



Learning Note

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN VIETNAM'S RURAL WASH: A CASE STUDY OF NGHE AN PROVINCE

Nguyen Thi Khanh Hoa, Hoang Hoa, Dr Lien Pham

1. POLICY CONTEXT OF GENDER EQUALITY IN VIET NAM

Vietnam has made significant progress in promulgating the legal basis related to gender equality for last more than two decades. This demonstrates the strong political determination of the Communist Party and the State as well as Viet Nam's efforts to realize its commitments to international conventions and laws on equality such as CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

With the opinion that gender equality is an indispensable element of the country's socio-economic development, over the past decades the activities to promote gender equality have been robustly and effectively implemented.

Since 1997, a series of law and guidelines have been implemented starting with the 1997 National Action Plan for the Advancement of Women in Viet Nam 1997-2000. In 2006, the Gender Equality Law was promulgated:

"Gender equality is the fact that men and women have equal status, roles, are given conditions and opportunities to enhance their capacity for development of the community, the family and to equally enjoy the fruits of that development" (Article 5, Clause 3, Gender Equality Law, 2006).

This concept of gender equality has since been the foundation for the formulation, revision and improvement of legal documents, policies, strategies, and programs on gender equality or pertaining to gender equality in Viet Nam. By supporting the empowerment of women and affirming that women are equal to men in all spheres of life, and this continues to be the primary goal of gender equality work at this stage; moreover, several emerging initiatives to engage men in gender equality activities are in evidence.

In 2008, Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs (MoLISA) established the Gender Equality Department with an advisory function for the performance of state management tasks on gender equality. On December 24, 2010, the Prime Minister stipulated Decision No. 2351/QĐ-TTg approving the National Strategy on Gender Equality for the period 2011-2020 (NSGE 2011-2020). After a period of implementation, in 2018, the Prime Minister issued Decision No. 800/QĐTTg adjusting and supplementing some contents of the NSGE. MoLISA was assigned to lead and coordinate with the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Finance, concerned ministries and sectors, the Vietnam Women's Union, other socio-political organizations as well as People's Committees of provinces and cities directly under the Central Government to organize the implementation of the NSGE 2011-2020 nationwide.

The NSGE 2011-2020 set out 7 objectives and 22 specific targets. The objectives include: 1) increase women's participation in leadership and managerial positions in political sphere; 2) reduce gender gaps in the economy, labour, and employment, and increase access of poor rural women and ethnic minority women to the economy; 3) equal participation between men and women in education and training; 4) increase gender equality in access to and benefits from healthcare services; 5) ensure gender equality in culture and information; 6) ensure gender equality in family life, gradually eliminating gender-based violence; 7) enhance state management capacity of gender equality

According to the government's report on the implementation of the national objectives on gender equality in 2019 and for the period 2011-2020, 7 out of 22 targets on gender equality are under-achieved and one lacked ground for the evaluation of achievability. Especially, all three targets of the first objective "To increase women's participation in leadership and managerial positions to gradually narrow the gender gap in the political sphere" are under-achieved. The percentage of female leaders/ heads of a sector or locality is very low. Comparisons with international statistics reveal that, in 2019, the rate of women's political participation in Viet Nam fell in the global rankings with the ranking of 110 out of the 153 countries.

2. THE STUDY

Against this policy landscape, we conducted a study on the opportunities and constraints for women's empowerment in a donor funded WASH project implemented in 5 rural provinces of Vietnam (Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Ben Tre). The 4.5 years (2018-2022) project was funded by DFAT through the Water for Women Fund and implemented by Thrive/EMW. Its key objective was increasing WASH access to poor and socially disadvantaged households through a results-based subsidy scheme, and improving gender equality and women's empowerment in the WASH sector. The Women's Union (WU) was the key delivery partner of Thrive/EMW, who was responsible for mobilizing households to take up WASH services and implementing the subsidy scheme.

Our study aimed to better understand the conditions for which women's empowerment opportunities can arise and barriers that constrain these empowerment choice and agency. In addressing this objective, we captured the gender experiences of the WU women in WOBA from different perspectives: political, WASH work and entrepreneurship, community, households. The study is guided by three research questions:

1. What opportunities are available to women in their WOBA participation, leadership and decision making, and which factors contribute to these opportunities?
2. What constraints do women encounter in their WOBA participation, leadership and decision making, and what are factors that contribute to these constraints?
3. What implications of these findings for policy and practices of women's empowerment in similar contexts of WOBA Vietnam?

