# Qualities of transformative leaders in WASH: A study of gender-transformative leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic

Diana Gonzalez[1]*, Naomi Carrard[1], Aastha Chhetri[2], Phetsakhone Somphongbouthakanh[3], Tshering Choden[4], Gabrielle Halcrow[5], Ratan Budhathoki[2], Ugyen Wangchuk[4] and Juliet Willetts[1]

[1]Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia, [2]SNV Nepal, Kathmandu, Nepal, [3]Independent Consultant, Vientiane, Laos, [4]SNV Bhutan, Thimphu, Bhutan, [5]SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, The Hague, Netherlands

**Introduction:** Equal access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) for all requires leadership that prioritises and drives inclusion. Inclusive WASH also presents opportunities to advance equality more widely, with WASH a pathway to meaningful participation and empowerment for diverse groups. The concept of gender-transformative leadership-which connects ideas of leadership to transformative models of gender equality in development theory that challenge prevailing power structures-is a relevant lens for exploring inclusive WASH. This article shares findings and reflections from a positive deviance study that aimed to investigate gender-transformative leadership in the WASH sector to explore (i) the factors shaping gender-transformative leadership and the characteristics of gender-transformative leaders; (ii) actions taken by gender-transformative leaders; (iii) the types of outcomes achieved; and (iv) ways to strengthen gender-transformative leadership.

**Methods:** The study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic and consisted of interviews with 19 leaders in Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Nepal. We developed a conceptual framework which considers leaders' (i) personal values and traits; (ii) leadership styles; (iii) actions; and (iv) outcomes, influenced by a range of (v) enabling factors and barriers.

**Results:** Leaders' personal values and traits included a strong learning orientation, social justice values, humility, courage, and altruism. Leadership styles were primarily empathetic, with leaders guided by a mission to lead by example and pursue equality in their professional and personal lives. Exploration of actions and outcomes revealed a range of inclusion-oriented WASH activities responding to pandemic-related challenges, with associated potential outcomes in shifting norms. However, validation of outcomes was not possible due to the study timeframe and complexity of tracing complex social change in a positive deviance study reliant on self-reporting. Analysis of enablers and barriers to gender-transformative leadership respectively emphasized the importance of educational opportunities and the persistence of traditional gender norms.

**Conclusion:** Findings contribute to the body of knowledge on gender-transformative leadership, being the first study to connect this concept to WASH. Future research could build further evidence by applying the conceptual framework to analyze additional contexts or sectors, and by more fully articulating and validating outcomes in terms of their potential for gender-transformative leadership to drive equality both in and beyond WASH.

## Introduction

Gender-transformative leadership is key to driving inclusion and equality in and beyond water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. It comprises part of a social-inclusion perspective that recognises the importance of both leaving no one behind in access to services, and the potential for WASH to drive inclusion and empowerment more widely. Strengthening WASH services can be a pathway to gender equality by challenging norms, creating opportunities for meaningful participation and addressing inequitable distribution of household tasks (Willetts et al., 2010; Sam and Todd, 2020). Access to WASH has been shown to create leadership and economic opportunities for women and people with disabilities (Indarti et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2021; Huggett et al., 2022). When intentionally designed to challenge harmful social norms and structural inequalities, WASH has also demonstrated potential to drive gender equality more generally. A recent study found strong associations between gender equality related to WASH and other aspects of life beyond WASH, particularly related to women's and men's agency (Gonzalez et al., 2022). Such approaches to WASH are now widely referred to as gender-transformative, bringing feminist theoretical perspectives to bear such that WASH activities have potential to drive both inclusion and wider equality (MacArthur et al., 2020, 2022).

To realise the dual aims of inclusive WASH and transformative change, leadership is required that challenges the status quo and builds momentum towards greater equality. Such forms of leadership can be termed transformative or transformational leadership. Initially defined by Burns (1978), the concept of transformational leadership was presented as an alternative to transactional leadership. Transformational leadership offered a model of leaders who engaged motives, worked to improve their team's capabilities, were visionary and sought systems change (Burns, 1978, as cited in Stewart, 2006; Hawkins et al., 2022). The concept has been discussed with reference to education, where 'instructional' leadership models focused on goals and curriculum are contrasted with

transformational leadership focused on restructuring and improving school conditions (Stewart, 2006). Transformational leadership has also been widely explored in organisational research, where transformational styles have been associated with organisational effectiveness in diverse institutions (Bass, 1999).

More recently, transformative leadership has emerged as a progression of transformational leadership that emphasises the connections between beliefs, actions, and inclusive outcomes. Transformative leadership ideas draw on Burns' foundational work, but rather than focusing on outcomes of effectiveness and efficiency, transformative leadership theory places greater emphasis on beliefs and actions that challenge inequity and promote inclusion (Shields, 2020). Transformative leadership also recognises leadership as a diffuse and collaborative process, as characterised by (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018, p. 319): *"[t]he basic premise of transformative leadership is that everyone can lead, and that particularly in this transformative moment, everybody contributes to, and in fact co-creates, the world we live in, whether conscious of their agency or not."* The idea that leadership can be exercised in relational and non-hierarchical ways sees leaders as diverse agents of change, with transformative leaders those that pursue equity and inclusion both within and through their roles.

The clear connections between 'transformative leadership' and 'gender-transformative' concepts have sparked interest in the potential for 'gender-transformative leadership' to drive gender equality, most notably in health and development fields. From the health sector, Hawkins et al. (2022) propose a definition of gender-transformative leadership as *"leadership which seeks to address gender inequities in power which perpetuate and reinforce inequities across different systems and structures of oppression"* (Hawkins et al., 2022, p. 6). The definition draws on the work of Keeling et al. (2018) who also emphasise that rather than placing the burden of change on women to 'lean in' to roles they have been excluded from, gender-transformative leadership aims to address the biases and discriminatory practises that perpetuate deep-rooted structures of inequality. Beyond the health sector, similar concepts have

been used by UN Women in leadership training offerings, which define gender-transformative leaders as those *"who empower themselves and their organizations to pay close attention to gender power structures and discriminatory practices—both formal and informal—in order to advance gender equity in their organizations as well as in the communities and constituencies they serve"* (UN Women, as cited in Jhpiego Corporation, 2020, p. 1).

As the WASH sector progresses its thinking about gender transformative approaches (MacArthur, Forthcoming), it is timely to explore the role of gender-transformative leadership in driving inclusion both within and through WASH initiatives. To date, there has been limited exploration of gender-transformative leadership in the WASH sector, with few documented examples. One—an analysis of Oxfam's programming in Africa (across WASH and other sectors)— found that transformative leadership advanced women's rights by prompting critical discussion about deeply held values and prejudices (Brown et al., 2019). Another example analysed participatory water management structures in Brazil from a feminist transformative leadership perspective, finding that participatory approaches may facilitate women's political involvement (Moraes and Perkins, 2007). Beyond WASH, gender-transformative leadership has been given focus in health (e.g., Keeling et al., 2018; Hawkins et al., 2022), though this work tends to conflate gender-transformative leadership with women's leadership. While women's leadership is a crucial component of transformative change, assuming the two are equivalent may obscure opportunities for gender-transformative leadership to be conceived as a process through which everyone can co-create more equal societies. As such, there is an opportunity to build on evidence about the potential for gender-transformative leadership to advance gender equality both in and through WASH programs, exploring the role of leaders in challenging unequal power dynamics and striving for greater equality.

The COVID-19 pandemic context presents both barriers and opportunities for gender-transformative leadership in WASH. On one hand, the highly gendered nature of the pandemic (Simba and Ngcobo, 2020; Wenham et al., 2020; Herten-Crabb and Wenham, 2022) has highlighted how structural inequalities continue to impact women's roles and experiences. On the other, the disruptions brought by the pandemic and responses present opportunities for social innovations that can drive transformative change (Montgomery and Mazzei, 2021). The central importance of WASH in pandemic response and preparedness is clear from a health perspective (Howard et al., 2020; Donde et al., 2021). Yet less attention has been given to the ways in which COVID-19, WASH, and gender-transformative concepts interconnect. A key question is how to leverage the changes brought by rapid pandemic responses to strengthen and create opportunities for gender-transformative leadership, both in and through WASH.

