



Accelerating Gender-Inclusive Urban WASH A Call for Action

In collaboration with The Daily Star, WaterAid organised a roundtable on March 11, 2025, titled 'Accelerating Gender-Inclusive Urban WASH: A Call for Action.' The roundtable aimed to bring together experts, practitioners, and stakeholders to discuss the challenges and proposed solutions for gender-inclusive WASH in Dhaka. Below is a summary of the discussion along with key recommendations.

Hasin Jahan

Country Director, WaterAid Bangladesh
(Keynote Presentation)



The situation of Dhaka's WASH facilities is dire, especially for vulnerable groups. Consider the plight of flower sellers, beggars, female traffic police officers, or female construction workers who spend 10–12 hours outside daily. How do they access WASH facilities? And what about the 300,000 street vendors in Dhaka who need clean water and toilets while serving food? These pressing concerns demand immediate attention.

The city sees approximately 400,000 daily commuters, while over four million LIC dwellers live in 5,000 LICs—half of them women. Yet, there are only 641 public toilets, with just 116 managed by the city corporation. Some areas have water ATMs, but access remains insufficient. While Dhaka WASA supplies legal water connections to these areas through its Low-Income Community (LIC) unit for community-based organisations (CBOs) formed by LIC dwellers, there is no systematic toilet infrastructure. NGOs attempt to fill this gap, but coverage remains limited to 400–500 LICs, even with joint efforts.

To tackle this issue, we, a group of experts and practitioners, are developing a set of planning principles for an action plan to ensure WASH facilities in public spaces and low-income communities (LICs). We initiated a WASH plan for Ward 20, Zone 3, of the Dhaka North City Corporation, which includes Sattala LIC. Despite having 18 public toilets and two WASA water ATMs, only six toilets are functional. Our analysis revealed that 13 toilets would be sufficient, yet 18 exist in ineffective locations. Since six toilets are already functional, we need seven new ones to address this. However, restoring all 18 toilets could be a practical solution. With limited government resources and tax constraints, optimising their use is crucial for maximum impact.

To achieve this, we recommend that city corporations adopt four key steps. First, they should set minimum standards for public WASH facilities, ensuring they are clean, functional, safe and accessible. Second, implementing a management model with tariffs and a safety net for low-income users would help sustain operations while maintaining affordability. Existing models by WaterAid and Bhumijo provide successful examples of efficient operation and maintenance, ensuring proper management that can be replicated.

Public engagement is not just crucial, it's a game-changer. Introducing a user rating system for lease renewals, focusing mainly on women's feedback, would encourage better service quality and accountability among facility operators. Lastly, utilising existing spaces, such as mosques and fuel stations, to develop gender-inclusive toilet facilities under proper management would create safe and accessible sanitation options for all users.

We propose several key initiatives that have the potential to significantly transform the WASH situation in Dhaka. By installing water ATMs in LICs, we can provide residents with reliable access to clean water, reducing dependency on unsafe sources. Creating a low-cost blue-pink toilet model for both men and women would ensure safe sanitation, particularly for women and girls, while also serving as an alternative to open bathing. Lastly, encouraging corporate investment in sanitation infrastructure could significantly improve living conditions in LICs while enhancing corporate branding. These initiatives offer a beacon of hope for a better future.

A unified strategy among all authorities and institutions is not just important; it's crucial. Additionally, interim WASH solutions should be ensured for LIC dwellers until long-term housing plans are implemented. Ward 20 can serve as a scalable model, demonstrating that only through coordinated efforts can clean water and sanitation be established as universal rights.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PRESENTATION

1. Set minimum standards for public WASH facilities, including those in markets, fuel stations, mosques, and other public spaces, to ensure they are clean, functional, safe, and accessible.
2. Implement a management model with tariffs and a safety net for low-income users to sustain operations and maintenance while retaining affordability.
3. Introduce a user rating system for lease renewals of public toilets, prioritising women's and other marginalised people's feedback to improve service quality and accountability among facility operators.
4. Utilise existing spaces such as markets, mosques and fuel stations to develop gender-inclusive toilet facilities under proper management, ensuring wider accessibility.
5. Expand access to water in LICs by installing water ATMs. This will provide residents with a reliable and affordable supply, reducing dependency on unsafe sources.
6. Encourage corporate investment in sanitation infrastructure to improve living conditions in LICs and enhance corporate social responsibility and brand image.
7. Ensure coordination among institutions by aligning RAJUK's DAP and Dhaka WASA's master plan while implementing interim WASH solutions for LIC dwellers until long-term housing plans are in place.

Farhana Rashid

Chief Executive Officer, Bhumijo



When Bhumijo began working on public sanitation in 2016, we approached the Nur Mansion section of Gawsia Market, a women-centric space. We

proposed to the market committee that we renovate and manage an existing toilet, choosing Gawsia for its significance to women.

Despite data showing 40 female salespersons and up to 400,000 female visitors daily during Eid, the committee initially claimed that no women used the facilities. After negotiations, we were given 15 days for renovation and another 15 days for operation. If no women used the facility, we would restore it to its original state. However within months, the same committee requested upgrades for the men's toilets.

Policymakers must take sanitation seriously. Government institutions often resist opening facilities to the public. Additionally, we are not just service providers—we are deeply committed to a customer-centric approach. At the same time, we prioritise affordability and leverage digital collaboration to enhance accessibility and efficiency. Those of us on the ground will continue pushing for change, but policymakers must engage to make public sanitation genuinely inclusive.