In answering these research questions, we considered all relevant objectives of the NSGE 2011-2020: Objective 1 on women's participation in leadership and managerial positions in political sphere; Objective 2 on women's participation in the economy, labour, particularly for poor rural women and ethnic minority women; Objective 3 on participation of women in education and training; Objective 5 on access to information and participation in public community activities; Objective 6 on gender equality in family life; Objective 7 on gender equality capacity within the WU organizations.

3. METHOD OF INQUIRY

The study uses the mixed methods case study approach, involving quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis across and within five cases of communes. Phase 1 of the study involved a survey with the WU staff at provincial, district, commune and village levels and the women in the WOBA's partners who participated in WOBA. The survey focuses on the women's perception of women's empowerment and experiences through WOBA in the seven domains of the NSGE 2010-2020.

From the results of the survey, 5 communes in 5 provinces were selected for Phase 2, which involved focus group discussion with men (who are the heads of villages) and women (who are the WU staff at village level); interviews with the WU staff and their husbands; and key informant interview with male leaders of CPC and WU staff at district level. The intention is to gain deeper insights in both men's and women's sides about what women's empowerment mean, and to what effects (positive and negative) have their participation in WOBA shaped their view of gender equality and women empowerment.

In addition, secondary data on statistic gender-related information was collected at the commune level. These gender-disaggregated information include demographic characteristics, poverty and employment, domestic violence and the female proportion in leadership positions.

This learning note presents the case study of Hai Thuong ward, Nghi Son commune, Thanh Hoa province. The next section provides an overview of the context of the ward to foreground the discussion of the case. The following sections present and discuss the key findings relating to the seven domains of the NSGE 2011-2020. The final section offers some implications for policy and practice for improving gender equality and women empowerment in rural Vietnam.

4. CASE STUDY OF NGHE AN

4.1 Overview of the context of Hai Thuong ward

Demographic and natural characteristics

Chau Cuong is a commune in Quy Hop mountainous district, Nghe An province. It has a natural area of 83.88 km², of which forest land accounts for more than ½ of the commune's natural land area.

The population of the whole commune in July 2022 is 5,465 people, with 2,737 women (accounting for 50.1%). The natural population growth rates in 2020 and 2021 are 0.79% and 0.67% respectively. The gender imbalance situation also occurs in Chau Cuong, when the number of boys is often higher than that of girls. In 2021, the ratio

is 106 boys/100 girls. This rate is still lower than the rate of gender imbalance in Nghe An province when the average rate in previous years was 114 boys/100 girls.¹

More than 70% of Chau Cuong commune's population is Thai ethnic minority. The rest are Kinh and Tho people. Local people often communicate mainly in Thai language but they can use Vietnamese. The illiteracy rate in the whole commune is 0%.

Poverty

The total number of households in the commune is 1,238 households (average 4.41 people/household). In which, the number of poor households is 317 (25.6%), and the number of near-poor households is 154 (12.4%). The poverty rate of Chau Cuong commune is higher than this rate in Quy Hop district (15.41%)²; but the rate of near-poor households is lower than the whole district (16%). The number of GESI households in the commune is 228, of which 80 are female headed households (35%).

Labor and employment

The unemployment rate in the whole commune was 1% in 2020 and 6.5% in 2021 (due to the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic). In which, the female unemployment rate in 2020 and 2021 were 0.4% and 2.5% respectively, lower than these rates of the whole commune.

Labor in the agricultural sector still accounts for the majority of 90%, of which female labor account for 45.5%. The proportion of workers in the non-agricultural sector accounts for only 10%. However, in reality, a lot of laborers work in agriculture for only a few months of the year, the rest of the year they go to find jobs elsewhere to increase their income. Agricultural production mainly focuses on rice cultivation and afforestation. Agricultural productivity is not high, causing households to look for other jobs – mainly unskilled and unstable jobs.

Women in leadership and managerial positions

The percentage of women in the Executive Committee of the Communist Party is 9.02%, in the Standing Committee is 20%. Only 7.14% of the Party Secretary in the commune is female. These percentages are all lower than the national target by 2020, the percentage of female cadres participating in Party Committees at all levels is over 25%.³ There is not any woman in the leadership staff of the Commune People's Committee. The proportion of women in the Commune People's Council is 36.4%, which is higher than the proportion of women in the Commune People's Council in Quy Hop district of 29.97%. However, this rate is also lower than the target of 35-40% of women being members to the National Assembly and People's Councils at all levels by 2020.⁴ Among the village heads in whole commune, only 11.2% are female.