This article shares a study of gender-transformative leadership in WASH undertaken in three countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study contributes evidence on the characteristics and actions of gender-transformative leaders working in a variety of WASH roles, exploring how leaders' values, relational styles and actions might contribute to inclusion within and through WASH-related activities. We first describe the study's positive deviance approach, which sought to generate knowledge and learning while also celebrating and inspiring gender-transformative leadership through the research process. As part of the approach, we present the conceptual framework that guided questions and analysis, which offers a replicable frame for engaging with the characteristics, outcomes and contextual dynamics of gender-transformative leadership. Findings are presented and discussed across three dimensions: characteristics of gender-transformative leaders, considerations for strengthening gender-transformative leadership, and participant and researcher reflections on the research approach.

## Approach

This qualitative study of gender-transformative leadership in WASH was undertaken in Bhutan, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), and Nepal during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. The study adopted a positive deviance approach (Bradley et al., 2009), purposely seeking leaders identified as operating in a gender-transformative manner. We also drew on strengths-based research ideas, eliciting success stories and seeking to inspire positive action. The approach built on a previous application of strengths-based approaches for evaluation of gender-WASH dynamics (Willetts et al., 2013). By taking a positive deviance approach, and inspired by strengths-based approaches, the team aimed to celebrate and recognise the participating leaders for their contributions to gender equality in or through WASH and to generate useful insights that might support other gender-transformative initiatives, much needed for recovering from the various negative impacts of the pandemic.

We also sought alignment with the transformative research paradigm (Creswell, 2014), which promotes social justice and demands conducting research *with*, instead of research *on* participants. Transformative research ideas were applied by inviting and supporting participating leaders to contribute to, review, and co-develop outputs, as well as co-defining ways in which the research could be beneficial to them through sharing their stories and promoting their achievements with the wider international WASH sector. As such, we produced a diversity of non-traditional research outputs targeting different audiences that shared leaders' experiences in their own voices. The outputs included a visual research report UTS-ISF and SNV, 2021a, a learning brief UTS-ISF and SNV, 2021b), a series of six blog

stories featuring two selected leaders from each country (e.g., Kumar et al., 2021b) and accompanying video stories (SNV and UTS-ISF, 2021a), two presentations at an international conference, and a webinar.

To ensure the rigour and validity of this qualitative study, we employed criteria for qualitative research quality, namely: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and reflexivity. In particular, in this article we have included many direct quotes from participants to contribute to dependability and confirmability and substantiate our findings, and have made transparent our methodology and the research context to support credibility and transferability. Reflexivity was supported by ensuring a diverse research team, conducting team sensemaking processes and including researcher reflections in this article. A complementary approach would be to employ quantitative measures of transformative leadership. This was not appropriate or possible due to the lack of agreement around such indicators, and concerns that current measures have a limited theoretical basis and are generally designed for examining leadership in the private sector (Jensen et al., 2019).

This study was conducted in partnership between researchers from the University of Technology Sydney's Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) and WASH practitioners from SNV in each country. Both organisations had pre-existing and long-standing relationships and took a collaborative approach to the research. SNV had a long-term presence in each country implementing WASH programmes with a strong emphasis on systems strengthening and working with government and non-government sector leaders in each country. This study was based on local knowledge and experience and sought to strengthen SNV's responses and coordination mechanisms in each of the three countries. This study was conducted under the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund, as part of their COVID-19 initiatives to support the response and recovery across Asia and the South Pacific.

Each step of the process (Figure 1) was influenced by the collaborative research partnership, from identifying the research need, to co-designing the research approach, to undertaking the different research activities related to data collection and analysis, and lastly to co-producing research outputs. This co-production approach was designed to ensure quality research that also had potential to facilitate learning for all involved (Winterford, 2017; Pereira et al., 2020).

## Study aims

This study aimed to investigate gender-transformative leadership in the WASH sector to identify and explore: (i) the factors that shape gender-transformative leadership and the characteristics of gender-transformative leaders; (ii) the actions gender-transformative leaders take and how they carry them out; (iii) the types of outcomes gender-transformative leadership can achieve; and (iv) the ways in which gender-transformative leadership can be strengthened. As described above, through an explicit transformative, positive deviance approach, the research also sought to inspire other leaders, current and emerging, to adopt gender-transformative approaches.

## Study contexts

This study was conducted as part of SNV's Beyond the Finish Line (BFL) programme, a five-year multi-country programme (2018–2022) funded by the Australian Government's Water for Women Fund. The BFL programme aimed to improve rural WASH services in Bhutan, Lao PDR, and Nepal, and adopted country-specific approaches based on country priorities. The programme took a systems strengthening approach and a strong focus on gender equality and social inclusion, in alignment with the Water for Women Fund objectives. Implementation of the BFL programme took an area-wide approach in each country fostering local government leadership, collaborating with rights-holders organisations, and engaging with leadership at the national level.

In Bhutan, the BFL programme focused on working with local leaders to improve inclusion and equality in and through WASH, through initiatives such as 'leadership for change' and 'making rights real'. The programme employed technical support and evidence-based advocacy combined with knowledge and learning processes to strengthen the capacity and performance of three national and eight sub-national government authorities and two civil society partners in eight districts. In four of the eight districts, the programme focused on leveraging political commitments, decentralisation, and cost-sharing mechanisms to achieve area-wide access and usage of WASH services for all, including households, schools, and institutions. In the remaining four districts, the programme focused on going 'beyond the finish line' of open defecation-free status, which included institutionalising strategies to ensure duty bearers and services had improved capacity to identify, reach and respond to the needs of potentially disadvantaged groups including people with disabilities, female-headed households, the elderly, and the poorest households. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in delays in programme activities. There were no COVID-19 outbreaks in Bhutan while the study was being conducted. As part of the national COVID-19 response, SNV supported new handwashing stations and worked closely with local governments.

In Lao PDR, the implementation of the BFL programme focused on supporting the provincial and district authorities in three districts of Savannakhet Province, working with existing systems and resources to strengthen rural sanitation in vulnerable flood-prone areas. In each district the programme was implemented by teams comprising officials from public

**FIGURE 1**
Study flowchart.
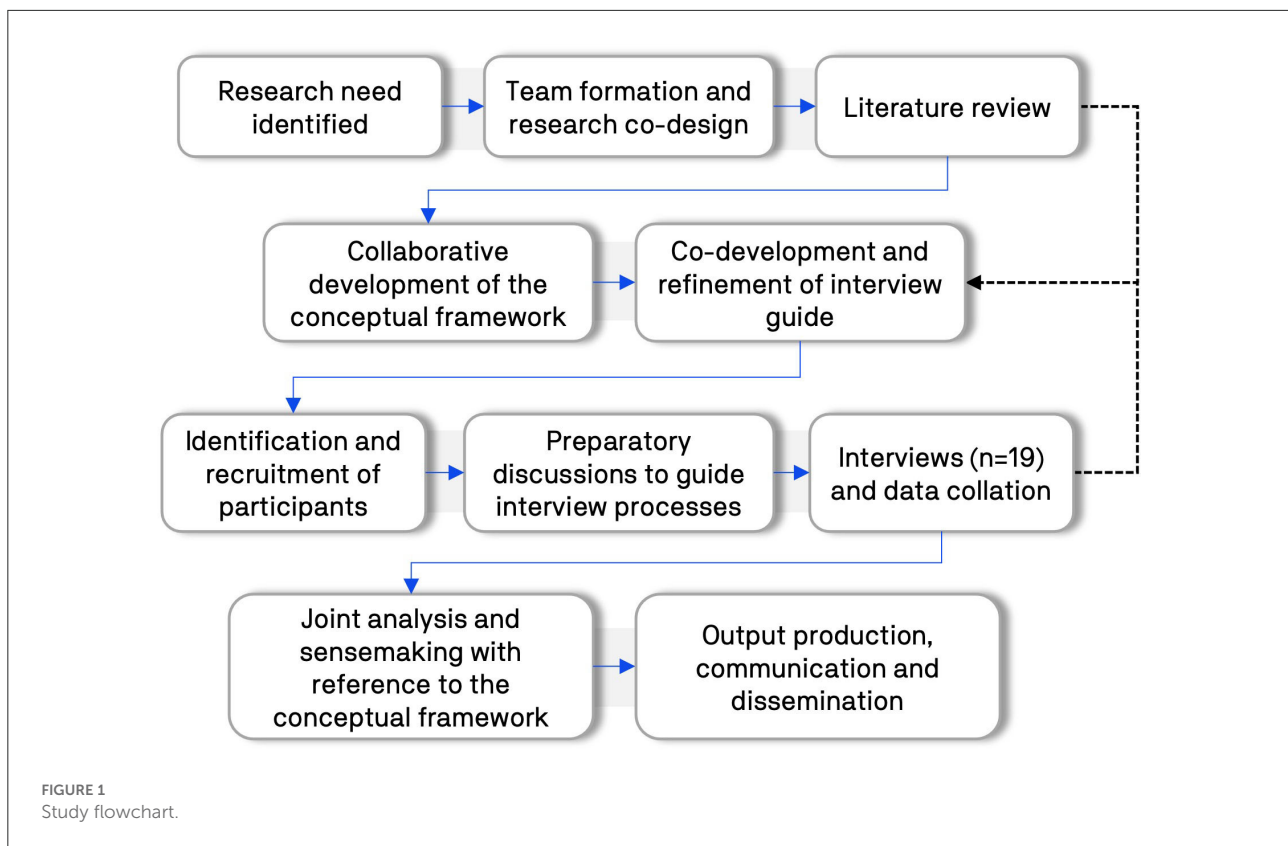
health, education, planning, the women's union, and the youth union. With an emphasis on capacity strengthening for government officials, activities included gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) training, technical support and coaching in forms designed to enable government leadership. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Savannakhet province had the highest number of cases and was affected by lockdowns and other restrictions. SNV supported government pandemic response initiatives including a communication campaign on the importance of soap, safe handwashing, and other protective measures against COVID-19.