Shamim Ara Shammi

Programme Manager, Operations,
Ultra-Poor Graduation Programme, BRAC



Over the past three months, a recurring issue in urban LIC community meetings has been the frequent damage of water and sanitation lines. As a result, residents often receive contaminated water instead of safe drinking water. Last month, I visited a LIC behind Pangu Hospital, which houses around 400 households. The water there had a foul odour, and many residents suffered from diarrhoea and other diseases.

Essential services are often taken for granted, but LIC residents—who sell vegetables, work in homes, and provide critical services—are deprived of basic needs. LICs exist within affluent areas like Banani and Dhanmondi, yet their residents remain invisible in policy and infrastructure planning. Our policies, infrastructure strategies, and review mechanisms must be more practical and inclusive.

Alauddin Ahmed

Project Manager, International Training Network
at Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology (ITN-BUET)



In Bangladesh, 18% of women fetch water, compared to only 4-5% of men, highlighting an apparent gender disparity. Similarly, sanitation responsibilities disproportionately

fall on women, who are also concentrated in lower-paying sanitation jobs, while higher-paid roles remain male-dominated.

True gender inclusivity means equal decision-making and access to resources. Yet, how often are women consulted when designing sanitation facilities? Their voices remain secondary at both institutional and household levels. Without addressing these disparities, discussions on gender-friendly policies remain empty promises.

Gender safety in WASH has two key dimensions: technological aspects such as functional toilet locks and broader community WASH initiatives. Sustainable and inclusive solutions require active involvement from all stakeholders.

Falguni Tripura

Member, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum



Urban sanitation challenges in Dhaka and beyond must address accessibility for marginalised communities, including indigenous women, trans-

gender individuals, and hijra communities. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, water scarcity worsens due to climate change, and inadequate school facilities often force young girls to skip school during menstruation. Poor housing designs further fail to consider hygiene needs.

Public sanitation remains inaccessible mainly to marginalised groups, such as disabled women and street vendors, who struggle to find WASH facilities. Beyond access, the lack of proper sanitation leads to violence—many indigenous women face assault simply while trying to use a toilet. This is not just a policy failure but a failure of social justice.

Fatema Begum

General Secretary, Nagar Daridra Basteeshashir
Unnayan Sangstha (NDBUS)



During menstruation, inadequate sanitation exacerbates the situation, with makeshift toilets offering no privacy, exposing women to further danger. Teenage

girls are often forced to bathe in semi-open spaces, making them vulnerable to harassment or worse. Victims are usually blamed, while perpetrators evade accountability.

As a representative of the Korail LIC, I am committed to securing legal water access for disadvantaged groups. With 80% of the poor suffering from water-borne diseases, we need well-planned, sustained strategies to address these challenges.

Salma Mahbub

General Secretary & Executive Director,
Bangladesh Society for the Change and
Advocacy Nexus (B-SCAN)



Since 2009, we have worked to improve sanitation facilities in key locations such as the National Museum, Dhaka University, and Mirpur Cricket

Stadium. Since 2011, our collaboration with WaterAid has prioritised accessibility in public toilets, yet the broader issue remains largely unaddressed. Many public toilets fail to meet the needs of disabled individuals, despite policies mandating universal accessibility.

Inconsistent standards across authorities and a lack of enforcement further hinder progress. Authorities and NGOs must involve us early to ensure public toilets are accessible. The Ministry of Social Welfare and other relevant ministries should also lead in this area.

Md. Fazlul Hoque

Deputy Chief Executive Officer,
Sajida Foundation



City corporations are responsible for sanitation, yet there is no clear accountability when restaurants, fuel stations, or workplaces fail to provide usable

toilets. Although the High Court recently ruled that individuals must receive at least 7.5 litres of water daily in emergencies, enforcement remains challenging. Financial institutions can play a role by incorporating sanitation compliance into financing agreements for entrepreneurs, especially in the restaurant and street food sectors. Ensuring access to sanitation requires urgent, multi-sector collaboration. Our microfinance institution (MFI) focuses on inclusive WASH, with plans to bring at least 1,000 restaurants into the sanitation programme for sustained hygiene and public health improvements.

Partha Shankar Saha

Assistant News Editor,
Prothom Alo



When we discuss urban issues, our focus is often disproportionately centred on Dhaka. However, new cities are emerging across Bangladesh. Are we considering

sanitation and hygiene challenges in these newly developing urban centres?

From a media perspective, I have noticed that discussions on gender-inclusive sanitation tend to peak around specific occasions, such as International Women's Day or World Water Day. Why do we only highlight these problems on special days? Do people not need clean water and sanitation every day? This raises a significant concern.

Mostafizur Rahman

National Programme Officer - Climate and
Environment, Embassy of Sweden



The term 'accelerating' implies that we need to intensify our efforts. However, we need to examine the existing gaps before focusing on acceleration. The

fact that we still have to advocate for these basic facilities demonstrates that gender and inclusivity are not yet embedded in urban planning.

Water and sanitation are not just women's issues—they affect everyone. WaterAid conducted a study revealing that women face significant harassment and violence when trying to access WASH facilities. Yet, these concerns are consistently overlooked. When sanitation facilities are designed, little thought is given to whether they will be genuinely accessible. We continue to design facilities without fully considering the diverse needs of all users.

We must assess whether existing policies truly serve everyone and require a fundamental shift in mindset. Gender inclusivity cannot be an isolated discussion—it must be part of a broader, more holistic approach to urban planning and public service design.

Meaningful private sector engagement depends on recognising how WASH aligns with business models. We are committed to reviewing existing laws and ensuring proper budget allocation to support this mission.