



Learning Note

# OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN VIETNAM'S RURAL WASH: A CASE STUDY OF HOA BINH PROVINCE

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## 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 HOA BINH

### 4.1 Overview of the context of Yen Nghiep commune

#### Demographic and natural characteristics

Yen Nghiep is one of communes in Lac Son mountainous district, Hoa Binh province. Yen Nghiep is 15 kilometers from the center of Lac Son mountainous district. There are 02 National Highways running through the commune, namely Ho Chi Minh Road and National Highway 12B. The whole commune has 14 villages. The total area of the commune is 2,257 ha. The population is mainly Muong ethnic minority, accounting for 98%, the rest are Kinh, Dao and Thai people.

The population of the commune in 2021 is 6,549 people. The number of households in the commune is about 1,416 households, the average household size is about 4.63, higher than the whole country (3.6 people/household). The commune's population growth rate in 2020 and 2021 are 1%, a bit higher than the growth rate of the whole country (0.8% in 2021<sup>1</sup>).

Sex ratio at birth (SRB) is calculated as the number of live birth boys per 100 live births in the same period. According to the Decision 3671/QĐ-BYT dated 2/8/2021 of the Ministry of Health promulgating Hoa Binh is one of 21 provinces with high SRB (over 112 boys/100 girls)<sup>2</sup>. However, the SRB of Yen Nghiep commune in 2014 2021 is lower, only 104 boys per 100 girls.

The common education level of people in the area is secondary school and high school. There are no illiterate people in the commune.

The commune has awarded the title of new rural commune in 2018 and announced in 2019, it is expected that in 2023 the commune will have awarded the title of “the advanced new rural commune” and “the typical new rural commune” in 2025.

According to the report from the Commune People’s Committee (CPC), no domestic violence cases occurred in 2020 and 2021. However, the reported case domestic violence is often mentioned as the physical violence, not included the violence in relation to the mental, economic or sexual violence.

### Income and poverty

The average income in Yen Nghiep commune in 2021 is about VND 50 million/capita/year. In general, the proportion of poor households (180 households – 12.7%) and near-poor households (117 households - 8.3%) of the commune is lower than that of Lac Son district (24.13% and 19.17%)<sup>3</sup> and Hoa Binh province (15.49% and 10.65%)<sup>4</sup> but still much higher than the figure of the whole country, specifically as follows:

Among the poor and near-poor households in the commune, the poor and near-poor female headed households account for 28.6%. This figure is higher than the percentage of female-headed households (9.7%) out of 1,416 households in the commune. Among 233 GESI households (16.5%), female headed GESI households account for a relatively high proportion of 36.9% (86 households). It is also higher than the percentage of female-headed households in the whole commune (9.7%).

### Labor and employment

The proportion of laborers working far away from home is relatively high, accounting for about 60-70% among the households in the commune. They often work in industrial parks in neighboring provinces such as Thai Nguyen, Bac Ninh, Bac Giang, and Hai Duong. Because of the increase in the labor force working in industrial zones, in 2019-2020, the unemployment rate in the commune increases significant to 50-60%. It is because many companies had to be closed due to Covid 19 pandemic. This has a significant impact on the lives of the households. In the first 6 months of 2022, the district and provincial authorities focused more on conducting vocational trainings when many labors stayed at home. There were 220 people in the commune participating in vocational training courses organized by the province/district authorities. In which, 160 people are female (accounting for 72.7%).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://danso.org/viet-nam/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://suckhoedoisong.vn/tinh-thanh-nao-dung-dau-danh-sach-co-ti-so-gioi-tinh-khi-sinh-cao-nhat-16921117094422378.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://kinhtedouong.vn/hoa-binh-con-tren-57-nghin-ho-ngheo-ho-can-ngheo-89442.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

## Women in leadership and managerial positions

According to CPC's reports, the percentage of women in the Standing Committee of the Commune's Party Committee accounts for 20%, and 20% in the Executive Committee of the Commune Communist Party, 5.8% of secretaries of the Communist Party Cell are female. Although there are women in the committees, this rate is much lower than the national target by 2020, the percentage of female staff participating in Party committees at all levels is over 25%<sup>5</sup>. 20% of women are on the leadership board of the Commune People's Committee. In the commune, among the delegates of commune People's Council, 6% are female. This rate is also lower than the target of 35-40% female delegates to the National Assembly and People's Councils at all levels by 2020<sup>6</sup>.