4.2 Access to training and resources

In Chau Cuong, propaganda and training activities are targeted at both men and women. The contents related to clean water and sanitation are mainly carried out through propaganda, not through training.

“They (the health station) integrate the content of water during propaganda in the villages” (Male leader of CPC)

With the contents of the WOBA Project, the chairperson of the Commune Women's Union was trained, and then she instructed the vice-chairperson of WU according to training content. Because of not being able to directly participate in all training contents, commune WU staff may not be fully informed and that may cause misunderstandings about the project's policies.

¹ <https://baonghean.vn/nang-cao-vai-tro-vi-the-tre-em-gai-post260048.html#:~:text=T%E1%BA%A1i%20Ngh%E1%BB%87%20An%2C%20t%E1%BB%B7%20s%E1%BB%91,b%C3%A9%20trai%2F100%20b%C3%A9%20g%C3%A1i>.

² <https://quyhop.gov.vn/vi/news/Tin-tuc-Su-kien/nhieu-hoat-dong-thang-cao-diem-vi-nguoi-ngheo-o-huyen-mien-nui-quy-hop-7889.html>

³ <https://thanhhoa.dcs.vn/tinhuy/pages/2021-8-17/Tinh-hinh-thuc-hien-cac-muc-tieu-quoc-gia-ve-binh-glsncb8zji4o.aspx>

⁴ Resolution 11/NQ-TW-Ministry of Politics on 27/4/2007

“When I researched and collected the information of WOBA in internet, I still read it but I didn't understand all, for example WOBA was a project to improve sanitation and clean water, but how it improves the sanitation and clean water, what is clean water, steps. I also told the HHs that but they said differently. The subsidies from the WOBA would be delivered soon, but the subsidies from the province would take longer. Village WU staff didn't understand that, so they made others confused like them... (CWU staff)

WU staff also commented that, for communication activities in the project in Chau Cuong under WOBA has been still limited, it is necessary to strengthen communication activities from the beginning and expand the scope of communication, target audience.

“I still want to have more communication activities. Communication helps change the awareness. Actually, the communication activities under WOBA were few, not many, not widely spread to the target audience, only communicated to the propagandists and some households. It's necessary to expand the audiences, promote communication activities and direct consultation.” (DWU staff)

Based on the survey results with WU staff in Nghe An, 17% respondents said that they couldn't join some trainings that they were invited to attend last year. Of which, 50% said that they didn't join because they had another meeting at the same time. The WU staff are responsible for many tasks, so, they had to give priority for the most important tasks whenever they were organized at the same time. Meanwhile only 12.5% said they couldn't join due to Covid 19 travel restriction.

4.3 Income and employment opportunities

Similar to the other communes in the study, WU staff did not see any opportunity to increase income or employment while participating in the WOBA project. Although WU staff receive allowance from the project when each household completes the latrine construction. But “In my opinion, if you are a propagandist, such income is not worth the effort they made” (NA_village WU staff). Because, it takes a lot of time, effort, even money for gas, transportation and phone to mobilize a household to build latrine. Women's Union staff perform their duties for political responsibility to the community.

However, in reality, although the WU staff may not directly have the opportunity to earn money or increase income under the WOBA project, participating in the WOBA project has contributed to the building or improving their skills and attitudes. For example, CWU staff has an opportunity to access highly demanding jobs in the future.

“Q: Now, for example, in your commune, there is another development project, do you and your CWU dare to confidently accept that work?”

A: Yes, I also wish there will be more and more projects to bring the benefits to the WU members.

Q: For example, now that you are working as a part-time staff or CWU only. Now there are some organizations that need project field staff to deploy in the field, not only in Chau Cuong but the neighboring communes too, if they want to recruit a field officer to do it, are you willing to apply and join?”

A: I'm ready. I also know that the requirements of organizations, they have more strict demands than the work of that State, in terms of progress and quality, it must be guaranteed, I am also ready to participate.” (CWU staff)

4.4 Activities in family

For family activities, women still take on more housework, while men are considered to be in charge of "bigger" tasks such as building houses, building latrines, and directing the development of children. In the opinion of male CPC leaders, it seems that decision-making power in the family is still implicitly reserved for men.

