



Transforming gender roles in WASH for a feminist economic recovery

SNV's research in Nepal highlights how place-based gender and social norms, combined with environmental factors, triggered different gendered divisions of WASH-related care and domestic workloads in households during COVID-19. This research brief presents perspectives from Dailekh and Sarlahi districts, highlighting the importance of addressing norms around work, masculinity, family roles, and fears of social exclusion and loss of influence in sector approaches to encouraging the equitable redistribution of unpaid WASH work.

Around the world, women, young women, and girls bear an unequal burden for achieving Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) outcomes at a household level. Whilst practices vary, women, young women, and girls are largely responsible for the collection and safe use of water, improving water quality at the household level, maintaining food hygiene, cleaning toilets and play spaces, and promoting family hygiene through handwashing practice, appropriate management of menstrual hygiene, and the safe disposal of babies' faeces. Women often have primary responsibility for supporting the WASH needs of household members with a disability, older people, and children.

Inequitable distribution of WASH-related unpaid Care and Domestic (CAD) work directly affects women's, young women's, and girl's rights, status, health, safety, paid work, and social and leadership opportunities. Men's, young men's, and boy's limited engagement and responsibility for WASH outcomes in households is linked to sub-optimal health outcomes, poor decision making, and household conflict. Scalable sector-specific approaches are needed to foster more equitable norms, deliver on sector commitments to gender equality and inclusion, and stimulate inclusive economic recovery from COVID-19.

RESEARCH BRIEF (STAGE 1 OF 2)

During COVID-19 in Nepal, CAD work increased in many contexts due to larger household sizes, longer hours spent inside the home, and increased hygiene and health needs of family members. Paid work opportunities significantly declined and many men and women returned home to wait for the situation to change. The availability of unoccupied household members in the context of increased CAD work presented a unique opportunity to better understand the division of CAD work in households and identify entry points and approaches to encouraging more equitable labour division.

In response to this opportunity, SNV in Nepal undertook qualitative research in two locations in Nepal in 2021-2022, using a two-stage approach. The first stage, comprising three days of qualitative research activities in two different communities, explored norms, practices, and attitudes underpinning CAD work distribution and CAD work shifts during COVID-19 to identify potential pathways to address inequities. The second stage involved the development and trialling of potential WASH interventions that target inequality in CAD work over a five-week period. This research brief focuses on learning from the first stage.

Stage 1 approach

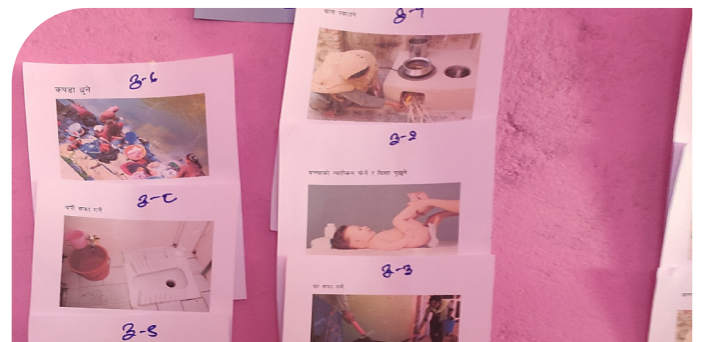
The research uses a feminist economy lens. Unpaid work is seen as a productive and essential contribution to the economy that is largely ignored, undervalued, and taken for granted. Inclusive economic recovery involves understanding the economic foundations of Nepalese communities, recognising and valuing both unpaid and paid work, and rebalancing economic opportunity, responsibilities, and benefits between people of different genders, castes, religions, disability, and other demographics.

Qualitative research activities were undertaken in two rural municipalities involved in the programme: mountainous Dailekh and Sarlahi, which is located in the lowland Terai region. The social and gender context differs significantly between these two locations. Women and men in Dailekh have higher access to education and a lower percentage of households in the lowest wealth quintile relative to Sarlahi. Larger, multi-generational households are more common in Sarlahi, and almost half the population in Sarlahi identify as Madhesi – a population

group living in the Terai, with a distinct culture, multiple languages, and a history of political marginalisation in Nepal. By contrast, almost half of the population of Dailekh identify as the highest caste in Nepal – the Brahmin and Chhetri.

