

Gender equality and women's empowerment in WOBA

Lessons learnt from the Mid-term Review of WOBA Viet Nam

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Introduction

The project of Women-led Output Based Aid (WOBA) Vietnam is a project designed and implemented by Thrive Networks /East Meets West Foundation (EMW) aimed to bring equitable water and sanitation services and hygiene practices to marginalized households in five rural provinces of Vietnam (Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Ben Tre) and to improve women's empowerment in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector. It is 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).

One of the expected outcomes of WOBA is "Improved gender empowerment and systematic inclusion of women and outcomes in households and communities and institutions".

A Mid-term Review (MTR) of WOBA was conducted from March to July 2021 in three provinces (Ben Tre, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An) to evaluate the effectiveness/efficiency and initial impact of the project approach and interventions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with WOBA's beneficiaries, WU members, private sector WASH suppliers. In addition, focus groups with WOBA partners at the national level, provincial and district levels were conducted.

This learning note is based on the findings from this MTR, to share the knowledge and lessons learned

about the progress of WOBA towards improving gender equality and women's empowerment.

Understanding of gender issues and women's empowerment

The Women Union (WU) is the key implementor in WOBA with the following main responsibilities

- collect baseline data for the sanitation component
- mobilize households to build latrine
- conduct verification of completed latrines for subsidy payment

This role, according to the project partners that took part in the focus group discussions, is logical because the WU has a mandate to serve women, and therefore the WU's activities must prioritize women. The partners consider women to be in charge of housework tasks relating to WASH in the family and responsible for taking care of health issues in the family. Thus, they felt that there is an inherent match between the role of the WU in delivering messages about WASH benefits for women. From their perspectives, women occupy a traditional role within the domestic boundary and the role of the WU is to enhance that traditional role. Their idea of gender equality comes from a gendered view about household women, the WU and WASH. As said by one participant in the focus group discussion (FGD) in Thanh Hoa,

"The approach of WOBA is new in focusing on gender equality. It is more advantageous for the WU to communicate to women because our target is disadvantaged households and

improving women's decision making in the family."

This view in this quote echoes other partners' view in the group discussions in other provinces. They felt that the WU is appropriate to mobilize households because they already have embedded networks within the community, and have developed communication and propaganda skills due to their WU work. However, none of the Commune Women Union (CWU) and WU at the village who actually delivered the mobilization activities shared this view.

WU's motivation to participate in WOBA

The WU interviewees described their role in the WU and WASH sector generally as "communication" and "mobilizing" even without WOBA. There are three factors that influence WU's perception of their role, duty and commitment to WOBA: (i) WU's responsibility; (ii) benefits of community including the vulnerable groups; and (iii) providing benefits of their own WU members. Among those, providing benefits of the WU staff is ranked lowest.

"I participate in the project because of my political responsibility to provide benefits for the people as well as to contribute to achieving the criteria of 90.2% hygienic latrine by 2020 and 92.5% by 2021." WU, Thanh Hoa

"The reason that I participated in the project is to enable local people to have access to clean water and hygienic latrine to ensure their health." WU, Ben Tre

At the beginning of the project, most of WU staff at the commune level thought that it would be very difficult to achieve the target of built latrines (set by the project and authorities) for poor, near poor and GESI families. They were concerned about the target groups because they felt that the poor, near poor and GESI Households could not build their latrines by their own resources.

Due to that pressure, the WU focused on communicating with households about household

eligibility criteria to enter WOBA and subsidy amounts to push households to build latrine.

The concerns or feedback among the WU staff were often around reaching targets of latrine completion, and different methods of mobilizing target beneficiaries to build latrines across communes. Achieving targets relied on the capacity and "creativity" of the local CWU staff and the local authorities.

The WU interviewees made many efforts to achieve WOBA latrine targets set for their commune or village including:

- propaganda activities
- encourage and advise the beneficiary households to understand the benefits of using clean water and building hygienic latrines
- provide information about the subsidies
- develop and review the list of beneficiaries
- support women with difficult economic conditions to access existing local funds such as loans from Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP),
- provide other resources such as the WU's economic development funds
- connect and act as household guarantor with construction material suppliers to help them buy materials on credit from these suppliers to build latrines.

