



Building collaboration: WaterAid's foundational approach to reaching and including people who are sexual and gender minorities in Timor-Leste

Context

“When going to the ‘male’ toilets, we always get stigmatised, with words such as ‘transgender’ and ‘panlero’ and ‘why do you have to use the men’s bathroom, why don’t you go find a bathroom for panlero that you can share. This is the stigma we experience from men. But when we go into the female bathroom, the girls laugh... but they accept us, saying that it is all right for a transgender to use their bathroom.”

- The opening words of a 2015 video on life as a transgender woman in Timor-Lesteⁱ

Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression such as lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex is considered highly taboo (“*tabu los*”) in Timor-Leste. Negative terminology is normalised by public figures and the community, and many people view it as a disease which can be cured.ⁱⁱ Discrimination is extreme and includes violence.ⁱⁱⁱ There are limited support mechanisms, information and awareness available for people who are SGM in Timor-Leste. Timor-Leste has a growing solidarity and rights movements for SGM.^{iv} The past five years in Timor-Leste has seen a shift from inclusion of people who are SGM as a focus of health programs to rights and advocacy movements.

WaterAid's approach

Building SGM inclusion into gender frameworks and assessments

The human rights to water and sanitation for all, and seeing gender equality and integral to this, is a core part of WaterAid's approach to strengthening WASH systems in Timor-Leste. To achieve this outcome, WaterAid developed a womens empowerment and gender transformative framework (2017) which incorporated specific components of SGM inclusion. The framework says:

Sexual and gender minorities (SGM) also experience specific challenges. This includes access to WASH facilities for trans women, and extends to safety for lesbian or bisexual women, and the menstrual hygiene management needs of trans men. Much WASH programming is currently blind to the needs of SGMs. Adding LGBTIQ or another acronyms to a long list of vulnerable communities is an ineffective means of genuinely including SGMs; recognising and addressing issues for SGMs requires a deeper examination of the norms and assumptions we make that all people will identify as either a man or a woman and be heterosexual. We need to see that there are multiple gender and sexual identities recognise the assumptions that can act as a barrier to ensuring access for WASH for all people.¹

¹ WaterAid's Womens Empowerment and Gender Transformative Framework (2017). It also states 'The assumption that all people are heterosexual, and the organisation of the world on the basis of that assumed norm is referred to as **heteronormativity**. The assumption that all people are **cisgender** (i.e. they identify as the gender that is consistent with the sex assigned to them at birth) and the organisation of the world on the basis of that assumed norm is called **cisnormativity**'. You can learn more about gender identity, hetero heteronormativity and cisnormativity from the Asia Pacific Transgender Network- <http://www.weareaptn.org/news/>

Sharing the Power: WASHFutures session
April 2021

WaterAid also undertook a gender audit (2018) to create an overview of staff understanding and perspectives on gender equality. Responses to specific questions on internal organisational and programming inclusion of people who are sexual and gender minorities highlighted how it was a critical gap at WaterAid. The audit found that 84% of staff felt they had moderate or limited skills and knowledge on working with an awareness of sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQI). 41% of staff also felt that WaterAid formed partnerships with LGBTQI rights groups or sexual and gender minority rights groups to a limited extent or not at all.

Starting collaboration with SGM rights groups

To build approaches towards reaching and including people who are LGBTQI+, WaterAid's Timor team led a consultation with SGM rights groups in Dili. WaterAid met with as many grassroots rights groups as possible, to understand the challenges and opportunities impacting them and their members and to seek their advice on approaches. We wanted to start by asking rights-groups how we can work together and what kind of working relationships they want, facilitate a deeper discussion on the type relationship. Two key recommendations to come out of the consultation that the team have been gradually progressing were:

- Begin to build organizational-level awareness and understanding, through dialogue in staff meetings;
- Build partnerships with rights-groups, similar to how the WASH sector has supported Disabled People's Organisations and women's groups.

Internal learning and awareness-raising

Throughout 2019-2020, one local rights groups facilitated two internal workshops on SGM inclusion for WaterAid. The first workshop was for WaterAid staff only, where SGM rights group representative shared their experiences and an overview of what work they do in communities. A second workshop was held later, and WaterAid local partners joined too. The local rights group shared an overview about what sexual orientation and gender identities mean in Timor-Leste, shared case studies from communities about discrimination and provided guidance on positive terminology and ways to do inclusion.

The team also began to test adding a third option to sex-disaggregated data collection – Men, Women and Other, to community participation sheets. This has been a useful exercise in raising staff and local partners awareness, but it has not led to people identifying as 'Other' in communities.

ⁱ ISEAN HIVOS. IEC video on lives of Transgender women in Timor-Leste. 2015. Available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rPGgMID9yQ>

ⁱⁱ Rede Feto and ASEAN SOGIE Caucus. A Research Report on the Lives of Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Transgender Men in Timor-Leste. 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ ISEAN-Hivos. Analysis of ISEAN-Hivos Program (IHP) Baseline Research on MSM and TG Experiences of Stigma and Discrimination in Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Timor-Leste. April 2015.

^{iv} "Timor-Leste celebrates LGBT Pride Day" Government of Timor-Leste, 29 June 2017. <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=18362&lang=en&n=1>; Yi, Beh Li (2017) Asia's youngest nation offers glimmer of hope for LGBT rights [news article] Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-timor-rights-lgbt-idUSKBN1A5005>