Two one-day qualitative workshops were held in each location during September 2021, followed by 10 Key Informant Interviews (KII) in each location between October and November 2021. The first workshop targeted older people and the second targeted young people (under 35 years old). A total of 31 women and 15 men were involved in the workshops and 6 men and 11 women participated in KIIs. Workshop activities were organised in sex segregated groups and mixed sex plenary sessions to reduce risk of harm to women, maximise women's voice and input, and gather the different perspectives of women and men. Key WASH sector players, including officials from the rural municipality and health workers, were engaged in the research process. Representatives from diverse demographics were recruited for the workshop and KII activities, including people with disabilities, Dalits and communities living in poverty, health volunteers, CSO representatives, women entrepreneurs, water user committee members, and members of community groups.

A key tool used in the workshop to identify COVID-19 driven changes in economic activities was the 'Cassava Tree' tool - an adaptation of the International Women's Development Agency's floating coconut. The tool recognises paid and unpaid work and highlights the relative value placed on different types of work, opening discussions on equity and inclusion. For many participants, this tool provided their first opportunity to discuss how unpaid work contributes to survival and well-being of their households and communities. Other tools used within the workshops included ranking activities, facilitated discussions, role plays, and surveys.



Ranking of CAD work activities by older women. Photo credit: SNV/Sabitra Dhakal.

Stage 1 research findings

COVID-19-induced changes to economic activities

The impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on paid work, according to respondents, was significant. Most businesses, markets, and waged labour activities were closed, resulting in loss of income for both women and men and the mass return of family members from work sites away from home. In addition, schools closed and children were required to stay indoors. Men reported having significantly more leisure time, particularly in Sarlahi, and women reported a corresponding increase in men's drinking and anti-social behaviours.

Financial stress and resulting domestic violence were defining features of stories shared during the workshops and KII interviews in both locations. Expenses increased to support the needs of larger families. In addition to household necessities and food, families needed to buy newly mandated hygiene products such as soap, sanitiser, and masks. Many respondents described using their savings or taking informal loans from neighbours or through networks to cover costs of living; for some this compounded existing household debts. Poor and Dalit families reported significant deprivation, with limited to no savings, no access to cash work, and high barriers to access informal social support networks and information about COVID. Furthermore, they faced poor access to water and sanitation. Women, with responsibility for stretching finances to cover family needs, were reportedly subject to increasing levels of violence as resources dwindled.

Unpaid community work also significantly reduced. Weddings, funerals and cultural/religious functions, group meetings, and formal support networks and services were disrupted and restricted. In Sarlahi, the change in social context was marked; testimony from respondents suggest widespread fear, weakened social networks, and increased social exclusion during lockdown. This fear had implications for households trying to access loans, advice, and as shown in the following quote, even water:

There is lack of water. There is a need to go and fetch water from someone else's house and we get scolded. (Young man, Sarlahi)

Growing household sizes increased demand for unpaid WASH-related CAD work – typically undertaken by women in Nepal. The burden of cooking, washing dishes, cleaning the house,

washing clothes, caring for the sick, and assisting children and the elderly with toileting increased. Cultural practices relating to illness, and new and/or more frequent hygiene practices (e.g., washing hands or bathing) also contributed to the increasing care and domestic workload. For example, in Dailekh, participants described how the belief that boiled water is good for preventing illness resulted in an increase in the collection and boiling of water for the family's consumption.

The pandemic also saw women and men working together, some for the first time, to expand their vegetable gardens to provide food and making products they would typically buy, such as herbal remedies, chairs, and spice mixes. Some families purchased technology to reduce the burden of these tasks.

A household's ability to pivot from cash to subsistence activities during the lockdowns was dependent on resource and network availability. Dalits and poor families without any access to land, for example, reported sending their children to work on other people's land for food or relying on food packages provided by local government.

In both districts, women and men respondents of different ages described experiencing a new state of family harmony, a sense of collective responsibility, during COVID-19 lockdowns, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. In parallel, respondents also reported an increase in violence against women and a decreased access to domestic violence services and safehouses. Representatives of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD) reported people with disabilities also faced a high risk of violence and neglect during lockdown periods.