### 4.2 Access to training and resources

The interviewees and participants in FGD highly appreciated the content of the training courses they attended. They consider the training courses as being able to share and discuss enthusiastically and gain more technical knowledge and soft skills in mobilization and communication.

*"This is shared from the WU staff at higher level such as the district, provincial or central WU, then I come back and share it with the women in my commune and they are also interested and love to listen. And they say that if this training is organized again, the WU must invite them – the farmers to go, and let their husbands come and listen to it (CWU staff)"*

All three WU staff in the interviews said that they had participated in training on gender equality organized by the province, district and WOBA project. In addition, they also participated in many other training courses such as leadership and management skills, soft skills, knowledge and expertise.

*"I received training on gender equality, training on menstrual hygiene under WOBA and received professional trainings every year, in general, many training courses." (DWU staff)*

However, there are also opinions that some of the training contents under WOBA program should be implemented earlier and learned lessons for the implementation of the next phase if the project continues, such as the training on the menstrual hygiene program for women.

*"Then if the project continues next phase, the training should be conducted earlier. Because about gender as well as gender equality in everything we have discussed, and the benefit is not only men or women alone." (DWU staff)*

The training course should have rich training methods, sharing, building/handling situations that will help participants remember for a long time and make them not sleepy. And the menstrual hygiene training program should be expanded to more target group, parents should participate more so that they can take care of their children.

*"Because in the past, the women who participated in some trainings said that they were so sleepy that they didn't want to join. If there are discussion and exchange opinions like Q-A, the women will surely respond and enjoy it more. Or the type of discussion, integrating the content in cooking competition." (CWU staff)*

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<sup>5</sup> Nghị quyết 11/NQ-TW-Bộ chính trị ngày 27/4/2007

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

*“This menstrual hygiene training to tell me the truth, it aims to wake up the parents so that people can take care of their children at that teenager age. It involves a lot of things. Therefore, training should be given to parents and children.” (DWU staff)*

### **4.3 Income and employment opportunities**

The purpose of WU staff participating in the WOBA is to bring the benefits to the community through improving the hygienic latrines of HHs but not aiming to increase income and employment opportunities for themselves.

*“WOBA bring the benefits for the women, WU members only. We ourselves, like me, are supported with a small allowance. The benefit of the project is to support the HHs to build new latrines for their hygiene condition.” (CWU staff)*

*“There is no job opportunity, this is my mission (with the position of WU staff).” (Village WU staff)*

The husbands of WU staff in the interviews also think that mobilizing the HHs to build latrine is the own duty of a WU staff. It is not for the income generation for the WU staff.

*“There’s no income, I’ve heard people say that if they can mobilize HHs to build latrines, they can get small allowances, but it is not important.” (Husband of village WU staff)*

### **4.4 Activities in family**

It was found in the Focus group discussion with male village heads and village WU staff that there were many activities in the household listed by the participants such as: Caring for children, grandchildren, elderly parents (ii) educating children, (iii) doing housework such as cooking, washing, housework, etc. (iv) earning money, (v) wedding, funeral, (vi) farming, animal husbandry, (vii) construction/ repair house, sanitation works/auxiliaries (viii) financial management. The overall mean score for the roles of men/women participating in activities showed a significant difference in the commune compared to other communes in the study. Men hold the main responsibility to carry out about 57.5% of activities while this figure of women was 42.5. Notably, in which activities such as taking care of children, grandchildren/old parents, guiding children to do housework, farming and raising animals, the men were responsible for up to 70%. The participation in weddings, funerals, men accounted for 80%. Men and women are equal in construction and repair of houses/sanitary works. A very interesting activity – earning money, the men were responsible for 20% while women 80%. of men make money and 80% of women. There was a customary in other provinces that men earned money more than women, women were responsible for financial management, but in Yen Nghiep, women were responsible for both earning money and financial management (75%).

*“When building houses, the men stay at home to supervise and the women to send money to build house. Women are still responsible for managing money, they are afraid that men at home do not know how to keep money. Women have to protect themselves in case the men spend all money on drinking and eating. The women only send money that is enough for each item such as the tuition fee for children, the foods.” (FGD with male heads of village and village WU staff)*

Men are responsible for the unpaid and un-named jobs but they are not responsible for financial management. This is so different to other communes in the study because they often earn money in faraway industrial zones such as Bac Ninh, Hai Duong which require female workers. Therefore, in most families, the men stay at home to take care of the house chores, while women earn money.

