

Gender equality and women's empowerment in WOBA

Lessons learnt from the Mid-term Review of WOBA Cambodia

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Introduction

The Women-Led Output-Based Aid (WOBA) Cambodia is an AU\$ 3.2 million project funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Water for Women Fund over 4.5 years (June 2018 to December 2022). Designed and implemented by Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation, WOBA Cambodia aims to improve health and gender equality for low-income and vulnerable households in Cambodia through sustainable and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

One of the two key objectives in WOBA is to improve rural livelihoods through increased access to equitable WASH services, especially among marginalised community members. The targets on water and sanitation in project are:

- WATER: 3,750 poor households connect to piped water schemes. Their connections are co-financed through a competitive output-based subsidy fund.
- SANITATION: Improved access to hygienic sanitation in rural communities, with latrines constructed by 15,000 poor and 15,000 non-poor households, with 4,000 of these in the poor/GESI.

By June 2021, WOBA achieved 11,115 latrine constructions, representing 96% of the project target for latrine uptake. 5,687 poor plus GESI households completed latrine, of which 1,391 households had persons with disabilities. The

is slower with about 33% of water connection targets achieved.

A Mid-term Review (MTR) of WOBA was conducted over a five-month period from March to July 2021. The evaluation team consisted of a Team Leader (Dr Lien Pham, Thrive's Director of Research and Evaluation) and a national consultant. The mid-term-review focused on four areas of inquiry alongside WOBA's expected outcomes: 1) partnerships and networks for systems strengthening; 2) building capacity of partners and stakeholders about OBA approach and GESI; 3) empowering women as leaders and change agents in WASH; 4) inclusive access for poor and GESI households.

The evaluation was undertaken primarily for learning purposes to understand why, and under what circumstances results and progress towards outcomes were achieved, and to make recommendations for EMW, WOBA implementing partners and other relevant stakeholders for project period, including plausible redirection and risk update in order to reach WOBA goal.

The evaluation involved:

- 1) desk review of WOBA project design, deliverables and relevant WASH policies in Cambodia,
- 2) focus group discussions and survey with WOBA partners, and
- 3) interviews with beneficiaries, private sector operators, and Committees for Women and Children (CCWC) members.

Field visits were conducted in Prey Veng, Kratie and Pursat.

This learning note provides a summary of key findings and recommendations relating to gender equality and women's empowerment in WOBA.

Understanding of gender issues and women's empowerment

Cambodia was ranked 117th out of 189 countries in the United Nations Gender Inequality Index in 2019. Systemic efforts to mainstream gender have resulted in the development of a small number of policies and plans by the Cambodian Government, including for example the Neary Ratanak IV, the five-year strategic plan (2014 – 2018) for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Cambodia, Cambodian National Strategy for Rural Water Supply (2011–2025) and Gender Mainstreaming Action Plans in each line ministries.

Thus, the relevance and appropriateness of WOBA's approaches to addressing gender empowerment aligns with the Cambodian policy context and supported by WOBA's partners. The discussions in the focus groups suggest that WOBA is viewed as addressing women's needs and priority. They considered the project's goal is provision of safety and convenience for women in doing WASH activities which they cited evidence of higher number of women attending village meetings and other WASH related meetings in the communities compared with male participants. It was said that more women from the communities increased knowledge about sanitation, hygiene, and clean water than men because men worked in the fields or had migrated to seek employment, so more women attended the training.

Whilst focusing on the increased uptake of WASH knowledge and service is important, women's empowerment requires a recognition of the power relations that impede women's attainment of healthy and fulfilling lives which operate at many levels of society, from the most personal to the highly public.

“Achieving changes in gender equality and women's empowerment requires policy and programme actions that will improve women's access to secure livelihoods and economic resources, alleviate their extreme responsibilities with regard to housework, remove legal impediments to their participation in public life, and raise social awareness through effective programmes of education and mass communication. In addition, improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life. Experience shows that population and development programmes are most effective when steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women.”

United Nations Population Fund, 2019

During the focus groups, there were some acknowledgments that WASH is not only a domestic issue for women to concern with, thus WOBA dissemination of information about WASH should also include men. For example, a CCWC, from Kratie told a story about sharing WASH information to a Muslim leader at a mosque, and she encouraged women to discuss on sanitation, hygiene, and clean water with their husbands.

Partners' perceptions of the benefits of WOBA carried the same gendered lens of WASH although there were mentions of broader security issues for women. The private sector representative from the Rural Sanitation Clean Company (RSCC) felt that WOBA benefits both women and men. He explained that the subsidies address categories of socioeconomic differences rather than gender differences. However, he said that the women benefit more from building latrine,

“Women need safe and personal protection for defecating and changing [menstrual] pads when they have periods.”

The private water operator had a similar view,

“Women use water more than men. They used water for bathing, cooking, and washing cloth. Connecting piped water has helped women to reduced time for fetching water, enabling to remove challenges/difficulties.”