Implementation of the BFL programme in Nepal focused on working with the newly formed local government (Rural Municipalities) through water supply operators and support service providers, and with civil society and rights-holder groups to capacitate and build strengthened WASH sector systems. The programme leveraged the opportunity of government decentralisation to develop inclusive, sustainable, and resilient water supply services in eight rural municipalities in Dailekh and Sarlahi Districts as role models for inclusive WASH services. The programme paid special attention to the inclusion of people from sexual and gender minorities and people with disabilities. This was based on an aspiration to include and promote the leadership and voice of such often socially excluded groups

with the intent that this would result in gender and social inclusion outcomes. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, SNV continued its commitment to strengthen governance in WASH through continuous coordination and collaboration with local governments and took actions to provide immediate relief. These actions included designing and installing foot-operated disability-inclusive handwashing stations, outreach campaigns to people at risk of marginalisation, delivering awareness communication campaigns in communities, and promoting online platforms for dissemination of information to support local governments.

## Conceptual framework

We developed a conceptual framework to inform interview questions and guide analysis. The framework was based on a rapid review of academic and other literature on transformative leadership and gender-transformative leadership. Aligning with the ideas that leadership is diffuse and relational (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018), and connected to social justice-oriented beliefs (Shields, 2020), the framework spans personal, relational, and action-oriented dimensions. It comprises five components: (i) personal values and traits, (ii) leadership style, (iii) actions, (iv) outcomes and (v) enablers and barriers (Figure 2). The

**FIGURE 2**
Conceptual framework.
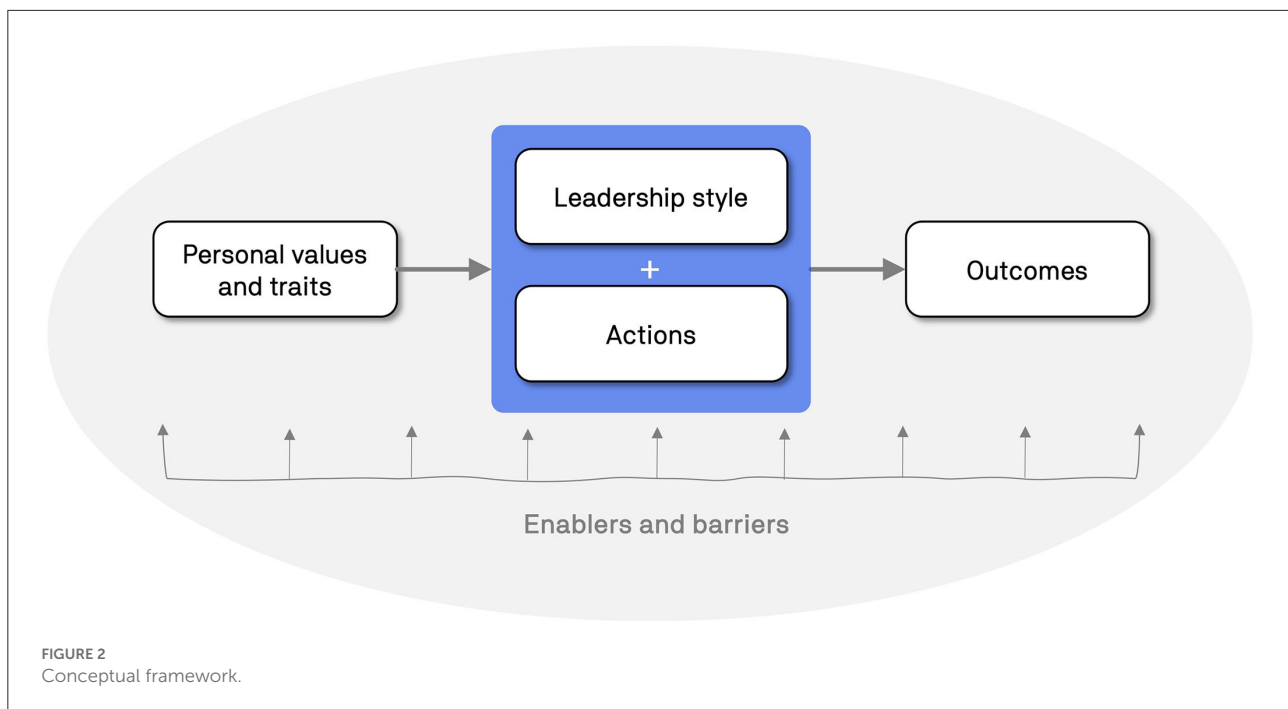
framework reflects a simplified theory of change in which personal values of a leader drive their leadership styles and actions, which in turn generate WASH and gender-transformative outcomes. Contextual enablers and barriers mediate all stages of the process and operate at multiple levels from individual circumstances through to organisational cultures, social norms, and structural factors. We acknowledge that reality is inevitably more complex and iterative, given that social change is rarely linear and can be shaped by multiple interconnected and unpredictable factors. Yet in designing the framework a key consideration was balancing conceptual rigour with practical usability as determined by research partnership team discussion. This approach aligns with a pragmatic research orientation that justifies shaping social inquiry as appropriate to the pursuit of normative goals (Kaushik and Walsh, 2019).

Including **personal values and traits** recognises the fundamental role of values in driving transformative action (Brown et al., 2019) and combines aspects of what Montouri and Donnelly (2018) refer to as a leader's 'way of being' and 'way of knowing'. Exploring leaders' worldviews, consciousness and personal principles offers the opportunity to identify whether particular values commonly underpin transformative leadership, and how these manifest in leadership styles and actions.

**Leadership styles** describe how a leader conducts themself and communicates with others. **Actions** refer to what a leader actually does in their role. The rationale for distinguishing leadership styles from actions is that modes of engagement critically shape transformative leadership

*"as an 'everyday, everyone, everywhere' relational process"* (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018, p. 322). Exemplifying the everyday practises and processes, actions offer tangible examples of how leadership is exercised to achieve change. While the boundaries are inevitably overlapping given the inextricable nature of styles and actions, leadership styles broadly align with Montouri and Donnelly's (2018) conception of a leader's 'way of relating', while actions reflect their 'way of doing'.

**Outcomes** refer to the changes that occur as a result of a leader's actions and leadership style. Outcomes of gender-transformative leadership might include changes in rules, policies, formal institutions, systems, structures, and decision-making (Brown et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2019a). Outcomes can be individual or collective and can span practical or strategic interests (after Moser, 1993). An important consideration is that outcomes may be intangible and challenging to comprehensively map, given the conceptualisation of transformative leadership as involving small actions with cumulative effects (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018).

Lastly, **enablers and barriers** capture the contextual dynamics that influence a leader's values, style, actions, and associated outcomes. Such dynamics include diverse and dynamic personal, collective, relational, and structural factors and experiences. We include contextual factors in the framework in recognition of their potential to drive or undermine gender-transformative leadership in different places and points in time. We also specifically included barriers to identify and acknowledge the challenges (e.g., norms and exclusionary

practises) that gender-transformative leaders must grapple with when seeking to influence change towards greater equality.