Gendered division of CAD work in Sarlahi during the COVID-19 pandemic

Women who move in with their in-laws after marriage (referred to here as 'married-in') in Sarlahi bear the brunt of care and domestic labour during COVID-19 lockdowns, according to respondents, with minimal support from mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, husbands, and sons. In addition to feeding, clothing, and cleaning up after the expanded household, women reported providing hands-on care to family members sick with COVID-19 and preparing health drinks (boiled water and turmeric water) and herbal remedies for all family members to stave off infection and serious illness.

Women's palpable frustration at men's sporadic CAD work engagement considering women's increased work is captured in this quote:

All they [men] do is eat and roam around the village. Some of them have helped in the household chores. (Older woman, Sarlahi)

According to research participants, care and domestic work is considered 'easy' and beneath men in Sarlahi. Men's and young men's Cassavas highlighted that they typically have a very limited role in any WASH-related CAD work. Older men listed only one WASH-related CAD task prior to COVID-19 - assisting children to wash their hands, and younger men also only listed one WASH-related CAD task - purchasing sanitary pads for their wife.

Men's CAD work increased during the pandemic but, according to several KII interviewees, this work was mostly supervisory and decision-making in nature, and sporadic at best. For example, men purchased medicine, masks, and sanitiser and ensured children did not leave the house during lockdown. Respondents suggested that when men assisted in household chores it was mainly due to boredom or from a sense of obligation given women's increased workload.



Older women in a role playing session. Photo credit: SNV/Sabitra Dhakal.

Barriers to men's engagement in WASH-related care and domestic work in Sarlahi

Women marry into Sarlahi's often large multi-generational households with a clear role: to undertake care and domestic work for the whole household. Parents-in-law, particularly mothers-in-law, can play a policing role over women's care and domestic work, maintaining standards, and determining when discipline is required. If women ask for help, it can be interpreted as a sign of laziness or trickery. The isolation and stress faced by married-in women is captured in this quote by a male KII respondent:

If the mother-in-law has a helping attitude, then she helps [the daughter-in-law with care and domestic work]. If not, they have to work from early morning until they sleep out of fear of being scolded. They have a lot of work pressure. There are no helping hands for her. (Young man, Sarlahi)

Gender norms also exclude and punish men for doing 'women's work', according to respondents. A man's own family, neighbours, and friends can accuse him of either becoming a woman, a transgender person, or to have fallen under a woman's control – all of which are significant insults given women's and gender-diverse people's lower status in society. Both women and men attributed men's poor CAD contributions to their fear of loss of status and respect. These fears are described in the quote below:

[Men face] fear of society, what if society will say something against them? Fear of the family, that the family will look down upon him. Fear of losing dignity in society and of negative gossip saying his words are not valued. (Adult woman, Sarlahi)

Fears of social backlash are also felt by women. Women, as mothers, wives, and mothers-in-law were described by several respondents as actively stopping husbands and sons from helping with CAD work. Whilst protecting men (and the broader family) from negative backlash, these actions serve to reinforce existing patriarchal norms and inequities.

Sarlahi participants were able to identify numerous positive benefits of sharing CAD work more fairly between men and women. Reduction in household conflict, increased mutual understanding, family harmony and happiness, and better outcomes for children were benefits recognised by all age and sex groups. Understanding the benefits, however, did not

Table 1: Perceived benefits of increased male involvement in CAD in Sarlahi

Perceived benefits identified by participants	Groups by age and sex			
	Young women	Young men	Older women	Older men
Time savings for women	•		•	•
Household efficiency		•		
Women will be able to access paid economic opportunities			•	•
Conflict and violence in family reduced	•	•	•	•
Relationships between men and children improve			•	
Children benefit from more time and attention from women and men	•	•	•	•
Working collectively, sharing responsibilities, and supporting each other	•	•	•	
Increased understanding, harmony, and happiness	•	•	•	•
Able to make family decisions that benefit everyone				•
Equality between women and men		•		

offset existing fears; the only gender and age group to strongly support the statement ‘men and young men should contribute more to care and domestic work in the household’ after the workshop was older men.

Identifying opportunities to reduce the burden of CAD on women

Participants ranked WASH-related CAD tasks by time consumption, level of perceived burden, and social acceptability for men, so that opportunities to reduce or redistribute these tasks could be explored. Older women workshop participants ranked cooking and washing clothes as their two most time-consuming CAD activities. Younger women selected helping older people and people with disability to bathe. Tasks considered difficult by women and young girls included those that were a health risk due to COVID-19 (cleaning children’s hands and bottoms and the toilet), bathing older people and people with disabilities (due to the difficulty of the task without appropriate supports), and cooking and cleaning.