A representative of Cambodia Water Association (CWA) said,

“Connecting piped water helps a lot for women. Women’s life is easier than before. They used to face the problems of unexpected danger. In some cases, when they go to take water, they could get raped. Having access to water at home provides security. It has contributed to women’s health and avoid any sexual harassment.”

These issues suggest that the cultural and socio-economic environment influences people’s viewpoint about gender issues, which in this case, WASH is seen as for women safety and domestic work. Perceptions of benefits of WOBA tend to reinforce gender norm of women as responsible for domestic duties involving WASH and vice versa, WASH is seen as bounded within the household context and thus a women’s issue. It should be noted that these comments were made by men in the FGDs.

CCWC women as change agents

The motivations of the CCWC women interviewed were threefold. First, WOBA provided opportunities for them to gain knowledge about WASH which they could use to educate villagers. Second, WOBA provided some funding for travel to the commune. Engaging with households at the commune level allow them to educate the villagers as part of WOBA but also to collect households concerns and integrate the concerns into the commune investment plan (CIP). Third, some were motivated by the need to support the poor and socially marginalised communities. One CCWC women stated,

“I just think that this is my role and I want the people to have a healthy life. I want

my people to have good health and have latrine to use all of them.”

The CCWC interviewees felt that by transferring their knowledge about WASH and provide sanitation access to households, they have changed the lives of these families in practical ways. The majority of the CCWC interviewees used awareness-raising sessions to explain the benefits of improved sanitation and improved health which means lower health care costs at the family level, more time to earn income at the family level, and improved public health for whole communities. As one CCWC said,

“Once each member of the households fell sick and hospitalized, one additional person would need to take care of the sickness. This additional person spent extra time that would otherwise be used for income generation for the family.”

As one CCWC member commented, as a result of the latrine uptake by the poor, some with more wealth followed, and there is change,

“Villagers started to realize and love their health. So, they built latrine even a simple one—underground structure (subsidy), and wall (covered by leaves and plastic bags) and a roof (left open).

The CCWC women saw themselves as agents of change in WASH through their mobilisation practices. They recounted the tactics of using fear of diseases to explain the benefits of clean water. According to them, continued awareness-raising on the links between WASH and health would enable villagers to change drinking only boiled water, purified water or clean water from piped water connection.

In terms of being change agents for women’s empowerment, most CCWC interviewees referred to challenges when they started working or elected to be commune councillors or CCWC. They did not know the administration system or how to work with different levels of the government and did not want to meet or travel to the communities. They have been exposed to different learning opportunities during the time

at the CCWC which has improved their skills and confidence to work with different people.

The CCWC felt that women's contribution to rural development and especially WASH was generally accepted by the commune committee. However, this could be because the majority of the CCWC was appointed by commune chiefs to undertake the roles and responsibilities of WASH and be focal persons for the communities and that they were expected to perform these roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, these roles were not limited to WOBA, and were recruited to leverage the existing role of CCWC in the political governance structure rather than progressing women's role in either the governance level or the WASH sector. They conducted the activities in a cooperative manner and such cooperation was a contributing factor for effective mobilisation of latrine uptake.

There was only one occasion where the CCWC interviewee experienced some communication problems with the commune chiefs, which made it difficult for her to develop work-plan, request for funding to undertake awareness-raising activities,

“He acted as if he did not know we request for some budget. So, he did not allow for me to undertake WASH activities. It is difficult for us to conduct awareness raising activities because the chief of commune does not allow us to do so.”

Women and leadership in WOBA

Despite different motivations and interests in promoting WASH into communities, most CCWC interviewees felt they were obliged to take the roles and responsibilities assigned to them by commune chiefs. They could not object these tasks. They had to follow and create their work-plan to either collaborate with development agencies, District Department of Rural Development (DoRD), Provincial Department of Rural Development (PDRD), RSCC or conduct awareness-raising by themselves. Another responsibility of the CCWC

assigned by commune chiefs was collecting baseline data about sanitation coverage, which they work with the PDRD, DoRD, and RSSC,

“My specific task is to work with village focal persons and to encourage them to collect data of latrines of household.”

Another issue mentioned by the CCWC interviewees is patriarchal workplace culture. Below is example of one of the CCWC's male colleague,

“Commune councillors, sometimes, rejected my roles because I am just promoted to a high position while, they are still commune council's member. As the first deputy of the commune chief, once the chief is absent and is sick, he delegates power to me, but some male councillors did not listen to me. They may not like me, or they may envy me. In the monthly meeting, they did not listen to my talk.”

Overall, the interviews with the CCWC informants suggest that the CCWC women, individually and collective as an organisation, gained respect from their colleagues at the commune offices as a result of participation in WOBA. From an empowerment perspective, their position in the governance structure of WOBA follow the vertical structure of government which impose certain sense of obligation rather than autonomy, and subordination rather than leadership. The CCWC interviewees felt that their roles and responsibilities were set by the commune chiefs, and they were following rather than leading in these activities. If they did assume a leader role, then they also faced patriarchal attitude from their male colleagues.