*“Both men and women have to do that, everyone has responsibilities in the family. According to the company's regulations and I encourage my wife to go to work. Men who do housework are not weak at all, having enough money to pay for their children's tuition is ok. I have to tie or braid the hair for children,*

*wash their feet, hands then I take the children to school in the morning.” (FGD with male heads of village and village WU staff)*

However, the fact that the wife works far away also causes the consequences and risks for the family, especially the relationship between the husband and the wife. Some couples divorced because the wife no longer felt love for their husbands. As of the first 6 months of 2022, the whole Lac Son district has about 150 divorced couples and in Yen Nghiep commune<sup>7</sup>, there have also been divorced cases with couples whose spouses work far away. According to Lac Son DWU staff and leader of CPC in Yen Nghiep, this is an alarming problem happening since the women went away for working in the industrial zones. This doesn't happen in the four other communes.

The husband looks very miserable, he has to care dozens of buffaloes at field whole day, take care of children, does housework while the wife goes to work in an industrial park. He was born in 1976 but looks like he was born in 1960. When his wife comes home, she feels bored, we also tell him that he should have to take care of himself more while the wife working in the company look more and more beautiful than before when she was at home, but the husband looks darker like a mole.

*“There are many husbands who do not want their wives to work in the industrial zones, they are easy to change after 4-5 years. In some cases, the husbands are afraid of being divorced when their wives fall in love with new, more beautiful guys. ...In those cases, after having a small saving budget, the women should stop working at industrial zones, stay at home to keep the marriage relationship and they raise cows, pigs, chickens together. Unless there are some women leaving home with other guys and not going back home anymore.” (FGD with male heads of village and village WU staff)*

The economy of Yen Nghiep commune was mainly dependent on agriculture and people mainly grew sugarcane. However, in the past 3-5 years, sugarcane was no longer purchased from the companies in Nghe An, the price of sugarcane decreased, so people had to change their livelihood. Meanwhile, the development in industrial zones in the neighboring provinces increase. The companies came to recruit local workers at commune, so the trend of going to work in industrial zones also increases. Working in industrial zones has a more stable income and is not as risky as farming.

*“About 20 years ago, my hometown was developing, the main source of income was agriculture, the main crop was sugarcane all year round, the price of sugarcane was also around VND 5-7,000/cane. But about 3-5 years ago, the sugarcane is only VND 1-1,500/one, the sugarcane was no longer valuable. In the past, the companies in Nghe An purchased the sugarcane here, but since a few years ago, they stopped purchasing the sugarcane here, especially during COVID 19 period. The local people switched to planting cassava and maize, but the income of agriculture was also precarious. So, people go to work in industrial zones, industrial zones are not much far away, but right in Hai Duong, Bac Ninh, Hai Phong, it is convenient to travel. The companies came here to recruit, or the people went there to apply for jobs. Salary is also around VND 8-12 million/month, much more than doing agricultural activities. The only disadvantage is to live far from family.” (Male leader of CPC)*

There is a change in decision-making power in the family, partly due to the economic factor wherein the person earns more money will have more voices. The voices of elderly parents have also reducing compared to before.

*“For example, if you want to use money for big things, then both the husband and wife discuss, but the person who decides withdraw the money or not is the wife. It is the equality; the women have the rights that they didn't have in the past. The women were very dependent, for example, they had to work in the*

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<sup>7</sup> <https://consosukien.vn/thuc-trang-hon-nhan-tai-viet-nam-nhin-tu-ket-qua-tong-dieu-tra-dan-so-va-nha-o-nam-2019.htm>

According to General Statistical Office, in general, the divorce rate in Vietnam is low, however, this rate is trending up in the past 10 years (in 2009: 1.0%, in 2019: 1.8%). Divorce rate differs by sex and urban and rural areas: The divorce rate of women is higher than that of men (2.1% versus 1.4%), higher in urban areas than rural areas (2.1% versus 1.6%).