The driver for the WU's participation in WOBA is their responsibility for their community, which stems from the WU mandate.

WU as change agents

By participating in WOBA, the WU members felt that they are change agents because of personal changes and impact of their work on the communities and beneficiaries.

Although most WU interviewed thought that knowledge about WASH and health is not new for them because they often have to propagate these contents in their WU role, they felt that the interactions with these marginalized households

have changed their mindset, attitude and behaviors. They understood more about the life and needs of each vulnerable household.

Based on that, they can give advice to the Commune Communist Party (CCP) and Commune People's Committee (CPC) to support those families with difficult conditions. As with the partners, the WU members seem to have developed a consciousness about people with disabilities, and the necessity in providing latrine that accommodate their needs and the needs of their carers. They understand the importance of enabling those living in poverty to live a more equal life with others in society, which is the purpose of the project, and that women have the rights and benefits in the project. They also felt that they have improved their way of communication and can listen more to understand the lives of beneficiaries before and after the projects.

The WU at the provincial and commune level supported the OBA (output-based aid) delivery model because this model helps the WU staff at the lower level to be more active, creative and responsible for their assigned tasks.

The WU interviewees employed different methods of mobilization to adapt to different types of households. For example, with single woman households, they mobilized their relatives or neighbors to support them in building latrine. With other households, they mobilized both wife and husband to build latrine.

"I persuade the target beneficiaries as well as their relatives to support them to build latrine. After being mobilized, their relatives say that if those households can't build latrines, their relatives will contribute to support." (WU, Thanh Hoa)

The practical activities that the WU involved in WOBA seemed to have enabled change in their knowledge, skills and attitude more than the training provided by WOBA. The broader context of WOBA's intervention regarding addressing needs of disadvantaged groups in society and working with

local authorities' expectation have also enabled the WU's consciousness and legitimacy. In each project area, the WOBA field staff have provided the WU guidance and explanation to help improve their knowledge.

As a result of these activities in WOBA, some WU interviewees felt an improved sense of self-efficacy and confidence in mobilizing households to take up WASH services. Although most WU interviewees had a lot of mobilization experience having worked in the WU for a long time (9 years per person in average), they encountered challenges at the early stage of WOBA, for example households' lack of resources, small subsidies, high target of latrine. However, as they were able to persuade households to build latrine, they felt happy and proud that they could contribute to bringing the benefits for the disadvantaged households.

Although WOBA may not have created economic opportunities for the WU members, it has created job opportunities and income for auxiliary workers including female masons, who earn about VND 200-300 thousand a day. It takes 3 working days to construct a latrine. For a latrine including a bathroom, it takes about 5-7 working days, especially for constructing a house including a latrine can take 2-3 months.

According to the WU women interviewed, WOBA has increased the WU's reputation significantly. Their participation in implementing WOBA activities has made leaders of CPCs and other socio-political organizations appreciate and support them more,

"The leaders of the commune have appreciated us much more, and they have assigned us more important tasks." (WU, Nghe An)

The gratitude and increased trust from the community has also led to increased membership in the WU,

"The community thank the WU for having a program that benefits the WU members. They respected and admired us." (WU, Nghe An)

Due to the above reasons, although the participation of CWU in WOBA is not totally voluntary, but under the direction of the WU at higher level and the authorities according to the WU's political responsibility of a propaganda arm of the government, their achievement seems to have both a personal dimension and institutional dimension. The WU can be considered as the change agents not only in the awareness and accessibility to WASH of the poor, near poor and GESI households, but also in their own WU structure.

Women and leadership in WOBA

The partnership structure in WOBA has concentrated decision making at the PC, resulting from EMW's prior experiences with the PC and the WU. As a result, the OBA subsidy schemes and payment are adhered to with the same mindset and understanding of OBA in prior projects, which is about achieving output of latrine/water rather than broader strengthening of WASH system through private sector engagement.