“With decision making in the family, most of them are still men. They still have the role of deciding where to go and do. So Any family members have to go back to ask their father's opinion. Taking care of children is the duty of women, but if women can't decide if children want to cut hair, the children have to ask your

father, for example, to get permission of going to a concert or a public service in the district or commune. They still have that mindset, and the decision of Thai women is still passive.” (Male leader of CPC)

“Q: Who makes the decisions such as to build a toilet and design a toilet?”

A: Also, be the men, now most of the men want to have a latrine because it is an essential part of a woman's family, so they decide on how that latrine is.” (Male leader of CPC)

However, male interviewees also said that financial management in the family should be managed by women. Because women know how to spend more rationally, while men holding money often do not know how to allocate spending.

“Because men can't spend on small things, they only know big things. With women, it is more reasonable to spend money on electricity, water, and noodles, in general. And men, no matter how much they have, they spend all.” (CWU staff's Husband)

When analyzing the change between the roles and voices of men and women in the family, the participants in the interviews and group discussions all confirmed that women had more voice in the family.

“A: Nowadays, in family meetings, women's voices are respected more

H: Why?”

A: It's probably because the perceptions of the villagers and men and parents have changed too, causing the change.” (Village WU staff)

In particular, mobilizing households to build latrines in the WOBA project also affects women's voices and decisions. The "bigger" tasks like building toilets used to be decided by men, but now women also have the right to demand "using the toilet" rather than waiting for their husbands to agree.

“Since the project started, women have had more authority to make decisions in the family, such as building toilets, constructing auxiliary works. For example, next to my house, there was a case in the past when two old couple used a dug latrine in that corner of the garden, and then they saw that there was a subsidy to build a latrine. We both mobilized and threatened (How unhygienic latrine can influence on their health), the wife came back and said her husband that if he didn't do the toilet, she would go to the company to use the toilet and the bathroom there. Finally, he agreed to just build it last year.” (Village HPN)

One of reasons for this change is the women participate more social activities and access information, they learn and improve their knowledge more.

“About ten years ago, the women were used to only stayed at home so they didn't know how the society develop. They also didn't know how to discuss with the husband about building “beautiful” latrine, but now it has been changed...” (FGD with male hamlet and CWU at village)

The women themselves are also pressured with housework, especially financial management. Especially when their income is low, it is difficult to allocate their income for the basic needs of daily life.

A: Are you under pressure when managing finance in your family?”

Q: Yes

A: Can you specify?”

Q: When the money's almost over, I don't know how to have more. Like electricity and water bills, tuition fee for children. Sometimes, I thought I lost my money but it turned out I spent it all.” (FGD with male hamlet and CWU at village)

Therefore, with their understanding, women have also actively changed their ways of doing things to also share housework with men. For example, financial management is often assumed by women, but now women also share it with their husbands.

“Electricity, internet cost is deducted from my husband's bank account. I have 2 children, so I pay for one child and the husband pay for another one. That lets the husband understand how much money to spend a month.” (FGD with male hamlet and CWU at village)

With the help of information technology, sharing the burden of financial management in the family is also an innovative way for women when they have knowledge and information.

According to the survey results, nearly 70% of WU staff said that they spend more than 3 hours per day on average for housework. And more than a half of respondents said there was no change in the time for housework in last 4 years. While 22.2% said the time that they spent for housework decreased in last 4 years and 17.8% said it increased. It means that the housework is still a burden for the women.

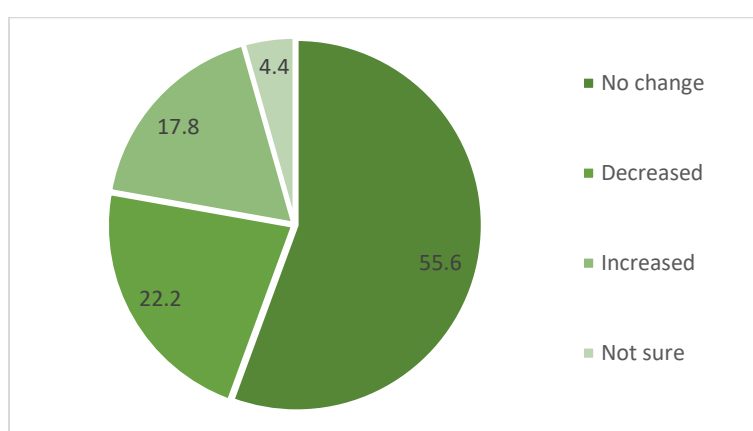


Fig 1. The change in spending time for housework in the last 4 years (Survey with WU staff in Nghe An province)

4.5 Participation in social activities

There is a significant difference in Chau Cuong compared to other communes in the study. In other communes, the husband’s family is often seen as an obstacle for women to participate in social activities, in Chau Cuong, the husband’s family is considered as an opportunity for women to participate in social activities. The husband’s family is often very supportive of their daughter-in-law’s participation in social work. Both men and women make this statement.