*field, raised pigs, but when the parents sold them and kept money, the women also had to bear it, it was the grandparents' right, so it was a miserable day for the women. But now, if the parents are not nice enough, they can be taken out of the house. Because the person who has money has rights. Money it always follows the right.” (DWU staff)*

*“Before, Muong women were very closed, they had to ask the husbands to give money when going out, but now it has been changed. In the 4.0 era, the women have left all the housework for these men. Even men are drunk, they have to breed the pigs first. In the past they (husbands) threatened us (wives), they took a rest after working, but now the women work in the company and they beautify after working hours, the men are responsible for the housework, breeding the animals. The voice of women has been increased. The companies never hire the drunk ones like the men here.” (FGD with the male village head and village WU staff)*

Empowerment for women in the HHs with women working far away also extends to HHs where no women have to work far away. In HHs where no women go away, the voices of both the husband and wife are more equal than in the past, housework is shared for both.

*“For example, my wife comes home late from work, for example, if I come home early, I still cook normally.” (Husband of CWU staff)*

*“Regarding the money, both of us make decision, for example, if you earn a small money from extra-work, you can keep it for the own spending. And the main salary of both is used for mutual budget. If there is anything, both will discuss and make decision together before spending.” (Husband of village WU staff)*

According to the results of the survey with WU staff in Hoa Binh (N=100), similar to other provinces in WOBA, 65% of WU staff in Hoa Binh spend 3 hours and above for doing housework. More than a half (51%) said there was no changes in the time for housework in the last 4 years. And only 17% said their time for housework reduced, this figure is even lower than the percentage of respondents said their time for housework increased.

The survey results also show that (WU staff in Hoa Binh, N=100), 53% of respondents do less than 10 hours per week for the paid work in average. And 32% do from 26-40 hours per week and only 11% do more than 41 hours per week. However, the time they spend for the social activities is much more than that. Even the village WU staff don't consider mobilizing HHs to build latrine as the paid work.

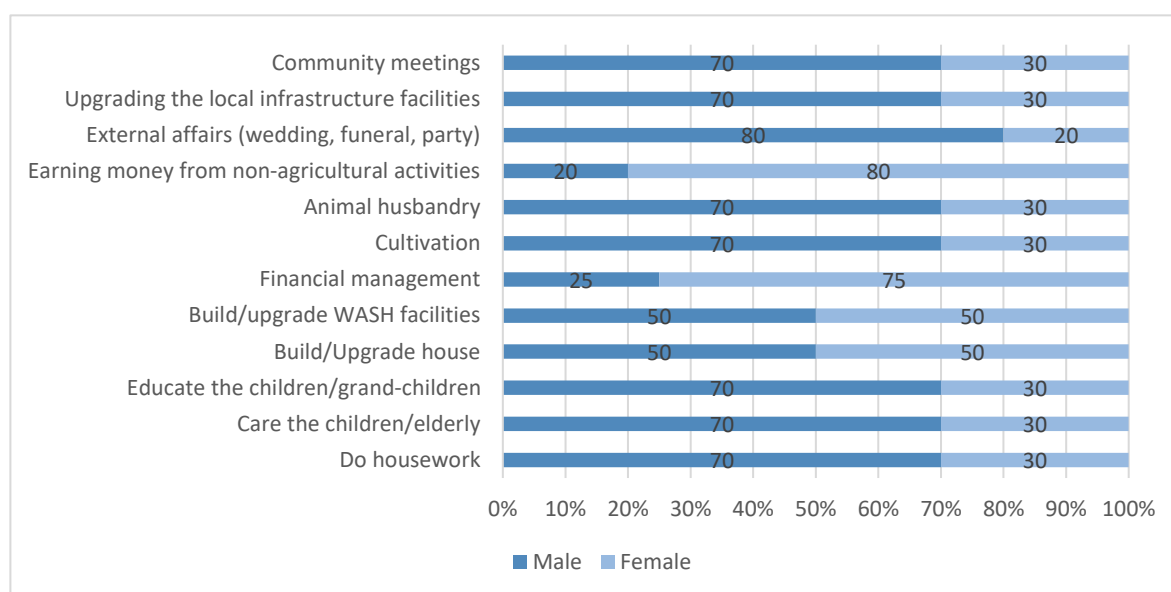


Fig. 1 Labor division by gender in Yen Nghiep, Hoa Binh (estimated by the participants in the FGD with male village heads and village WU staff)



#### 4.5 Participation in social activities

According to the participants in FGD and interviews, at the moment, the women have more advantages to participate in the social activities and make decision in family than in the past. Firstly, women are more active, self-reliant, and self-determined to earn their own money regardless of their family or husband. As analyzed above, the person earns more money will have more voices. The women can make decision for the issues that need to pay a big amount of money. The voices of elderly parents – in - law have also reducing compared to before when their daughters – in – law are the breadwinners in the family. Secondly, they receive sympathy from their husbands and family members for their work. Especially, with the WU staff with the low income, the women themselves need to be encouraged from their husbands and family to keep their position.