## Data collection

We conducted 19 in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders across the three countries between January and April 2021. The relevant SNV country teams identified the participants, with a primary criterion focused on leaders who were considered to positively contribute to gender transformations in the WASH sector in their local contexts. We also aimed to ensure representation of a diverse group of leaders. The relevant guiding criteria included a broad definition of leadership (both formal and informal leaders), leaders with experience working in WASH or health, ensuring at least two genders represented, a spread of emerging, mid-career and senior leaders, people with disabilities, and minority and majority ethnic groups where relevant.

Question prompts are provided in the Supplementary material. The interviews sought to evoke personal stories and reflections, in line with our conception of transformative leadership as combining personal with social ways of being and relating (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018). We asked participants about themselves and their roles, their experience of gender leadership during the COVID-19 response, their personal perspectives on leadership, leaders' visions for gender equality and ideas for enabling gender-transformative leadership, and next steps for the research, including how the team could make the research beneficial to them. Responses were recorded through written notes as well as audio recordings.

All the interviews were conducted by the local SNV teams in the participants' local language, and one interview was conducted jointly by SNV and UTS-ISF in English. Where possible, the interviews were conducted in person, taking the necessary precautions to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University of Technology Sydney prior to data collection, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Acknowledging the potential sensitivity of the discussions and the positions of several leaders as having lived experiences of barriers to leadership, interviewers were trained on ethical research principles and approaches, and briefed on appropriate responses to participant distress. Participants reviewed and approved the research outputs before publication, including seeking permission to use some quotes in this paper with identification of relevant leaders.

## Data analysis and sensemaking

All the interview data were translated into English and transcribed by the interviewers. We manually coded the transcribed data in Microsoft Excel by first using a deductive analysis approach derived from the conceptual framework to categorise data into the five main framework components. We then used an inductive approach to identify the emerging themes within each component. We undertook a frequency analysis to identify stronger themes. In the thematic analysis we disaggregated responses from men and women leaders to understand differences or alignment between groups. Thematic analysis was undertaken by two researchers to check for consistency and divergence in interpretation.

Following the initial thematic analysis, we conducted an online sensemaking workshop with the three-country research team to (i) share, discuss and validate the preliminary findings; (ii) create space for a group reflection on the research and its implications for the WASH sector; and (iii) decide on the approach to share draft documentation with participants to seek their feedback and approval to use selected quotes.

## Results and discussion

In this section we present and discuss findings from the interviews with 19 leaders and research team collaborative sensemaking. We first present insights on the characteristics of gender-transformative leaders, followed by values, styles, actions, and outcomes. We then discuss considerations for strengthening gender-transformative leadership arising from our exploration of enablers, barriers and leaders' visions. Finally, we reflect on the research approach as a collaborative means to inspire and strengthen gender-transformative leadership, before reflecting on limitations and challenges.

When illustrating findings with research data in the form of quotes, we have attributed some quotes to participants where permission was given to do so, and with a view to profiling and celebrating the leaders involved. Where quotes include sensitive information, we have de-identified the contributions.

### Characterising gender-transformative leaders

The participating leaders worked in a range of organisations and played diverse roles in the WASH sector. They included three leaders in national government positions (one woman and two men), seven in sub-national government positions (four women and three men), five in local rights-holders organisations (three women and two men), and four NGO workers (one woman and three men). Four of the 19 leaders were people with disabilities, and one worked for an organisation for people with disabilities. Participating leaders were between 19 and 65 years old, and the median age of participants was 40. Six of the leaders held senior leadership positions, nine were mid-level, and four

|        | Bhutan | Lao PDR | Nepal | Total |
|--------|--------|---------|-------|-------|
| Women  | 2      | 5       | 2     | 9     |
| Men    | 3      | 1       | 6     | 10    |
| *Total*| *5*    | *6*     | *8*   | *19*  |

were early career leaders. Only two genders were represented, with the gender breakdown by country shown in Table 1.

## Personal values and traits

The data showed compelling evidence of strong social justice and feminist values among gender-transformative leaders, with all 19 participants expressing a desire to do right by those in positions of disadvantage, particularly during the response to COVID-19. Participants linked these values to personal experiences. In some cases, direct personal experiences of discrimination relating to disability or gender shaped justice-oriented values, in other cases they were connected to observed instances of disadvantage. One participant shared:

> *"In the community, women are discriminated against by family. They face violence in the house. I also faced discrimination and violence from my in-laws. I want to stop violence toward women. Hence gender equality and inclusion issues became my priority."*- Participating leader

Related to these values, leaders expressed that striving for equality was central to the work they did, linking their daily work to the pursuit of wider social change.

Leaders also demonstrated a strong learning orientation (12 of 19 participants), expressing openness to learning from others and curiosity about new ideas, and framing life-long learning as critical for being a good leader. One respondent said:

> *"One needs to want to lead with an attitude to learn [...] I openly acknowledge that I don't know everything and I'm willing to listen and learn from others. It's always important to keep doors open to learning and creating an environment for all to learn and thrive."* - H.E. Dechen Wangmo, Minister of Health, Government of Bhutan

Another participant with similar views shared:

> *"I am a person who likes to learn. I like to try new things, learn from others and reflect about myself. Now, I have better experience in leadership and I guide others, but I do not stop learning. If I do not learn, I cannot perform the leadership tasks well. For example, when COVID came, I learned from young staff in my team how to use Zoom, WhatsApp and*

*meeting online, and new knowledge on COVID."* - Chomsy Ngamvilay, Deputy Head of the Atsaphone District Health Office, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

Humility was linked to a learning orientation, with leaders expressing traits of being open to learning from others, aware of diffuse expertise and seeing themselves as enabled by the people around them.

Some leaders were driven by a wish to prove themselves (eight participants), a trait most commonly reported by women leaders or leaders with a disability. While the situation of leaders reporting this characteristic attests to their sense of agency, the finding also suggests they experience the burden of breaking barriers in contexts where social norms continue to prescribe leadership as predominantly the domain of men and able-bodied people (as described by Ryan and Haslam, 2007). Respondents shared:

> *"Women themselves also need to prove that they can be a leader."* - Participating leader
> *"I wanted to show the community that people with a disability can do everything."* - Rajesh Sahani

Other common attributes that emerged from the data were self-reflection, courage, trustworthiness, altruism, the ability to inspire, motivate and mobilise others, and being a role model for others. Having excellent communication skills as demonstrated by being a good listener, eloquence, and delivering clear and consistent messages were also highlighted. Additionally, optimism in the face of challenges, which had a positive effect on others, as well as working with dedication, passion and commitment were seen as important leadership traits by participants.

The range of values and traits identified in our sample of leaders broadly aligned with those described in literature on transformative leadership and leadership for women's rights—particularly the social justice orientation and feminist values (Brown et al., 2019). A social justice orientation also speaks to Montouri and Donnelly's (2018) 'way of being' that emphasises the role of transformative leaders as continuously creating the world around them, while a humble learning orientation suggests reflective capability and openness to uncertainty in alignment with a transformative leadership 'way of knowing' (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018).

## Leadership styles

The leadership styles of gender-transformative leaders were primarily empathetic (12 of 19 participants), particularly during the COVID-19 response. Styles were shaped by and reflected the above-mentioned values including altruism, social justice, equality, and working with dedication, passion, and

commitment. The pandemic highlighted the gaps and needs of people at risk of exclusion and marginalisation, to which the participating leaders responded by prioritising said populations, specifically, women victims of gender-based violence, the elderly, and people with disabilities. During the COVID-19 response participating leaders also reported prioritising supporting their staff to ensure their wellbeing.