“The ladies (mother – in – law) are very supportive. They said (to the CPC staff) that whenever there is any communication meeting/workshop, they are available to take care the grandchildren at home so that their daughter- in – law can join.” (CWU staff)

“I think that at present, Chau Cuong commune is a relatively difficult commune under program 135, if their daughter-in-law is commune or village staff, I think they are very supportive. They want their daughter in law to be the authority’s staff. Moreover, they really want their daughter-in-law to have a stable job, rather than working as a worker away from home, so, they are very supportive.” (Husband of CWU staff)

In particular, the stories of the interviewees show that participating in the WOPA project also helps WU staff improve their own knowledge and skills such as awareness, attitude, self-esteem, seriousness, discipline and confidence. These are the prerequisites to create opportunities for women to participate in social activities.

“Working in the project with demands of precise, serious and disciplined, so it is seen that the staff of the village WU and commune WU have a change in perception, action, attitude... They also have to be adapted

to change in attitude towards work. Many women are also more agile, and then communicate more confidently, they gradually practice more skills as well. (DWU staff)

“Maybe at home I never spoke out, but since she became WU staff, she went out, increased her knowledge, she, like a propagandist, was more confident when standing in front of a crowd.” (Husband of CWU staff)

However, there isn’t any evidence from survey results to show a significant change in decision making in the family in the last 4 years. 77.3% WU staff in Nghe An said that there is no change in decision making in the family in the last 4 years. Only 18/3% said, it has been changed and 4.5% said they were unsure.

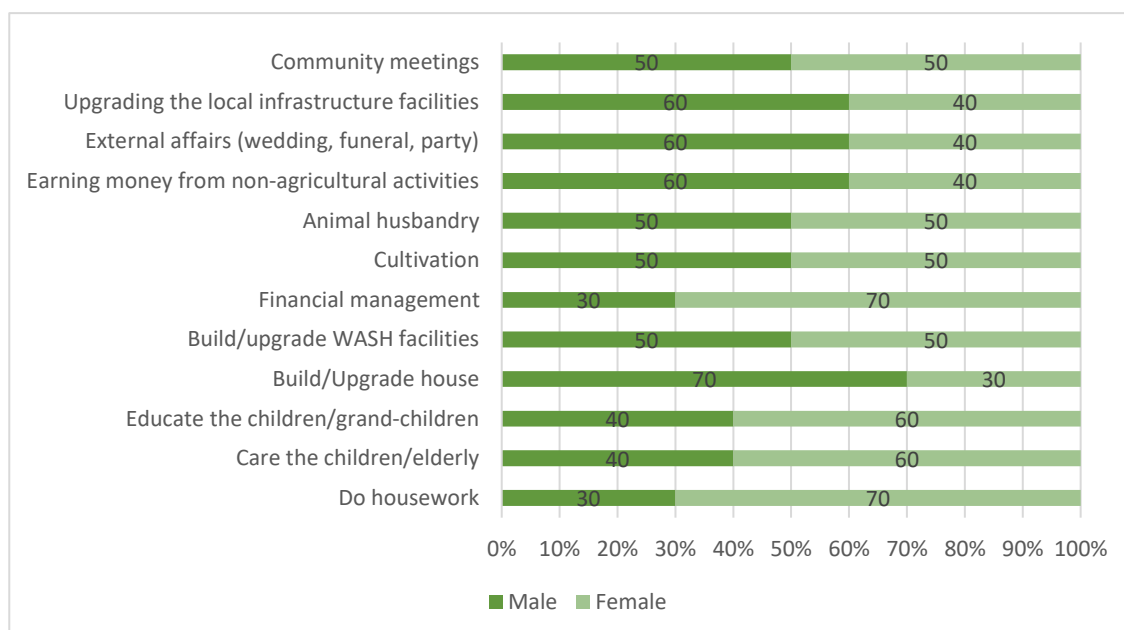


Fig. 1 Labor division by gender - Chau Cuong, Nghe An. (Estimated by the participants in the FGD with male village heads and village WU staff)

Besides the project, propaganda and information activities also contributed to the positive change of women.