There was a common feeling among the CCWC interviewees about lack of autonomy or voice in the commune structure and the role of the commune chiefs as a critical factor in enabling women's empowerment. The majority of CCWC expressed similar challenges regarding obtaining commune budget for WASH generally.

As noted earlier, the premise for their participation in WOBA seems to be based on the idea that WASH is women's issues in the domestic space. This kind of assumption seems to resonate with the CCWC women's stories of patriarchal behaviours of male colleagues at work and husband at home, which suggest that gender norms and practices are prevalent and not yet transformed in and through WOBA.

The CCWC interviews suggest these women had different perceptions about WOBA's contributions to women's empowerment compared with the focus group discussions at the provincial level reveal contrary perceptions about the role of CCWC women and leadership in WASH. In Pursat, it seems that women were selected to work in WASH because it was assumed that women would understand women's issues better than men, and WASH is women's concerns. A representative from Pursat stated,

“Women understand women's issues relevant to WASH. So, women can talk to their peers easily.”

It seems that this representative felt that women would need other women to explain and discuss about their privacy need for latrine usage, taking shower, and during menstrual periods. For this reason, the perceived leadership of women in sanitation and hygiene was high among the focus group participants.

In Prey Veng, the leadership of women seem to take place at the commune level because women have always had roles and responsibilities in the CCWC in WASH besides looking after issues of women and children. Further, female leadership seems to be more common at the local authority level. A representative from Prey Veng said:

“70% of women in the community are leading the roles of sanitation and hygiene and are provided more power for decision than before. Women have roles in the district as deputy district governor. Almost every district and commune have women,

taking the roles as lead candidates in communes.”

It seems that there is a more transformative view in Prey Veng about women as leaders beyond the traditional norms and practices of women within the domestic boundaries.

In Kratie, the idea of women as leaders to fill the knowledge and skills gap of men in WASH seem to be a pragmatic reason and reflect the male-oriented WASH labour force. Women are given the responsibility to educate villagers about menstrual health management because men could not do it.

Overall, it seems at the focus group levels, there is a general acknowledgement about women as leaders because of the national policy explicitly encouraging women to in the leading positions (see 4.1). However, there are differences in rationale and practices across the three provinces.

Limitations

Due to a lack of baseline data and appropriate M&E framework, processes, tools and data, sex-disaggregated data collection did not start for WOBA until March 2021. As a result, no gender analysis has been conducted to date. Data which has been reported and assumed to provide insight into women empowerment, for example, one that captures decision making of latrine construction at household level and is collected through verification surveys, is taken at face value, as it is not sufficient to analyse strategic gender change to WOBA.

The ways forward

WOBA can be said to contribute to women's leadership and empowerment in WASH through i) recruitment of the CCWC to the commune council committee, which has achieved WOBA's quota for women in the commune councils; ii) CCWC members' self-perception that they are change agents.

Yet research has shown that increasing the number of women in decision-making bodies is necessary but not sufficient for women's

empowerment. This leaning note has discussed some of the gaps in reaching outcomes of women's empowerment in WOBA. Below are some recommendations to promote gender transformative mindset among partners and improve gender empowerment for CCWC women. More research is needed to understand gender and empowerment for all women partners and stakeholders in WOBA including WASH female operators, female Commune Council members, female government partners, female volunteers, female head of households, and the CCWC.

- Continue with quota for women in the CC and CCWC and look beyond number of women in a committee and their position to understand the extent that they have a voice in decisions and committee outcomes. This could be done by, for example, incorporating the CCWC in the design, process and feedback at each stage of WOBA processes, including at baseline data, mobilisation, latrine verification, behaviour change communication etc.
- Although female volunteers were not part of the evaluation, and that the CCWC women interviewed often remitted their incentives back to the beneficiaries, discuss with these women about appropriate reward or recognition of the time and energy that they spent and try to include that in WOBA.
- Invite the WOBA women to identify existing supportive structure for women to make decision and take up leadership opportunities within the existing structure.
- EMW facilitate discussion that includes both men and women on gender norms, barriers and advantages to CCWC and female volunteers' participation before and during a WOBA activity.
- Provide leadership skills to several CCWC, and female water operators to promote collective leadership and support the sustainability of their WASH activities.
- Maintain the level of training provided to CCWC and female volunteers and make sure it does not add to unpaid work and can include range of skills beyond WASH

like business skills, conflict management, leadership, climate change, project management. This adds to their capacity of diverse skills, confidence, self-efficacy.

- Provide access to networks or create networks if they do not exist for CCWC, female private sector operators and volunteers to share their experience and allow them to know and be part of different steps in the WASH service value chain.
- All capacity building activities should be evaluated as part of EMW's monitoring framework and include quantitative and qualitative indicators for analysis of acquired knowledge, skills, attitude and other forms of change impact assessment. Results should be communicated back to the CCWC with follow up activities.

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