Gender-transformative leaders were also found to lead by example (11 leaders) and to pursue equality in their professional and personal lives, which was associated with the traits of being a role model and motivating and mobilising others, as described above. One respondent said:

> "Gender equality and social inclusion have become a very important issue for me. In fact, when I worked in the community, I handled many cases of violence against women which was much related to household roles and responsibilities. The women complained about being overloaded with work and faced violence when they were not able to complete the work on time. Initially, to mitigate such problems, I used to conduct orientation and training programs only for women. But then I realised that this is not the best option to reduce violence against women, so I started bringing both men and women together in one place to train them on equal responsibility for men's and women's household chores, gender equality and gender balance. The result was very positive which encouraged me to work in GESI as well as to change my behaviour. I started to support my wife in household chores. My family now teases me for working in the kitchen, as I would otherwise never enter the kitchen a few years back. When people of the community inquire if I myself apply what I say in my own home, I gladly respond that I do."
> - Madan Kumar Barma, Project Coordinator, SNV Nepal

Another respondent said:

> "I have never stopped raising my voice for women and marginalised people in my society as well as in my home." - Ambika Yadav, Sarlahi District Coordinator, SNV Nepal

The leadership styles identified were generally underpinned by teamwork, with six leaders reporting they led with an 'open door' policy to welcome new ideas and collaboration. Over a third of leaders demonstrated inclusive leadership styles by involving and giving voice to others, as well as actively seeking others' input and participation and not elevating their own status. These styles were linked to the values of humility and a learning orientation described above. One leader stated:

> "I firmly believe that everybody, irrespective of who they are, has things to contribute. Valuing other people's potential and always keeping my door open to my subordinates,

> *nourishing the relationships that support my leadership is important to me.*" - H.E. Dechen Wangmo, Minister of Health, Government of Bhutan

Gender-transformative leadership styles were shaped by goal- and vision-orientations (seven participants) and over a third of leaders demonstrated strategically influencing people at both the community and government levels in order to effect change. Participants enacted persuasive leadership styles (six of 19 participants) by building consensus and convincing others to see the importance of gender equality and social inclusion in their own work. This sometimes led to criticism and backlash within communities and among peers, which leaders were equipped and experienced to manage, with some leaders expressing feeling energised by and not shying away from these challenges.

Less common leadership styles that emerged from the research included leadership of self (four of 19 leaders), which involved self-reflection and actively seeking feedback from others. Two leaders demonstrated risk-taking leadership styles, linked to the value of courage. Lastly, adaptive management styles and having flexible plans without compromisin the overall goal were also highlighted by two leaders.

The gender-transformative leadership styles identified at the time of the research aligned with those outlined in gender-transformative literature, which describes gender-transformative leadership styles as motivating, caring, collaborative and collective (Brown et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2019a; Fuhrman and Rhodes, 2020). Styles also matched a transformative 'way of relating' that rejects binary oppositions (e.g., leader/follower) and pursuit of the creation of mutual benefit (Montouri and Donnelly, 2018). A particular contribution of our study is the inclusion of men demonstrating transformative leadership styles, which offers empirical examples of cases where such styles—often described as 'feminine' leadership attributes (Billing and Alvesson, 2022; Saseanu et al., 2014)—can be enacted by women or men in all their diversity for the progression of gender transformations. As such, this research affirms the value of having all genders engaged as leaders in the realisation of women's rights and gender equality and inclusion (Brown et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2019a; Meagher et al., 2020).

## Actions

Illustrative actions taken by gender-transformative leaders were captured in the form of stories and specific examples of efforts leaders had made to ensure that their work was gender-transformative and supported social inclusion, particularly during COVID-19. All the leaders shared compelling stories of actions they had undertaken, which were closely aligned

with the personal values and traits and leadership styles previously described.

Leader's actions were diverse. Actions within government included enabling women's participation in the workplace through building a breastfeeding room in a public government office and supporting younger women in the workplace to move up into higher roles and leadership positions in local government. Other actions included championing gender mainstreaming into public health and WASH work at the local government level, providing mentorship to younger staff, and seeing value in building others' skills and knowledge up. Importantly, actions included involving men in gender-related training and activities because *"it is not just about telling men, but also about involving them"* (Participating leader, man). Encouraging men's participation was also a strategy to manage resistance and backlash to gender transformations and to start conversations about gender equality together. Finally, a leader reported placing the vulnerable at the centre of the COVID-19 response by mobilising teams to call all the elderly people in the country, ensuring their safety and well-being during the pandemic.

A particularly compelling story of gender-transformative actions during the pandemic is one from a participant from Nepal (Box 1). Her actions highlight her efforts to improve WASH services for all during the pandemic, and reflect her personal journey of overcoming personal barriers and limitations within a conservative community with strong patriarchal norms.

## Outcomes

The outcomes achieved through gender-transformative leadership were difficult to ascertain in this research, which was not designed to be evaluative. As such, we instead sought perspectives on possible or expected outcomes, self-reported by leaders, as a means to explore the potential for gender-transformative leadership to drive positive outcomes, and as a basis for further research.

When exploring outcomes, we took guidance from literature asserting the potential for gender-transformative leadership and programmes more generally to drive structural change towards equality. Literature has asserted the potential for gender-transformative leadership to drive changes in social norms and perceptions of women leaders (Mulder et al., 2019), in formal and informal decision-making practises (Brown et al., 2019), as well as tangible improvements in access to quality services such as water, education, and healthcare (Brown et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2019a). In this study, while we did not expect to identify and attribute significant outcomes to specific leadership actions, we did wish to highlight the transformative potential of practises featured as strengths. As such, interviews explored short-term outcomes and potentially

catalytic changes self-reported by participants, with a view to identifying indicative or illustrative examples.

The self-reported outcomes were categorised into societal (external) and personal (internal) changes. Societal outcomes were diverse and predominantly referred to inclusive service provision and contributions to broader systemic changes. Specifically, leaders mentioned achieving the placement of groups at risk of exclusion at the centre of the COVID-19 responses (12 of 19 participants); improving quality WASH services for all (eight participants) particularly related to access to water and hand hygiene behaviours during COVID-19 response and prevention; and delivering inclusive health services (five participants).

Leaders shared several examples of societal outcomes related to efforts made towards achieving systemic changes within rural communities and institutions. Outcomes spanning both communities and institutions included changes in the public's negative perceptions of women leaders (three leaders), an increase in women's participation in the workplace and as beneficiaries of activities in the community (nine leaders), and perceived higher awareness of the need for gender equality and social inclusion among community members and in professional bodies (four leaders). In communities, five leaders reported changes in gender social norms related to the division of household work, decision-making, and women's access to education and work. Lastly, specific institutional societal outcomes included an increase in girls' access to education (two leaders); cultivating an intergenerational legacy of gender-transformative leadership through mentorship (two leaders); and changes in national policy concerned with women's and children's health (one leader).

Related to changes in perceptions about women leaders, one participant said:

> *"I am pleased and really proud of how my leadership has encouraged women in my community to come forward and to participate. My work also made people realise the importance of diversity of voices in the decision-making rooms, particularly on the importance and value addition of women leaders."* - Namgay Pelden, first female Gup (local elected leader), Dagana District, Bhutan

Two personal outcomes were identified. The first one was associated with a sense of personal satisfaction (more commonly expressed by men) as a result of the outcomes achieved throughout their careers and their influence on others (10 leaders). One respondent expressed:

> *"I get a sense of satisfaction when I am able to bring positive changes in others. I try to cultivate these aspects in my own leadership style."* - Rinchen Wangdi, Chief of Public Health Engineering Division, Department of Public Health, Bhutan

---

**BOX 1**  Improving WASH services for all during the pandemic, the story of Ambika Yadav. Source: Adapted from Kumar et al. (2021a) and SNV and UTS-ISF (2021b).

Ambika Yadav is a community leader and an active advocate for GESI in her personal and professional life. Ambika reported playing a bold and pivotal role to ensure the continuation of WASH services in the communities where she worked, taking the risk to go out into the communities to provide services during the peak of the pandemic.

Her team started by conducting a WASH sector gap analysis with the local government to identify the vulnerable groups whose access to sanitation and handwashing facilities was impacted by COVID-19. The results from the gap analysis led to the installation of GESI-friendly contactless (foot-operated) handwashing stations in public places and quarantine centres. In turn, these efforts led to significant improvements in hygiene behaviours among women, children, people with disability, elderly people, and members of minority groups.

Ambika was also proactive in mobilising her team to spread awareness about the importance of physical distancing and handwashing with soap through mobile messaging, particularly among people with disabilities. This resonates with her belief in creating an enabling environment for people with disabilities and empowering them in every way.

Ambika is motivated to challenge gender and social norms, particularly within her community, which restricted her access to education and to work outside the home when she was younger:

> *"Living in a community that largely had reservations about sending girls to school, and having a daughter who lives with a disability, drove me to take action professionally and personally."*

She continues to advocate for equal participation of women and marginalised groups in society, including in the Rural Municipal WASH Coordination Committees, and has collaborated with various rights-holder organisations. Ambika believes that a leader should be bold and should invest in building strong relationships:

> *"Twenty-five years of my professional journey have taught me that trust is the strong bone of leadership. Clear determination, dissemination of information in the right manner, and regular communication has helped to build trust with stakeholders in the community and has supported me in influencing them."*

---

And another one said:

> *"I feel proud that local government has been focusing their activities on the most vulnerable in the community because of our facilitation."* - Madan Kumar Barma, Project Coordinator, SNV Nepal

The second personal outcome referred to the leaders' increased self-confidence (nine leaders) in both their abilities as leaders and how being a leader made them a more self-confident person. One woman leader expressed:

> *"My own leadership changed my economic status, built my confidence, and empowered me. I am not economically dependent on family and now I feel I am respected by other people in my community. I can confidently speak and raise my voice for women's rights and the rights of people with disabilities."* - Suchitra Chaudhary, School teacher and Member of Disabled People Organization Network, Nepal

Another leader said:

> *"My work changed me a lot, especially my self-confidence, and helped me appreciated my ability."* - Silivanh Khamsingsavath, Accountant and Secretary, Lao Disabled People's Association, Savannakhet Province Branch, Lao PDR

Leaders' self-reported outcomes were diverse and spanned societal and personal changes. Although difficult for leaders to articulate and for the researchers to independently verify, leaders' self-reported outcomes provide sufficient evidence of plausible contributions of gender-transformative leadership to positive social change in and through WASH.