“Women have not had access to information, so they have not changed. After propaganda sessions and policies, women have gradually changed.” (FGD with male hamlet and CWU at village)

Women’s participation in social activities is significantly influenced by their husbands. If the husband does not agree, they will make it difficult for their wives to participate, including they are jealously, so they do not want the wives to talk/contact with other people. It is also because there is not any salary or allowance or the allowance is too small (if any) when participating in social activities.

“Frankly, working as a village head is very hard, it takes a long time, very low allowance, it is like “a fool for one’s pains”. So, perhaps many husbands don’t like, don’t want their wives to do. (DWU staff)

“There are some women in difficult conditions and they want to participate but they can’t. There are also many husbands who don’t let their wives go out to dance in the evening, so, their wives are not comfortable to go, either.” (village WU staff)

Economic conditions can be considered as a barrier for women as if their household’s economic condition is difficult, they are unable to focus on social activities when they have to focus on earning money.

“Firstly, it is my family. My economic condition must be quite good, even better than other households. In general, you have to feel secure at home first before you can work at the office.” (Husband of CWU staff)

Like other communes in the study, housework is still an obstacle for women to participate in social activities. From the perspective of men, men themselves also realize that this is a disadvantage for women, while men when participating in social activities will not face this disadvantage.

“Women have to do more housework and they are more disadvantaged. Because men don’t have to do housework. After finishing working at office for example, they can go out to exchange and have party to enhance the relationships. But with women, there are still many things to do, the simplest example is which foods for the meals, who cooks for husband and children, whether the children take a bath or not, etc.” (Husband of CWU staff)

“Now women have more free time, but in the new era, women meet difficulties to improve themselves. For example, after working, men can play volleyball or gossip with each other, while women have to go home to do housework, take care the children. And men can go out with friends.” (male leader of CPC)

4.6 Leadership and decision making

The WU staff assess themselves to have all required qualifications to hold a leadership or decision-making role. According to the observations of DWU staff for all communes in Quy Hop district, the female commune leaders seem to work more efficiently than men because they do not have to attend parties and drink so much wine that affects their mind devoted to work.

“Now sometimes male leaders at commune level don’t do as well as female ones. The ladies are both careful and thoughtful, then they have a foretaste, their nature is foreboding, so they undertake the tasks very well. I also observe and find that no matter which position women work, they almost always do better than men. It’s just that they take on fewer number of positions. But with the results, if women can do better than men.

- Men often go back to sleep after drinking wine, but women do not drink, when they come back, they can make plans for tomorrow. I see most of the communes where there is a female secretary of the Party Committee, the results of those communes are always excellent. That is, the female leader shows that it is more efficient and more thoughtful. That is not to say that they (male) are not good, but sometimes there are factors that are detrimental to them in the process of working, even in the way of taking care of work, women are still different from men. (DWU staff)

The confidence at work is also an opportunity for women to get the leadership positions. In particular, participating in the WOBA project has made WU staff much more confident. This is also an important initial factor, a premise for women to be appointed to leadership positions in the future.

“H: What do you see that it’s really different since you participated in WOBA?”

A: As a woman, I can still do many things, everything a man can do, a woman can do as well.

Q: So, do you feel more confident?”

A: Yes, so much. (NA_ CWU staff)

One woman keeping the leadership position that is also an opportunity for other women to be appointed to leadership positions. The case in Quy Hop district clearly shows this statement.

Now, there is no female leader in Quy Hop, in the past there was one female leader, now she is working at the provincial level. It’s true that when she was the female leader in Quy Hop district, she really cared about women, such as organizing many activities for women and tried to include women in leadership planning. That is more actions and stronger impacts on women, while the male leaders didn’t do that.” (DWU staff)

While competence is an opportunity for women to be in leadership positions, education degree is an obstacle for women. The reason is that women were not able to attend school much in their youth, while men were given priority to study more than women.

“Because women are not educated. At the same with my age, ten or fifteen years ago, there was a pattern of respect for men and contempt for women. Men were given more priority to go to school than women. So, the consequence is that women have the lower degrees at the present.” (CWU staff)

Besides, maternity and having small children also hinders women’s higher education.

