

Women's participation in the sanitation economy - evidence from Bangladesh

Women's participation in Bangladesh's sanitation economy is essential - particular for certain roles across the value chain - but remains limited and largely invisible. Few women can enter or grow within sanitation-related markets due to financial exclusion, informal business structures, mobility constraints, and limited policy support. The 2013 Economic Census by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that among all cottage, micro, and small enterprises - which make up 99% of businesses nationally - only 7.21% are owned by women.¹

The Women in Sanitation Enterprises (WISE) project seeks to close this gap by strengthening women-owned and women-led cottage, micro, small and medium enterprises (WSMEs) across the sanitation value chain. A four-year initiative led by the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and financed by the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) through a We-Fi grant, WISE aims to reach 500 WSMEs nationwide. The project will expand access to finance, improve business practices, increase market access, strengthen project management and monitoring, and build an enabling environment for sustainable WSME growth.

STUDY OVERVIEW

To inform the design and targeting of the WISE project, a rapid baseline study was conducted by a technical team from WSUP Bangladesh, with support from the Global Water & Sanitation Center at AIT, Thailand. This brief summarises a longer report of the rapid baseline carried out in three locations - Dohar, Cumilla, and Lakshmipur.

METHODS

- Structured surveys with 64 WSMEs (13 in Dohar, 31 in Cumilla, 20 in Lakshmipur)
- 23 key informant interviews (4 national, 19 local)
- 3 focus group discussions with women entrepreneurs
- 6 in-depth business case studies (waste scrap dealers, recycled items & handicrafts, waste collection, paper bags from wastepaper, and sanitary pads)

STUDY OBJECTIVES

- To map WSMEs' engagement in the sanitation sector, including their needs, challenges, and opportunities
- To review available financial resources for WSMEs and sanitation- or climate-related enterprises relevant to WISE
- To recommend strategies for detailed assessments and capacity-building interventions



A woman entrepreneur dries and sorts recovered materials for reuse.
Photo credit: Mohammad Fahim Sayeed

KEY FINDINGS

The baseline study revealed several insights into how women-led sanitation enterprises operate, the constraints they face, and where opportunities lie for targeted WISE support.

1. Women-led businesses in the sanitation sector are concentrated in a few entry points.

Women participate most actively in hygiene product retail, reuse and recycling and solid waste management - playing a vital role in the sanitation value chain. This distribution of enterprise types (figure 1) illustrates a concentration in hygiene and recycling businesses rather than service-oriented sanitation roles. Most enterprises are cottage-scale, informal, and reliant on household labour and existing family networks.

1. World Bank micro level data: <https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/1929>

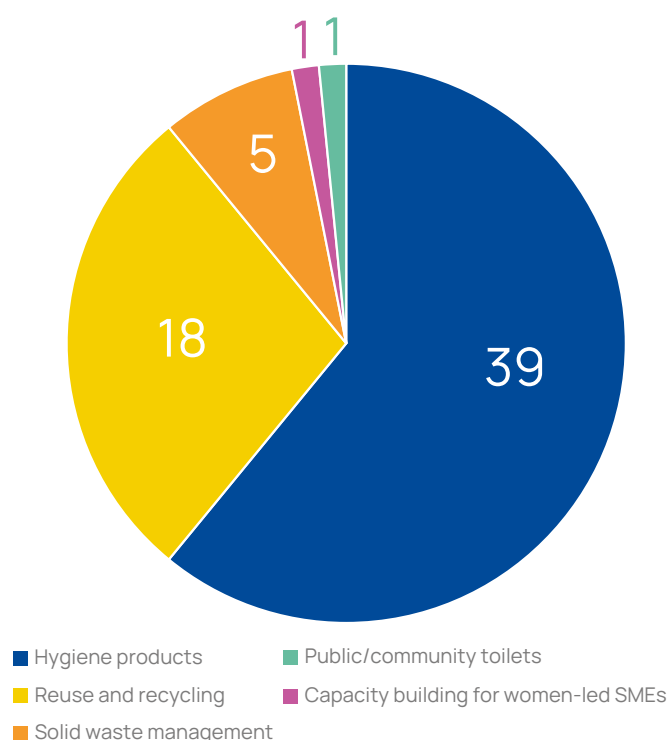


Figure 1: Distribution of women-led sanitation enterprise types across the 3 municipalities.

2. Women-led sanitation enterprises face barriers from the individual to the policy level.

- Individual level: Most WSMEs are informal and lack licences or financial records, restricting access to loans and formal markets. Limited financial literacy, business management skills, and digital capacity further reduce women's ability to secure capital and operate efficiently.
- Market-level: Gendered mobility constraints, weak business networks, and limited access to suppliers or buyers hinder expansion. Many women depend on family members to move goods or engage with markets, resulting in unstable and fragmented participation.
- Policy and regulatory barriers: WSMEs receive little recognition within formal policy or municipal planning. Few incentives exist for women-owned sanitation or circular-economy businesses, and regulatory requirements remain difficult to navigate.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PARTICIPATION

Regional differences shape how WSMEs participate in sanitation markets. Dohar faces strong gendered norms and low market activity; Cumilla has high demand but competitive, unstructured markets; and Lakshmipur benefits from better infrastructure and more supportive conditions for enterprise growth.

3. Despite the constraints identified, there are several entry-points for growth.

- Recycling, paper-bag production, handicrafts, and hygiene product sales all show strong market demand, suggesting these enterprises could scale rapidly.
- Women expressed strong interest in developing business management, financial literacy, digital skills, and sector-specific knowledge.
- Better connections to suppliers, buyers, cooperatives, and municipal systems could significantly improve business viability. There is particular potential in digital marketplaces, climate-relevant products, and local supply chains that integrate WSMEs more fully into the sanitation ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

This rapid baseline underscores both the constraints and the significant potential within women-led sanitation enterprises in Bangladesh. Despite barriers at individual, market, and policy levels, there are clear opportunities to expand WSMEs' contribution to the sanitation economy through targeted finance, capacity development, and stronger market linkages. These findings form a robust evidence base for the WISE project, now at the approval stage, which intends to support 500 women-led enterprises, improve access to finance, strengthen the enabling environment, and promote more inclusive and resilient sanitation markets nationwide.

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