When asked to list WASH-related care and domestic work tasks in order of acceptability, men’s and young men’s top five tasks did not align with the tasks women and young women found most difficult or time-consuming. Washing dishes, washing clothes, cooking, and changing nappies ranked very low on men’s and young men’s acceptable tasks lists. There were no

immediately obvious opportunities identified to redistribute time consuming or difficult tasks without significant resistance from men.

Shifts in gendered WASH-related CAD roles in Dailekh during the COVID-19 pandemic

Typically, women and girls are responsible for WASH-related CAD work tasks in Dailekh. During COVID-19 lockdowns, respondents described the gendered distribution of labour as significantly disrupted. In the initial period, respondents stated that men’s mobility in Dailekh was heavily controlled by police forces; many men had recently returned from jobs outside of Dailekh and were considered potential carriers of COVID-19. Women on the other hand, were less likely to have worked outside of Dailekh pre-COVID, so were considered relatively safe. The heavy policing of men’s movement meant that they could not complete tasks that they were typically responsible for, such as manual labour and selling and buying goods. This opened-up space to (temporarily) rework gender roles. In the words of a young man key informant:

During COVID, domestic work was done by men and outside work was done by women. During the lockdown for example, all the men in the community returned home and lived in isolation for a few weeks. During that time, the outdoor activities that men used to do such as farming, ploughing, digging for wages, selling

vegetables and goats, buying goods from the market, and earning cash were done by women. (Young man, Dailekh)

Men and young men were reported to wash clothes and dishes, look after children, care for the sick, and cook during this initial lockdown period - tasks typically undertaken by women and young women. While men continued to share this work after lockdown, women reportedly carried the larger burden and overall responsibility as captured in the following quote from a KII interview:

Men supported women to perform these [CAD] tasks, but still they think that women are primarily responsible for this. So, despite the help of men, such works have become very difficult for women. (Young man, Dailekh)

Barriers to men's engagement in care and domestic work in Dailekh

Similar to Sarlahi, respondents described women's role as to take care of the family and her husband. However, in Dailekh, men engaged in more and a greater variety of CAD work tasks prior to COVID-19 than men in Sarlahi. Water availability affects the burden of these tasks; in Sarlahi, most households have their own taps (ground water through handpumps) and in Dailekh, water is accessed through shared tap-stands (supplied through gravity-fed piped water supply systems).

Public opinion is also an important driver of the gendered status quo in Dailekh; respondents reported how men can be shamed and called 'daughter-in-law' when doing CAD work. Women participants expressed fear of loss of influence and importance in the family if CAD tasks, their main responsibility, are shared with men. Dailekhi men respondents appeared less concerned about public opinion than their Sarlahi counterparts. Furthermore, the role of mothers-in-law in supervising married-in women's CAD work was not a major theme of the Dailekh workshop, indicating that the practice may be less pervasive there. These factors likely underscore Dailekh's very different CAD work response to the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Commitment to further engagement in WASH-related CAD work beyond COVID-19 differed between men in each age bracket. Almost all older men felt that women's CAD workload was too high. Young men were less likely to see women's high workload - only half agreed that it

was too high. Young men were also more likely than older men to think violence was acceptable for disciplining women for under performance in CAD work. Regardless, almost all young men agreed with the statement 'Men and boys should contribute more to the care and domestic work in the household'. While both men and young men felt they should do more CAD work in their households, older men expressed more concerns about public opinion and saving face. According to workshop participants, male role models are likely to have limited impact on older men's choices, but a father's or peer's role modelling could be very impactful for younger men's role in WASH-related CAD work.

Comments by several male and female respondents indicate that CAD work is increasingly acceptable for men in Dailekh. For example, an older woman said:

For men, fetching water, shepherding, looking after the children, washing clothes, and especially farming have become acceptable. (Older woman, Dailekh)

Identifying opportunities to reduce the burden of CAD on women

Intersections between women's most difficult and time-consuming CAD tasks and men's list of acceptable CAD activities [see Table 2 on next page] illustrate potential for men's greater role in CAD work with positive impacts on women's time and health. Young men are amenable to cooking, which is the highest-ranking task on both older and younger women's list of time consuming and difficult activities. Water collection, cleaning the house, and cleaning clothes are acceptable tasks that also fall in women's priority lists. Similarly, three of the tasks chosen by older men as most acceptable align with women and young women's most time consuming and difficult tasks.