"It's true that they are always struggling, but because of the small children, when the children are grown up, there is no chance, it's over again. So many women who had chances to get the higher education were busy. The opportunities for women to participate in higher education were also less than that of men. Men could study at any time if needed, but women had to arrange the housework, especially taking care of their children and family before they could go to university, which is also a barrier." (DWU staff)

Besides hindering women to improve their education, maternity and having small children are also obstacles for women when senior leaders plan to appoint women into the leader positions. In the opinion of leaders, maternity and having small children take women a lot of time and enthusiasm, that cause negative impact to their work. Meanwhile, the age structure of women for leadership positions is lower than that of men, which further reduces women's opportunities.

"Actually, now that it's planning. But the women at the age below 50 can be planned for leadership positions, but the men can be longer, until the age of 55. Women take time to give birth, after that, taking care of small children, when the children are grown up, the women are out of the required age (below 50). That is a disadvantage of the women. Actually, it is not correct to say that amending the law, but it means to create conditions for women to participate. For example, the local authorities themselves create conditions and can include them in the planning leadership positions. But actually, when the leaders see that a woman is still having small children, no training, no fostering, no caring, so, when they start to care, that woman will be late." (DWU staff)

"Yes, that's right. It is true that women miss a lot of opportunities during the maternity. With my experience, I couldn't get any jobs since I was pregnant... I lost the opportunities." (CWU staff)

A major factor from the women is also an obstacle for themselves to take up leadership positions. When women themselves see leadership positions as a "burden", they do not want to be held responsible for their decisions. Women are afraid to challenge themselves in new positions. Meanwhile, men's willingness to perform is more obvious.

"There are women having full degree and qualifications, but they to give way to men. That is, even the women themselves say that they do not need to participate in this or that leader position, they feel that it is a burden, carrying a heavier responsibility. For an example in Tam Hop commune, there was a woman who was the vice chairperson of CPC. But when she started her tenure as a leader, her husband did the same, she resigned to push her husband to become that position. Even that was not the husband or relative, but the women were willing to back down, let the men keep the leader position, the women don't want to be leaders." (DWU staff)

Even the superior leaders themselves sometimes do put their trust in women to assign leadership positions. This is caused by gender stereotypes, in their thought, women are not strong and decisive enough to take on a leadership position, it is suitable for the leadership position must be reserved by men.

"In the men's opinion, men still have to keep the leader positions, but women have to be considered whether she is strong enough or assertive enough to do this position." (DWU staff).

The barrier from the family indirectly affects women as well. If the superiors see a woman who has to take care of the family, they also do not recommend women to hold leadership positions because of affecting the work of the organization.

"When the Communist's Party Committee considers a woman, they also take into account whether her family creates conditions for her to assign the leader position, that's the prejudice." (DWU staff)

Although women face many constraints on their way to the leadership positions as well as decision-making, WU staff still see that in the future, the proportion of women in leadership positions will definitely increase, due to movement and propaganda on gender equality have positive impacts and women having full degree as men.

In next two terms of 10 years. With the current development, I am sure that after 10 years, it is certain that the number of women who keep the leadership positions will increase when women have the opportunity to have a full degree like men. (CWU staff)

According to the results from the survey with WU staff in Nghe An at all levels, more than 80% of respondents stated that there are positive individual changes since joining WOBA. 83.1% felt the changes are the results of involvement in WASH activities. 93.2% felt that they could play key role in WASH operations and policy making.

