



*For the first time in IRC's Environmental Health Program, a transgender person became a valued member of the project team."*

In Pakistan's society there is a typical understanding of taking biological sex and gender as binary: male/men and female/women- leaving no room for the non-binary 'human' identities. The oppressive behaviors towards gender minorities and persons with disabilities includes biases, caricaturing, prejudice, alienation, discrimination, marginalization, and violence (with different implications) commonly exist among people including our own staff.

The LIFE Pakistan project, referred to as Leveraging Inclusive WASH for Empowerment, has a strong focus on marginalized groups, particularly gender minorities and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) decided to initiate transformation in IRC Pakistan working culture.

To provide a conducive environment to all staff with diverse backgrounds, it was pertinent to bring a change within the organizational culture by becoming a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) friendly organization. In-doing-so a study was designed to assess organizational environment, policies, and practices about social inclusion, diversity, inclusive and equal opportunities at workplace for the Transgender and Person with disabilities. The assessment produced specific recommendation that helped IRC to initiate actions to create enabling environment. On the recommendation of the assessment, awareness and capacity training workshops were arranged for all IRC Pakistan staff including partner's staff.

The IRC leadership set the ground for hiring transgender individuals and women with disability staff. IRC not only trained program staff but also the operations staff. To further create a working environment within IRC premises, modifications were made in office infrastructure like the construction of inclusive washroom, ramps, and customized workstation for staff with disability. The new staff were taken on-board and arranged special orientation sessions both for existing (men and women) and new staff (SGM and PWD) whilst utilizing the tool kits designed during the assessment.

The training evaluation resulted a significant change in the perception of IRC staff regarding Transgender persons and provided a warm welcome to the new team members. It has been observed that acceptance level has also increased; for instance, despite initial concerns, both male and female staff were fine with using either washroom by the TG staff. As further evidence of increasing comfort with our newly diverse team, our Women at Work (W@W) forum was open for Syed Wajid Ali (Alias Namkeen), the transgender staff member with full respect and dignity.





An important beneficiary in the whole process is IRC Pakistan itself. We are observing changes in the wider country program, through assessment of facilities for inclusion and disability, and new trainings on inclusion for project staff. Ultimately, we are striving to see these changes across other international organizations as well.

And one big achievement of having a transgender staff member was an easy access to the transgender communities. Before hiring the Transgendered staff IRC experienced it extremely challenging in reaching out to transgender communities.

One of the main driving forces to bring a change at the organizational level was IRC's commitments on gender equality, inclusion, and diversity. In addition the transformative agenda of LIFE project also played a catalytic role in this change. LIFE project is bringing equitable WASH (for all) Services for the marginalized groups by keeping "leaving no one behind" principle above all and by adopting innovative approaches within the context. The community's self-interest for change is the main factor behind the on-going change. Knowing the fact to be neglected in development discourse, the deserving groups welcome the IRC LIFE project staff and organized in a way to initiate the change process in their communities.

IRC interventions with Gender Minorities (GM) and PWDs has proved beneficial especially in their outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic. After receiving training on independent living and networking skills, they are better connected with service providers for access to basic needs, better informed and aware of social services for access to identity documents.



Furthermore, the PWD needs were considered only for material support. Our team members can provide us with insights and understanding based on their own life experience, and to introduce us to the challenges faced by their counterparts in the wider communities. The IRC LIFE project is approaching these neglected groups with a comprehensive package that includes their access to safe WASH facilities and efforts for their empowerment via capacitating them. The change process is underway and visible in many ways, like, the marginalised groups are part of the implementing team and it is further leading at community level for hiring Transformation Facilitator and to form self-help groups.

Initially there was real concern about physical harm to the person him/herself, and to the team due to hostility of society. While we were right to move cautiously and slowly to avoid doing harm, the integration of these groups into our program has gone more smoothly and quickly than was initially thought. Keeping in view the living conditions of GM groups and PWDs, particularly their protection and accessibility needs, the existing project package is not enough to meet their expectations, yet we are trying our best to capacitate them with the best available resources.