WOBA leverages the government structure in which the CWU is subordinated to the PC in both the Project Management Board (PMB) and in government structure. The CWU advises the CPC in the decision making and does not have any right to make the final decision. All CWU interviewees said that they participated in the project because of their political responsibility as a member of the CWU, and with that, they accepted that they have to be directed by the CCP, CPC and District Women Union (DWU).

All participants in the FGDs at provincial level in Nghe An and Thanh Hoa agreed that any decision they make must be approved by the PPC. The WU can only carry out activities if the PPC has issued an Official Letter to direct the assignment of roles and responsibilities of the WU. Even at the district or commune level, the WU's activities must be approved by the district/commune People's Committee. This structure applies for any activities of departments and agencies. Because of this structure, the WU women have less influence on

decision-making, resources and budgets within the WOBA project.

"The WU only takes the role of an advisor. The Provincial WU must be approved by the PPC before deploying any activities rather than directly connecting with the private units by themselves." (Focus group discussion, Nghe An)

"The Party and the Government consensus on the policy, then the WU will deploy it. If they do not consensus on the policy, it will be difficult for WU implement the project." (Focus group discussion, Nga Son)

It is clear that the WU members, as individuals, did not have leadership role in WOBA due to the structure of the WU within the political governance, which WOBA leverages rather than intends to transform. Although the WU in sanitation component have gained some sense of self improvement as a result of their mobilization activities in WOBA, the increased reputation for the WU maintains their traditional role of a socio-political propaganda arm of the government.

Alongside the perception of the WU as skilled and legitimate people to protecting the rights and interests of women, and WASH is a women's issue bounded within the domestic domain, it is hard for the WU to be empowered as women leader with decision making and autonomy in the workplace.

In WOBA's annual report to the Fund, 690 was reported for women in leadership position (indicator 3) which is the number of women in the project management board from the beginning of the project at all levels. However, in each PMB, the WU chairwomen are often appointed as the deputy head while the representatives (they are often male) from PC at same level keep the positions of head of the PMB. The high number reflects the various levels of the government and WU in which the women hold their positions and responsibility which is already established, rather than results of WOBA.

Overall, the design of WOBA leverages existing government structure of the WU under the PC. This may be effective for mobilization activities of the WU, but is limited as a mechanism to improve women's leadership and decision making at both the individual and organizational levels.

Ways forward

To promote gender transformative mindset among partners and improve women's empowerment which is one of the expected outcomes in WOBA, the following actions need to be considered carefully and implemented in the remaining period of implementation.

Two-way information sharing through a forum for the WU, WASH experts and women households should be incorporated to share their knowledge about WASH related issues, and allow them to know and be part of different steps in the WASH service value chain, discuss challenges encountered and come up with solutions for themselves. This would enable the women to have ownership in the activities, have a sense of decision making and leadership of their activities and voice.

Challenges and enablers for the WU as market agents or mobilisers which affect their ability to raise their ambitions in WOBA and in the WASH sector should be identified.

Training and support need to be provided to the WU based on their desires and needs in market operations and market agents. Training should be provided by business experts and social enterprises.

The WU should be incorporated in the design, process and feedback at each stage of WOBA processes e.g. baseline data collection, households mobilization, latrine verification, etc.

There should be more discussions with the WU about appropriate reward or recognition of the time and energy that they spend on mobilization and try to include that in WOBA.

Existing supportive structure for women's empowerment should be identified within the

existing structures that WOBA leverages and facilitate discussion that includes both men and women on gender norms, barriers and advantages to WU and female volunteers' participation before and during a WOBA activity.

Leadership skills should be provided to the WU in a targeted training and mentoring program to promote collective leadership and support the sustainability of their WASH activities.

The level of training provided to WU volunteers should be maintained 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.

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 WU with follow up activities.

[For the full report of the MTR, please email Dr Lien Pham at \[lien.pham@eastmeetswest.org.au\]\(mailto:lien.pham@eastmeetswest.org.au\)](mailto:lien.pham@eastmeetswest.org.au)

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