## Strengthening gender-transformative leadership

In this section we present and discuss the enabling factors, barriers, and leaders' visions and wishes for the future. These three factors evoke pathways for contributing to strengthening gender-transformative leadership.

### Enablers

There was very strong evidence of external support from others as a main enabling factor for gender-transformative leadership. External support was perceived to come from different levels, categorised into domestic sphere, professional sphere, and external organisations and networks. Support in the domestic sphere (reported by nine participants) included family members relieving leaders from domestic chores and childcare allowing them more time in professional roles, and was particularly highlighted by women. Families also

provided emotional support and encouragement. Support in the professional sphere (reported by 14 participants) generally came from bosses, colleagues or teachers through mentoring, professional opportunities, constructive feedback, and advice. Support from external organisations and networks (reported by 10 participants) was received through access to capacity building opportunities and exposure to new ideas. Reflecting on the support she received from other leaders, a participant expressed:

> *"I am in this position because of the leaders who trusted my capacity and ability. I could complete the tasks assigned by my boss when I was a technical staff […] I also have learned from other senior women leaders at the Provincial Health Department, who have been my role models."* - Souksakhone Kothliengthong, Head of the Health and Hygiene Communication and Promotion Unit, Savannakhet Province, Lao PDR

Other enabling factors included access to education and training (12 participants), though this was also expressed as a challenge for some women leaders and leaders with disabilities. Leaders expressed that accessing education and training gave them the right academic qualifications and built their self-confidence, credibility, and trust from others. Access to role models (three participants), mentorship, and capacity building opportunities (five participants) also supported leaders to gain confidence, knowledge, and skills. Enablers identified by participants reflected those described in gender-transformative leadership literature, which particularly highlights the importance of knowledge, transformative learning experiences, apprenticeships, and mentorships (Brown et al., 2019; Soeters et al., 2019a; Fuhrman and Rhodes, 2020).

Lastly, four leaders expressed that their personal experiences of disadvantage or direct contact with those in disadvantaged positions shaped them to be the gender-transformative leaders they are and gave them direction in their journeys as gender-transformative leaders.

## Barriers

Barriers to gender-transformative leadership in the WASH sector were diverse and ranged from personal experiences of discrimination, to wider social resistance and backlash, to formal and institutional structures and policies. The majority of participating leaders expressed great difficulty in overcoming harmful gender and social norms to drive change within the communities where they worked (13 of 19 leaders). Additionally, women leaders and leaders with disabilities articulated having to overcome these harmful norms in their personal lives and for their professional advancement, for example, when trying to access education and join the workforce, which in their respective communities was not the norm for women or people with disabilities.

> *"I experienced people not welcoming me to go to school because I am a person with a disability. I wanted to see changes by starting from myself to show them that I have ability and I can do many things. I can take a job. This is what I wanted people in society to accept people with disabilities and this gave me energy to create change in society, office and within myself and for others."* - Silivanh Khamsingsavath, Accountant and Secretary, Lao Disabled People's Association, Savannakhet Province Branch, Lao PDR

Standing up against harmful gender and social norms was not easy for leaders (6 of 19 leaders), particularly women leaders, and it included a sense that women had to work harder to fulfil new leadership roles while also fulfilling traditional gender roles. Three leaders also expressed that women lack confidence to lead, and three other leaders also experienced the consequences of the public's negative perceptions of women leaders.

Leaders expressed that in their gender-transformative work it was not uncommon to encounter backlash, resistance to change, and criticisms (5 leaders). They reported dealing with these challenges by drawing on their values of optimism, courage, dedication, and passion. They also used the leadership styles described earlier, of persuasion and building consensus, leading by example, being goal- and vision-oriented, and maintaining openness to new ideas.

Lastly, six leaders (predominantly from the NGO sector) reported having to navigate broader institutional and systemic challenges. These included a lack of clear national policies and guidelines for GESI, weak implementation of policies and guidelines, and difficulty accessing funds for GESI-focused work. The latter was particularly difficult during the COVID-19 response since other work was prioritised. One respondent said:

> *"Our government has more focus on infrastructure development rather than human development. GESI issues are still not a priority issue for the government. Somehow, this also creates obstacles when raising the voice for gender equality."* - Ambika Yadav, Sarlahi District Coordinator, SNV Nepal

## Visioning

While investigating how gender-transformative leadership could be strengthened, we asked participating leaders what would be the one change they would make if they could snap their fingers and magically enable better leadership for equality and inclusion. Responses revealed three themes in desired changes. The first desired change was for social norms that celebrate and enable diversity in leadership. Achieving this vision would represent dismantling harmful social norms including traditional ideas about what makes, and who can be, a good leader. The second theme focused

on enabling environments, envisioning systematic embracing of transformation ideals such that gender equality and social inclusion are mainstreamed in institutions. This theme also envisioned an increase in educational and capacity-strengthening opportunities. The third theme focused on intersectionality and diversity, particularly focusing on the importance of addressing multiple structural power imbalances, including but not limited to gender. In the study, the importance of considering disability inclusion was particularly emphasised for advancing transformative leadership.

Each of these themes reflects ongoing discussions in literature on gender equality and social inclusion in WASH (e.g., Soeters et al., 2019b; MacArthur et al., 2022; Water for Women, 2022). Having such perspectives expressed by participating leaders affirms their relevance for practical action and the importance of those working in WASH to continue advocating for a focus on transformative change. As we recover from the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, grapple with urgent climate change challenges, and continue to champion the delivery of essential WASH services, we must do so in a way that actively advances gender and social transformation towards more equal, inclusive societies.

## Reflections on the research approach

The research approach emphasised collaboration, strengths, and transformation both in and through the process of undertaking this study. In this section, we share reflections in the form of testimonies from a leader and members of the research team, then synthesise themes and implications for future research.

### For the participating leaders

The transformative approach to the research involved engaging the participating leaders beyond data collection. Leaders identified ways in which the research might support and benefit them. These included building and expanding networks, creating opportunities to speak at events, creating opportunities to share and learn from others, sharing their testimonies and experiences with donors and others who might support their work, and participating in developing the research outputs. We took a storytelling approach in the production of the different outputs (described in Section Approach) to celebrate leaders and provide them with resources to share their achievements and inspire others. We also selected leaders to be featured in videos and blog stories, sought leaders' input and review into the different research outputs, and shared outputs with donors and the wider WASH sector. One of the participating leaders shared his reflections (Box 2).

### For the research team

The pandemic has created many challenges, but also some opportunities. Interviewed leaders shared the increased pressure it placed on them and their roles, but they showed continued strength and courage during very challenging times. The research team hoped that this research would provide fresh insights into the critical and varied roles that gender-transformative leaders can and do play in facilitating more gender equitable and socially inclusive WASH systems, policies, and services. The case studies of the leaders opened our eyes to the rewards, challenges, and benefits of transformative leadership, showing us what is possible. Two members of the research team shared their personal reflections on the research and what it meant for them (Boxes 3, 4).

## Limitations and challenges

We identify three limitations spanning practical and methodological aspects of the study, which should be considered when interpreting and drawing conclusions from insights presented. First, conducting the research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic across three countries created some practical challenges and resulted in occasional interruptions and delays. The team was aware of the potential for delays, and while the research plan was flexible and adaptable, the approach to conducting certain activities had to be adjusted. One such example is collective data analysis, which had initially been planned to be conducted jointly by all team members. Due to delays and time pressures, a sequential process was instead undertaken in which UTS-ISF team members undertook initial analysis which was then shared and critically discussed during a wider team sensemaking workshop. To address the associated risk of confirmation bias, during wider sensemaking we included interactive processes with opportunity for anonymous input and critique of identified themes.