*“Well, of course, each person has their own job, how can they be complete, you also have to sympathize with your wife.” (Husband of CWU staff)*

Thirdly, women's capacity and qualifications are higher than before. Due to participating in the trainings, the women know to manage finance, calculate the interests in the agricultural activities.

*“The women’s capacity has been increased. They were also trained, including trainings on household expenditure management and so on. Those trainings were organized by the commune authorities. For example, how to calculate it, it must be calculated for it all, not today I go to a harvest session, that is just me or my family doing by ourselves (excluding the labor), if including the labor, there is maybe non-profitable, they know how to calculate from those small things, then they pass it on the other women.” (DWU staff).*

Although in Yen Nghiep, there is a big change in the person who is responsible for the housework, due to social activities with low allowance, and women do not go to work far away, housework and small children are still the factors that hinder women. They are the reason why the wives cannot participate in social activities. Especially, with the families whose husbands and other members do not sympathize and share the housework with the women.

*“In my CPC, there are 6 female staff, most of them have difficulty when having small children, so they often go to work late.” (Male leader of CPC)*

*“The biggest difficulty for women to participate in social work is that their families do not understand that it is the first thing, and the second one is the women have to be responsible for both housework and social work. that participating in social work and taking care of the family is the most difficult thing for women. women participating in social work.” (Husband of village WU staff)*

There is still a gendered view that women have to be modest, good, gentle and take care of family and children. This is a barrier for women to participate in social activities.

*“In rural areas, women are still heavily prejudiced against having to be modest and gentle as a bride in general, with many duties, so the voice of women is still limited in all areas.” (Male leader of CPC)*

#### 4.6 Leadership and making decision

Leadership opportunities of the women are also dependent on women's qualifications and on whether the local people trust the women who do social work or not. Decision-making opportunities are only for the leaders of the organizations.

*“She must win the hearts of the people, the people follow her words, then she will be able to keep this position, that is the leadership capacity of each person. As for the decision-making power, she is also the head of organization, so she must have the right to make decisions for her organization.” (Husband of village WU staff).*

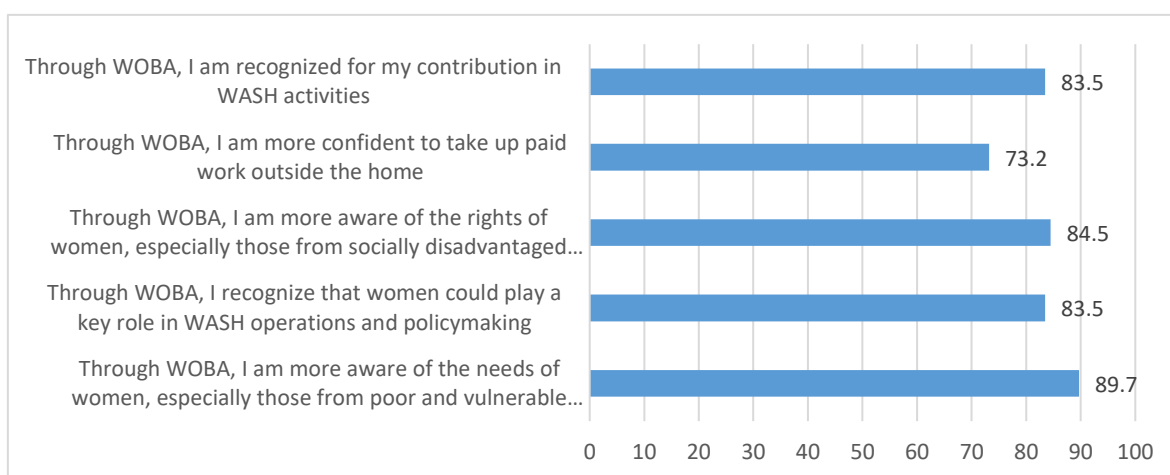
The leadership structure planned by the superiors determines whether a woman is allowed to take a leadership position or not.

*“If I didn't agree, they still moved me to the new position, because the human structure need to be rotated... In short, I still have to move to this position according to the planned structure.” (CWU staff)*

WU is still only a stakeholder like the advisory department, WU only have their own vertical line of authority, decision making of WU is still limited in some activities, which is similar to the engagement of WU in WOBA project.