Promoting inclusive economic recovery through WASH services in rural Nepal

Inclusive recovery requires more equitable access to and responsibility for all work that contributes to wellbeing and survival - paid and unpaid. The research results show clearly that this is not possible without more equitable redistribution of WASH-related CAD labour between men and women in both locations. In-laws can act as gate keepers to women's cash work opportunities, with access conditional on their performance of CAD work tasks, as described by respondents in Dailekh. Newly married women in Sarlahi can be

Table 2: Top 5 rankings of CAD work activities by acceptability, time consumption, and difficulty according to different age and gender groups in Dailekh

Age group	Top 5 acceptable CAD roles according to men	Top 5 time-consuming CAD tasks according to women	Top 5 tasks ranked for difficulty during COVID according to women
Young (under 35)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cleaning the house Water collection Washing clothes Cooking Helping children wash their hands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking Washing dishes Wiping children’s bottoms Washing clothes Cleaning the house 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking Helping children wash their hands Wiping children’s bottoms Washing clothes Cleaning the house
Older (over 35)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cleaning the house Water collection Washing clothes Helping children wash their hands Cleaning the toilet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking Washing dishes Cleaning the house Washing clothes Water collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooking Washing dishes Cleaning the house Washing clothes Water collection

confined to their house by their husband or in-laws whilst ‘adjusting’ to their new life. Even as cash work opportunities, including WASH entrepreneurship opportunities, open-up post-lockdown, women’s high CAD workload and pervading gender and social norms mean that women will be less able to access this work without negative impacts on their health and safety.

Men’s limited role in unpaid work means that they are not fairly sharing responsibility for WASH-related health outcomes. Men’s increasing availability in households during lockdowns led to engagement in subsistence work but did not automatically extend to WASH-related CAD work. Stories from Dailekh show that less rigid gender norms can flex in response to contextual factors, but new behaviours will not necessarily become new norms unless reinforced and supported more broadly in society. In Sarlahi, even in an emergency context, men were constrained by unhealthy gender norms, watching from the sidelines, unable or unwilling to share the burden, as women’s workload increased and their health suffered. To add insult to injury, environmental stressors were increasingly taken out on women in the form of violence. The WASH sector will not be able to promote inclusive economic recovery unless these inequalities are addressed.

Introduction to Stage 2

In stage two of the research,¹ SNV developed and trialled interventions related to water sanitation and hygiene, suitable to each location, that engage both men and women in gender norms change around CAD work. A central component of these interventions was engaging young men and their family members to reframe masculinities, value unpaid work, build non-violent communication in households, and develop CAD work skills and family support for changes to gender roles. Local religious leaders were included in the process to challenge myths relating to menstrual hygiene that underpin women’s low status within households and communities and to act as positive role models to young men. These interventions, discussed in a separate Research Brief, present promising approaches to scale deep and affect norms change around WASH related CAD work.

SNV’s ongoing work in this space will focus on co-learning and embedding local and culturally competent solutions into the WASH services landscape. Not only will this lead to improved GEDSI and WASH outcomes, but it will also seek to open up space for a more inclusive economic recovery in Nepal.

¹ Stage 2 research experience and results are documented in SNV in Nepal, ‘Engaging men to transform gender roles in WASH’, *Research Brief, Stage 2 of 2*, The Hague, SNV, 2023, <https://snv.org/assets/explore/download/2023-NP-engaging-men-transform-gender-roles-wash-snv.pdf> (accessed 30 January 2023).

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Beyond the Finish Line – Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services

BFL – Inclusive and Sustainable Rural Water Supply Services in Nepal (2018-2022) aims to improve the health, gender equality, social inclusion, and well-being of 40,000 people in the rural districts of Dailekh and Sarlahi by supporting inclusive, sustainable, and resilient rural water supply services and hygiene promotion.

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Cover: Young men and women in a CAD workshop organised by SNV in Nepal. Photo credit: SNV/Sabitra Dhakal.



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