A second limitation concerns identification of outcomes associated with gender-transformative leadership. As noted in Section Characterising gender-transformative leaders, outcomes were not easy for participants to articulate due to both the timing of the research and personal characteristics of leaders (with modesty and humility characteristic traits). As such, evidence presented about outcomes should be interpreted as indicative and instructive for further research, rather than comprehensive or strongly evidence-based. We justify the inclusion of outcomes despite these limitations given the imperative to build evidence about how gender-transformative leadership can contribute to positive social change. In future, studies could include use of quantitative indicators of change combined with qualitative insights to provide a robust, substantiated evidence-base of change.

Finally, the positive deviance approach and strengths-based orientation to interviews means that explicit details

---

**BOX 2  Personal reflection by Ugyen Wangchuk, former Executive Director of Ability Bhutan Society, Bhutan.**

I was inspired by other leaders who participated in this research. In particular, I was inspired by the stories of Namgay Pelden, a local government woman leader in Bhutan, and H. E. Dechen Wangmo, the Minister of Health of Bhutan. I admired their leadership, initiative and genuine passion for people from marginalised groups including women and people with disabilities, and learnt lessons about accessibility and inclusion in WASH.

Being part of the research changed some of my perspectives on leadership. For example, in Bhutan we do not have many women leader champions, and those are 2 leaders that I can look up to. Their skills and leadership really inspired me and made me aware of my own biases. As a male leader, sometimes I fail to take into consideration the needs of women. But through this research, I saw how women leaders take into consideration the needs of women and people with disabilities, and this was very inspirational. As men, we tend to assume things, and I have reflected that we are not in a position to understand the needs of women and people with disabilities in difficult times. As a leader, sometimes we could do more harm than good even if we have good intentions, because we might make assumptions that are not necessarily true.

---

**BOX 3  Personal reflection by Aastha Chhetri, MandE Advisor, SNV in Nepal.**

This research has enabled me to understand that no circumstances can stop you from doing what you want. Being a leader is not an easy task, and it requires education, continuous hard work, patience, and dedication. A new perspective on leadership I gained from working in this research is that being able to influence people into doing something good is noble work and it provides a high sense of satisfaction at the end of the day. I would like to inspire women and disadvantaged people to speak for themselves and raise their voices in WASH. I want to work towards supporting them in doing what they can to improve the sanitary conditions in and around their households and their entire community.

This research has been conducted in trying to understand the pathway followed in the making of a leader. This involves the struggles faced along with support received by the leaders and covers all the lived experiences which have shaped the leaders, which is a new and different approach in WASH research.

---

**BOX 4  Personal reflection by Phetsakhone Somphongbouthakanh, Gender Equality and Inclusion Consultant for SNV in Lao PDR.**

Sitting with leaders and learning about their work and experiences gave me a new perspective on leadership: being a leader does not mean following one standard model of leadership. Everywhere and everyone is different and needs to be led in different ways. Especially listening to the leaders with disabilities inspired me to advocate for policy change that benefit them and continue working on inclusive leadership as well as improving my own self-leadership.

Something I could do differently, or might do in future to support the kinds of leaders I spoke to through this research is to spend more time with them to listen, learn about their needs and share what I have learned with others as much as possible. I believe the work SNV did to collect these valuable experiences from leaders, and different levels of ability is very important work. These findings and insights could be used to strengthen CSOs' work on WASH leadership programmes. They could also be used in policy dialogues to progress gender equality and social inclusion and to inspire other organisations and governments to prioritise GESI in their WASH programmes. I invite readers to reflect on themselves as they read through the findings, select the aspects of their leadership they think could be strengthened and think of a doable action that could improve their gender-transformative leadership. Share and inspire others.

---

on the challenges of being a gender-transformative leader, or barriers to exercising gender-transformative leadership, may have been missed. Barriers discussed in this article represent those experienced by leaders who were specifically identified as gender-transformative, and therefore do not explore the ways in which pervasive structures and norms create leadership opportunities for some while excluding others. While we assert the value of a positive deviance approach in this study as a means to celebrate and inspire, we also affirm the importance of complementary research that more deeply engages with the multiple, intersecting barriers that may limit gender-transformative leadership.

## Conclusions

This article presented a conceptual framework for analysis of gender-transformative leadership, and results from a positive deviance study of gender-transformative WASH leaders in Bhutan, Lao PDR, and Nepal. The conceptual framework reflects a conception of leadership as diffuse and relational. In the framework, personal, relational, action-oriented and contextual dimensions are all identified as shaping the qualities and potential of transformative leadership.

Findings from interviews with 19 leaders identified alignment between the values and styles of gender-transformative WASH leaders and those discussed in wider transformative leadership literature. Leaders were found to have strong learning orientations and social justice and feminist values, often shaped by direct personal experiences of discrimination or their observations of disadvantage. This aligned with typical values and traits of transformative leaders in the literature. They also displayed characteristics of being altruistic, humble, and brave.

Leadership styles were found to be relational, shaped by empathy and a commitment to lead by example, in alignment with literature which suggests that such leaders are typically motivating, caring, collaborative and collective. Interestingly,

these 'feminine' leadership qualities were exhibited by both women and men leaders, affirming the value of having all genders engaged in the realisation of women's rights and gender equality and inclusion. Illustrative actions identified in the study included direct support for women's advancement, championing gender mainstreaming and placing vulnerable groups at the centre of the COVID-19 response. Indicative outcomes—while requiring further validation—suggested the potential of gender-transformative leadership to drive tangible societal outcomes such as inclusive service provision, shifts social norms and perceptions, as well as personal changes in self-confidence and work satisfaction.

The study identified strong external support to be an important enabler of transformative leaders. Such support could come from different levels, including in the domestic sphere, professional sphere, and external organisations and networks. Common barriers faced by transformative leaders included personal experiences of discrimination, wider social resistance and backlash, and lack of formal and institutional structures and policies. Three key areas noted as areas to strengthen in the future included increased celebration of diversity in leadership, increase mainstreaming of equality and inclusion in institutions, and the importance of paying attention to intersectionality and concurrently addressing multiple structure imbalances.

This study contributes to the body of knowledge in leadership in general, and gender-transformative leadership applied to the WASH sector in particular. Having been undertaken during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study also highlights the critical role of transformative leaders in prioritising inclusion during times of rapid social upheaval and change. The conceptual framework and key findings from this research can be beneficially applied to other contexts or sectors to generate evidence about how transformative leadership can be celebrated and supported as a means to drive gender equality and social inclusion in and through WASH, and beyond.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by University of Technology Sydney, Human Research Ethics Committee. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

## Funding

## Acknowledgments

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/frwa.2022.1050103/full#supplementary-material

# References

Bass, B. M. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *Eur. J. Work Organ. Psychol.* 8, 9–32. doi: 10.1080/135943299398410

Billing, Y. D., and Alvesson, M. (2022). Questioning the notion of feminine leadership: a critical perspective on the gender labelling of leadership. *Gender Work Organ.* 7, 144–157. doi: 10.1111/1468-0432.00103

Bradley, E. H., Curry, L. A., Ramanadhan, S., Rowe, L., Nembhard, I. M., and Krumholz, H. M. (2009). Research in action: using positive deviance to improve quality of health care. *Implement. Sci.* 4, 25. doi: 10.1186/1748-5908-4-25

Brown, E., Ekoue, E., and Goodban, V. (2019). Transformative leadership for women's rights in Africa: learning from Oxfam's work. *Agenda* 33, 21–37. doi: 10.1080/10130950.2019.1598776

Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches, 4th Edn.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Donde, O. O., Atoni, E., Muia, A. W., and Yillia, P. T. (2021). COVID-19 pandemic: water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) as a critical control measure remains a major challenge in low-income countries. *Water Res.* 191, 116793. doi: 10.1016/j.watres.2020.116793

Fuhrman, S., and Rhodes, F. (2020). *Where are the Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them*. Care International. Available online at: https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE_COVID-19-womens-leadership-report_June-2020.pdf

Gonzalez, D., Abdel Sattar, R., Budhathoki, R., Carrard, N., Chase, R. P., Crawford, J., et al. (2022). A partnership approach to the design and use of a quantitative measure: co-producing and piloting the WASH gender equality measure in Cambodia and Nepal. *Dev. Stud. Res.* 9, 142–158. doi: 10.1080/21665095.2022.2073248

Hawkins, K., Morgan, R., Overs, C., Manzoor, M., Dhatt, R., and Bali, S. (2022). "Women and global health leadership: power and transformation," in *Women and Global Health Leadership: Power and Transformation*, eds R. Morgan, K. Hawkins, R. Dhatt, M. Manzoor, S. Bali, C. Overs (Cham: Springer), 1–18.