*“The local authorities can direct the stakeholders to implement. Therefore, in any project in the commune, there must be chairman or vice chairman of CPC in the project management unit to implement more effectively and conveniently.” (DWU staff)*

WOBA also contributed to the positive changes of WU staff. In the survey with the WU staff in Hoa Binh (N=96), most of respondents agreed and totally agreed with the positive changes for themselves from the WOBA. (Fig 2 below).



**Fig. 2 The personal changes under the WOBA (Survey with WU staff in Hoa Binh province)**

As analyzed above, if a woman is not in the planned leadership structure, she can't hold the position although she makes many efforts. Another constrain relating to the gender stereotype that women are less decisive, less confident and more limited in communication than the men. These characteristics are perceived to be required for a leadership position.

*“Many factors. One is leadership structure, and the other one due to the understanding level of women. Perhaps the superiors recognize that this woman is not active, not assertive, not good at communication for example.” (CWU staff)*

The low salaries for the leaders, even not enough for daily living expenses is another factor that hinders women from taking up leadership positions.

*“Honestly, we at this grassroots level are very difficult in terms of economy. I think salary determines many things. I have been working for 7 years, my current salary is still VND 5 million. Many people like the current chairman of CPC, his salary is only a bit over VND 5 million.” (CWU staff)*

*“The salary of my wife even isn’t enough for herself but not including (raising) the children.” (Husband of CWU staff)*

Another barrier for women is from her family such as taking care of husbands and children, husbands don’t share the housework with their wives, don’t want their wives to be leaders.

With the mother’s roles of pregnancy and childbirth, women's opportunities to improve their education are also more limited than men. It is difficult for women without the required degree to get promotions and the opportunities for promotions are not often made available to them.

*“If you want to go to school to improve your degree when you are pregnant, who wants let you go? How can I quit while breastfeeding? That's also a matter that even creates opportunities for women, but they can't do. The opportunity can't be grasped, but also can't leave the small children to go.” (DWU staff)*

## 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.

Compared to other case studies in the research, many women in Yen Nghiep have economic empowered due to having a stable job as workers in the industrial zones. However, there are many other women staying at home. Both of them have to facing the constraints to be equal to the men in reality. Therefore, the following suggestions should be considered to design the project interventions in the future.

Firstly, the communication on gender equality should be continued. In which, the target groups should focus on the men more.

*“The propagandists must have in-depth family knowledge of the target audience, including men and women, and have a deep awareness of the gender equality. (Male leader of CPC)*

In term of the practical implications, communication activities related to gender equality need to be carried out for both genders in all communes. Training courses should be organized for both men and women to participate as in WOBA’s activities. In Thanh Hoa, there should be some attractive communication events to attract the local residents at different ages – especially the youth who are working at the industrial zones.

Secondly, it is necessary to have supportive policies for women to have more opportunities for career advancement, especially policies that give priority to women during pregnancy and lactation. 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.

*“For example, at that time the women were pregnant, for example, that opportunity they passed, but they have to prioritize other opportunities next time when they have the conditions. Especially the training classes, improving the professional skills.” (DWU staff)*

In addition, there should be intervention programs for children whose parents work away from home or even children living with parents because 4.0 technology has many temptations that make children not know how to filter information and it will adversely affect their thoughts and actions.

*“Now communicate with each other via Zalo, Facebook, then all kinds of things on the phone the children and grandchildren are watching and learning. It doesn't matter if they are good things, but the children don't know how to screen, so there must be some kind of intervention program.” (DWU staff)*

The family model in which the wife has to work away from home constantly has potential risks. Therefore, if there are companies in the district or neighboring districts and recruit local workers, and the salary may be lower but still ensure income for women, it will avoid the risks to family life when the women working far away from home.

*“There is a company around here so that women don't have to be far from their family. The husband and wife do not have to be divorced; children are taken care of by both the father and the mother. As long as there are 2 companies, they will basically solve this problem, so the women will be able to get jobs. The salary of VND 5 million is fine. The salary of VND 12 million but working far away from home is not as good as the salary of 5-6 million but sleeping at home. (FGD with heads of village and village WU staff)*

Age difference between men and women in current leadership structure is hindering the women in take up the leadership positions. In terms of policy, firstly, it is necessary to remove the age difference between men and women in the leadership structure. 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.

## REFERENCES

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