks requires understanding current and future challenges and taking appropriate and proactive steps. Often, service planners and providers lack awareness of whether infrastructure can withstand climate threats, or whether water resources will maintain their quality and quantity with continued use. Building the capacities of all stakeholders to understand climate change and the impact of services is crucial. Involving individuals in all stages of ensuring services (planning, implementation, monitoring) ensures their experiences inform suitable solutions, helping to prevent service disruptions and sustain efforts. The table below lists what realising GESI in Water Resource Management and Climate Resilience would entail.

Table 8. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the water resource management and climate resilience building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• Platforms for information and decision-making around the management and use of water resources include women and marginalised communities. • Decision-makers, service providers and communities are aware of the differential impact of climate change on GESI and plan accordingly (ensuring availability of infrastructure, services, budgets, human resources).	• Capacities on climate change for all stakeholders (community, service providers, decision-makers, policy makers, etc.) with a focus on GESI are built. • A community cadre (comprising women and youth representatives from marginalised communities) is trained to be able to locally address climate change-related challenges. • Climate change language is made accessible – easy to understand and relatable - to all.

30   Ibid, pp. 25.

Learning and adaptation

The learning and adaptation building block presumes inclusive platforms for the regular sharing of information and use of data for critical analysis, with insights from multiple stakeholders, including civil society.[31]

Learning platforms are key to influencing the building blocks. Including the right actors at the various levels is essential to ensure ground realities, especially of marginalised groups, are captured and addressed in a timely manner. Learning and Adaptation focuses on both the creation and exchange of knowledge. Thus, it is important to create the space for those typically excluded from such platforms to create, exchange, and even validate knowledge on their experiences and solutions that work best for them. These platforms can also draw on good practices and learnings from other sectors in reaching and providing services for these groups.

Table 9. Essential and desirable features of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) for the learning and adaptation building block of the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) system.

Essential	Desirable
• Partnerships are formed between government departments that make policy decisions and implement them, and research and implementation organisations that produce research to inform these decisions. • Knowledge is created (using data as evidence for accountability) on the differential impact of access to WASH services on marginalised communities. • Best practices for delivering WASH services to the last mile are documented. • Sharing, exchange, and peer-to-peer learning take place on good practices on how best to reach the last mile, being intentional about inclusion, and facilitating the same. Plans are periodically reviewed, learnings are synthesised, and the programme is adapted to be deliberate on aspects of gender and social inclusion.	• There is a research agenda (funded and implemented) that captures evidence of progress on GESI and access to WASH services – on systemic bottlenecks and/or societal barriers in reaching everyone, capturing unintended harm, for improved decision-making. • Multi-stakeholder platforms, including rights holders and the private sector, are created to address/educate about GESI. • Simple language and relatable contextual examples are used to reiterate certain key concepts on GESI and WASH.

31   Ibid. pp. 26.

Guiding Principles

When planning or implementing GESI initiatives, certain general principles should be kept in mind. These are :

1. **Ensure contextual relevance**: As mentioned above, who is marginalised and how, plays out differently in different contexts. To be relevant, initiatives must be tailored to the specific context in which they are implemented.

2. **Set realistic goals**: While the aim may be to dismantle unequal power relations that create social barriers to accessing basic rights, it is crucial that the processes and targets set are realistic and achievable.

3. **Gradual integration**: Sometimes, it is more effective to gradually incorporate GESI initiatives into ongoing activities rather than introducing all changes at once.

4. **Assess current and desired states**: It is important to identify the current position and the desired state across the WASH systems factors on the GESI intervention scale, ranging from GESI blind to GESI transformative.

5. **Do no harm**: The intention of applying a GESI lens to systems strengthening efforts is to move actors (politicians, duty bearers, academicians, and rights holders) from a GESI aware (and sometimes GESI blind) state to a GESI transformative approach towards justice. This requires space for dialogue between actors such as government, civil society, and rights holders. However, there may be situations where well-intentioned actions are not socially, politically, or culturally appropriate, potentially harming marginalised and vulnerable groups, resulting in them getting even fewer services. For example, social accountability measures like public hearings may not be feasible in all contexts due to political situations. Therefore, it is essential to conduct a risk assessment of GESI interventions before implementation.

Conclusion

Putting gender equality and social inclusion at the heart of systems thinking is the only way to address inequalities and discrimination based on race, gender, socio-economic status, and other grounds. We cannot build thriving communities or deliver meaningful services if we fail to integrate the fundamental attributes of social inclusion in our systems work. By neglecting this integration, we continue to tolerate social injustice or remain blind to it. Whether intentional or inherited from societal structures, inequalities undermine the foundations of a healthy and prosperous society.

In this learning note, we highlight that while the systems approach intends to ensure safe and sustainable services to all, certain deliberate actions need to be included to achieve this. These actions include:

*   **Identifying marginalised groups**: Understanding who is marginalised in the context.
*   **Mapping stakeholders**: Identifying representatives and stakeholders (both government and non-government) who work with and understand the needs of these individuals/groups.
*   **Analysing political economy**: Understanding the political economy around gender and social inclusion in the local context to influence change effectively.
*   **Prioritising actions**: Prioritising the most relevant 'essential' and 'desirable' actions across the building blocks for short, medium, and long-term implementation.
*   **Interconnected building blocks**: Recognising that the building blocks do not work in isolation. To bring about certain changes, it may be necessary to work across multiple building blocks. Similarly, changes in one building block will influence other building blocks as well.

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