Herten-Crabb, A., and Wenham, C. (2022). "I was facilitating everybody else's life. and mine had just ground to a halt": the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women in the United Kingdom. *Soc. Politics* 2022, jxac006. doi: 10.1093/sp/jxac006

Howard, G., Bartram, J., Brocklehurst, C., Colford, J. M., Costa, F., Cunliffe, D., et al. (2020). COVID-19: urgent actions, critical reflections and future relevance of 'WaSH': lessons for the current and future pandemics. *J. Water Health* 8, 613–630. doi: 10.2166/wh.2020.162

Huggett, C., Da Costa Cruz, L., Goff, F., Pheng, P., and Ton, D. (2022). Beyond inclusion: practical lessons on striving for gender and disability transformational changes in WASH systems in Cambodia and Timor-Leste. *H₂Open J.* 5, 26–42. doi: 10.2166/h2oj.2022.039

Indarti, N., Rostiani, R., Megaw, T., and Willetts, J. (2019). Women's involvement in economic opportunities in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in Indonesia: examining personal experiences and potential for empowerment. *Dev. Stud. Res.* 6, 76–91. doi: 10.1080/21665095.2019.1604149

Jensen, U., Andersen, L. B., Bro, L. L., Bøllingtoft, A., Eriksen, T. L. M., Holten, A. L., et al. (2019). Conceptualizing and measuring transformational and transactional leadership. *Administ. Soc.* 51, 3–33. doi: 10.1177/0095399716667157

Jhpiego Corporation (2020). *Gender-Transformative Leadership, a Participatory Toolkit for Health Workers*. Maryland: Jhpiego Corporation. Available online at: https://www.jhpiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/GTL-Full-Toolkit.pdf (accessed on October 30, 2020)

Kaushik, V., and Walsh, C. A. (2019). Pragmatism as a research paradigm and its implications for social work research. *Soc. Sci.* 8, 255. doi: 10.3390/socsci8090255

Keeling, A., Manzoor, M., Thompson, K., and Dhatt, R. (2018). *Gender Transformative Leadership: A New Vision for Leadership in Global Health*. Women in Global Health.

Kumar, A., Gonzalez, D., and Chhetri, A. (2021a). *Leading by Building Trust in the Community*. SNV Updates, December 2021. Available online at: https://snv.org/update/leading-building-trust-community (accessed on August 26, 2022).

Kumar, A., Gonzalez, D., and Phetsakhone, P. (2021b). *Leading With Courage and Confidence*. SNV Updates, September 2021. Available online at: https://snv.org/update/leading-courage-and-confidence (accessed on August 26, 2022).

MacArthur, J. (Forthcoming). A spectrum of gender equality approaches in WASH: towards gender-transformative practice. *Front. Water*.

MacArthur, J., Carrard, N., Davila, F., Grant, M., Megaw, T., Willetts, J., et al. (2022). Gender-transformative approaches in international development: a brief history and five uniting principles. *Womens Stud. Int. Forum* 95, 102635. doi: 10.1016/j.wsif.2022.102635

MacArthur, J., Carrard, N., and Willetts, J. (2020). WASH and Gender: a critical review of the literature and implications for gender-transformative WASH research. *J. Water Sanit. Hygiene Dev.* 10, 818–827. doi: 10.2166/washdev.2020.232

Meagher, K., Singh, N. S., and Patel, P. (2020). The role of gender inclusive leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic to support vulnerable populations in conflict settings. *BMJ Glob. Health* 5, e003760. doi: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-003760

Montgomery, T., and Mazzei, M. (2021). Two paths of social innovation in the post-pandemic world. *Soc. Enterprise J.* 17, 450–458. doi: 10.1108/SEJ-03-2021-0018

Montouri, A., and Donnelly, G. (2018). "Transformative leadership" in *Handbook of Personal and Organisational Transformation*, ed J. Neal (Cham: Springer), 319.

Moraes, A., and Perkins, P. E. (2007). Women, equity and participatory water management in Brazil. *Int. Feminist J. Polit.* 9, 485–493. doi: 10.1080/14616740701607986

Moser, C. O. N. (1993). *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. London: Routledge.

Mulder, S., McDiarmid, T., and Vettori, L. (2019). *Public Perceptions of Women as Political Leaders: A Multi-Country Study*. Melbourne, VIC: International Women's Development Agency (IWDA).

Pereira, L., Frantzeskaki, N., Hebinck, A., Charli-Joseph, L., Drimie, S., Dyer, M., et al. (2020). Transformative spaces in the making: key lessons from nine cases in the Global South. *Sustain. Sci.* 15, 161–178. doi: 10.1007/s11625-019-00749-x

Ryan, M. K., and Haslam, S. A. (2007). The glass cliff: exploring the dynamics surrounding the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions. *Acad. Manag. Rev.* 32, 549–572. doi: 10.5465/amr.2007.24351856

Sam, J. M., and Todd, S. K. (2020). Women as hand pump technicians: Empowering women and enhancing participation in rural water supply projects. *Dev. Pract.* 30, 357–368. doi: 10.1080/09614524.2019.1703904

Saseanu, A. S., Toma, S. G., and Marinescu, P. (2014). Feminine leadership and organisational culture. *Manager* 19, 144–150. Available online at: https://www.proquest.com/docview/1619354088/abstract/AA3807CC8D7C466CPQ/1?accountid=17095s

Shields, C. M. (2020). *Transformative Leadership*. Oxford: Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education.

Simba, H., and Ngcobo, S. (2020). Are pandemics gender neutral? women's health and COVID-19. *Front. Global Womens Health* 1, 570666. doi: 10.3389/fgwh.2020.570666

SNV and UTS-ISF (2021a). *Gender Transformative Leadership in WASH During COVID-19: Voices From Asia*. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1oZtXroJSPKlfTS1rfnGHhh9lmN3u8OP

SNV and UTS-ISF (2021b). *Ambika Yadav for Inclusive COVID-19 and WASH Responses that Transform Lives*. Available online at: https://youtu.be/rL0-AubrR3A

Soeters, S., Carrard, N., Grant, M., and Willetts, J. (2019a). *Leadership and voice: more than add women and stir*. Water for Women: Gender in WASH - Conversational Article 3, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

Soeters, S., Grant, M., Carrard, N., and Willetts, J. (2019b). *Intersectionality: ask the other question*. Water for Women: Gender in WASH - Conversational article 2, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney.

Soeters, S., Siscawati, M., Ratnasari Anggriani, S., Nailah, and Willetts, J. (2021). Gender equality in the government water, sanitation, and hygiene workforce in Indonesia: an analysis through the Gender at Work framework. *Dev. Stud. Res.* 8, 280–293. doi: 10.1080/21665095.2021.1978300

Stewart, J. (2006). "Transformational Leadership: an evolving concept examined through the works of Burns, Bass, Avolio, and Leithwood," in *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, Vol. 54.*

UTS-ISF and SNV (2021a). *Gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Research Report. The Hague: SNV.

UTS-ISF and SNV (2021b). *Gender transformative leadership in WASH during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Learning Brief. The Hague: SNV.

Water for Women. (2022). *Shifting Social Norms for Transformative WASH: Review of Concepts, Literature and Practice.* Available online at: https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources/KL/Publications/Water-for-Women-TT-Shifting-Social-Norms-for-Transformative-WASH_Literature-Review-web.pdf

Wenham, C., Smith, J., Morgan, R., and Gender, and COVID-19 Working Group (2020). COVID-19: the gendered impacts of the outbreak. *Lancet* 395, 846–848. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30526-2

Willetts, J., Carrard, N., Crawford, J., Rowland, C., and Halcrow, G. (2013). Working from strengths to assess changes in gender equality. *Dev. Pract.* 23, 991–1006. doi: 10.1080/09614524.2013.840564

Willetts, J., Halcrow, G., Carrard, N., Rowland, C., and Crawford, J. (2010). Addressing two critical MDGs together: gender in water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives. *Pacific Econ. Bull.* 25, 162–176. Available online at: https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/30589/2/PEB25_1_Willets%20et%20al.pdf

Winterford, K. (2017). *How to Partner for Development Research: Research for Development Impact Network*. Canberra,ACT: Australian Council for International Development.