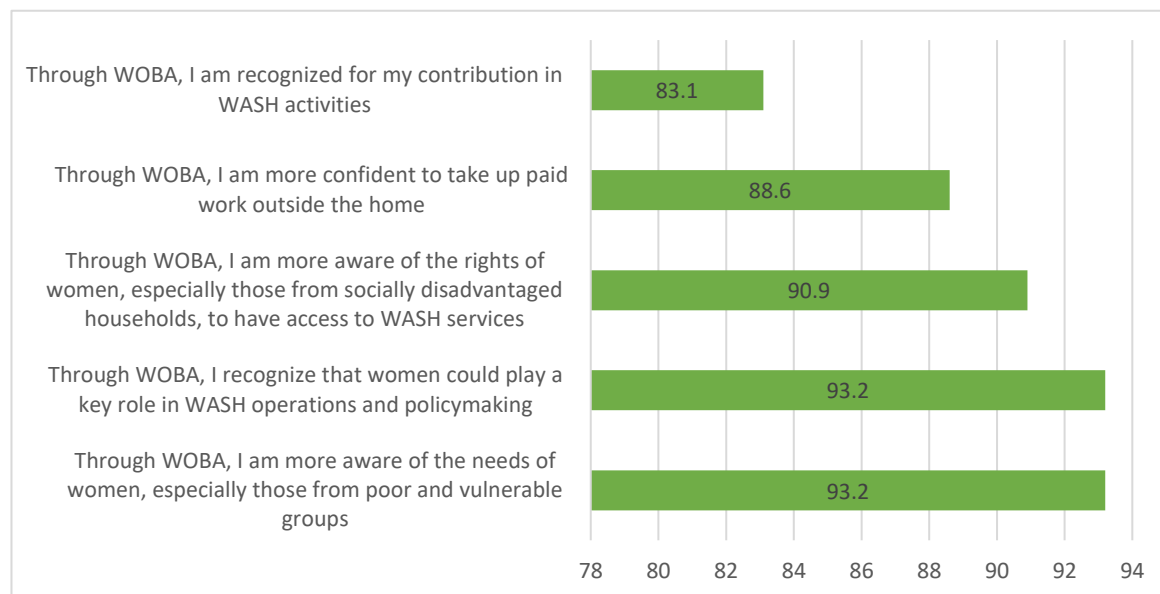


Fig 2. Personal changes since joining the WOBA (Survey with WU staff in Nghe An province)

5. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

There are inherent limitations with the methods employed particularly the survey. First, the use of online survey was unfamiliar to many women, and restrict many WU's staff (especially at village level) who did not have smart phones with internet connection. Second, the respondents in the survey are mostly the WU's staff and WOBA's partners who all belong to the government organizations. Many of them were afraid of giving frank assessment and straight opinions, and tend to agree with the statements in the questionnaire although it may not be the reality of their community. Although this is an inherent problem with online survey where Likert scale is used to elicit opinions on latent indicators, it is a more critical issue for this group of respondents due to the context of the WU and Vietnam political context. Other logistical problems relating to the qualitative data collection include interrupted focus group discussion and interviews at the start and during the interviews. We have attempted to improve the rigour of the data by using multiple sources and levels of analysis including comparison of the information gathered across and within the cases.

Despite these limitations, the case study provides some insights, which we can draw on to offer some implications for improving gender equality and women's empowerment at the policy and practical level.

Women themselves need to be empowered through providing the training and information so that they can be active in their work and taking on leadership positions in the organization. In order to create opportunities for women to participate in social activities and take up leadership positions, specific policies and regulations should be in place for men to share housework with women and to reduce women's time and burden for housework.

"If Vietnam had such policies such as when giving birth, the husband and wife take turns staying at home to take care of the children, it would certainly create more opportunities for women compared to now. (CWU staff)

In addition, the regulations on the age of women to be assigned as leaders should also be reviewed. As analyzed above, women face more disadvantages than men if women over 45 years old are difficult to consider for leadership positions, while this age for men is 50 years old. Meanwhile, women who are 30-35 years old have to take maternity leave and take care of the small children. The target roadmap for the percentage of women in leadership also needs to be developed and accompanied by specific solutions for each locality to ensure that the set target can be achieved. In addition, there should be policies and regulations to support women to be trained, improve their qualifications and degrees and be appointed to leadership positions after her pregnancy and breastfeeding period to create favorable conditions for the appointment time.

The support policies from similar projects to WOBA need to expand the target beneficiaries to ensure that there are many households with difficult conditions that are not on the list of poor households provided by CPC still get benefits from the similar programs.

“Economic empowerment is very important dimension of women’s empowerment. Therefore, the allowances for participation in social activities also need to be increased so that women can have enough income when undertaking social work, as well as being the leader in the community. “The allowance is too low, but the work is too much, so they want to receive more support for gas and transportation costs” (village WU staff).

In addition, local economic development projects are needed to increase employment opportunities for local women. So that women who can't go far to work are still able to participate in employment.

General empowerment is inevitably based on the women's economic empowerment. When women are economically independent, they have a better voice and better participation in social activities. This is an important factor to promote gender equality. Therefore, empowering women requires a parallel combination of other resources. As WOBA directly focuses on interventions to empower women in WASH, to increase the effectiveness of these interventions, additional interventions are needed, especially livelihood and employment development, income improvements for women.

Finally, gender equality activities should be propagated not only to women but also to men. These activities in the past were mostly undertaken by WU, so they are often directed at the main group of WU’s members. This is a gap in gender equality propaganda.

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