

Men and women in Rural Water Supply and Sanitation in Vietnam

A field trip to Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh Provinces

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INTRODUCTION

When planning and implementing the National Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Strategy, many aspects need to be considered. One of these is the crosscutting aspect of gender. Many recent reports have shown that paying attention to both men and women positively affects people's well being, the sustainability and effectiveness of strategies, and thus contributes to the reduction of poverty. However, gender issues often seem difficult to deal with, as they are associated with social norms, religion, cultural traditions or simply because it is difficult to figure out what the gender issues are, for example in the field of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS).

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Terminology¹

Gender: *all the characteristics associated with men and women, which are socially and culturally ascribed and vary from one society to another and over time;*

Gender balance: *to give equal opportunity to men and women in learning, decision-making, and demonstrating their work abilities.*

By providing examples and questions, this publication aims to show practical ways of considering gender issues. **Hopefully, after reading this publication many people will find that integrating gender issues in RWSS activities is not so complicated. It only requires reflections on existing norms and traditions - and on what implications they have for men and women's equal conditions for benefiting from and participating in the decision-making related to RWSS.** This publication should therefore be seen as an encouragement to discuss and consider what simple steps can be taken to increase the gender balance in RWSS.

In April 2002, staff from the Centre for Rural Water Supply and Environmental Sanitation (CERWASS) and Danida made a field trip to Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh Provinces. The purpose was to identify the most common gender issues related to RWSS. In the two provinces discussions took place with people from provincial, district, commune and village levels. In Ha Tinh, the team visited the communes of Phuc Dong and Gia Pho, while in Nam Dinh visits were made to the communes of Xuan Thoung and Thanh Loi. The water supply situation in the communes differed. In Nam Dinh the communes had recently improved their water supply by installing piped water supply schemes. The villagers in the two communes in Ha Tinh faced harder conditions and had to collect their water from dug wells or rivers. No recent efforts had been made to improve the sanitation situation in the four communes.

WHO IS DOING WHAT – WHEN IT COMES TO WATER AND SANITATION?

In all four communes there was a clear pattern in men and women's main tasks. Women's main responsibilities were primarily related to the household and family activities, whereas - according to the men themselves - the men's tasks were more related to physically hard work such as ploughing, construction and repairs to the house. According to the women, they had the tasks of washing clothes, bathing children,

¹ Definitions from "The Challenge of Working with Gender", Danida 2000

collecting water and cleaning the latrine. It was therefore clear that women's tasks were more related to water and sanitation than men's tasks were.

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The work tasks in the four communes were not divided in exactly the same way. An example from Phuc Dong commune in Ha Tinh gives, however, in many respects a general impression of how the work was divided in the four communes.

Phuc Dong, Ha Tinh;

Women's views:

Men and women share the responsibility for:

- collecting firewood
- ploughing
- emptying the latrine

Women are responsible for:

- selling at the market
- harvesting the rice
- saving and keeping the money
- washing the clothes
- cooking
- bathing the children
- collecting water
- cleaning the latrine
- feeding the children
- cleaning the house.

Men's views:

Men and women share the responsibility for:

- cleaning the latrine
- feeding the children
- bathing the children
- cleaning the house

Men are responsible for:

- ploughing
- emptying the latrine

Women are responsible for:

- selling at the market
- harvesting the rice
- saving and keeping the money
- washing the clothes
- cooking
- collecting water

Men and women did not always agree on who is doing what. The perception that more chores were shared from the men's point of view than from the women's was very common in all four communes. However, at all levels both men and women acknowledged that mainly women were responsible for work tasks related to water and

sanitation, as these tasks were seen as part of the household chores. Furthermore, several men and women mentioned that women have longer working hours than men, due to their many chores. And thus have less time for activities, not related to work.

Questions:

- Is there a need to change the present division of water and sanitation related tasks between men and women?
 - If yes: how should they be changed?
 - Are there any obstacles?

WHY DO MEN AND WOMEN WANT IMPROVED WATER SUPPLY – AND WHAT DO THEY CONSIDER AS BENEFITS?

It was evident in all four communes that there was a difference in the priority given to good water supply and good sanitation, respectively. The wish to invest in sanitation had in all communes a lower priority than improvements to the water supply. In Nam Dinh water had been a first priority before they improved the supply. After having improved the water supply situation, the communes now hoped also to organise for improvements to sanitation. In Ha Tinh water was either a first or a second priority, whereas sanitation was not always mentioned as a top priority. The priority in Ha Tinh needs to be seen in relation to the scarce economic resources in the communes. Since all the people interviewed at commune and village levels almost only discussed the reasons for and benefits of improving their water supply, there will in the following be a focus on water.

“Everyone needs clean water for daily life, but for women the need is more urgent”
(Male village motivator, Gai Pho, Ha Tinh)

Everybody agreed that men and women need the water for the same reasons, such as for health reasons and to improve their personal hygiene. Furthermore, there was general agreement that women have a stronger need for improved water supply and sanitation in order to reduce their daily workload.

In Ha Tinh, where the water supply situation had not yet been improved, the women mentioned another reason why they would benefit more from improved water supply facilities than the men. They felt that the lack of these facilities influenced their opportunities for washing and showering. The men in the villages could take a bath in the river after a day’s work in the field. Because of their need for privacy, women had to wait until dusk before they could wash and shower.

As mentioned, the two provinces have different water supply conditions. This meant that people in Nam Dinh could explain what they experienced as benefits of improved water supply, whereas the people in Ha Tinh had to talk about their expected benefits. However, the experience and the expectations seemed very identical. The women in Nam Dinh emphasised for example as one of the benefits of improved water supply that they now have better opportunities for showering. Due to the new facilities the women in the villages had improved their personal hygiene. Furthermore, they always wore nice and clean clothes, because of the improved conditions for washing the clothes. The men

in Nam Dinh also commented on the change and proudly told how beautiful the women in the village had become.

The women in Nam Dinh mentioned how much easier their lives had become since the water supply had been improved; all of a sudden they had time to read books and watch television, whereby they felt they could increase their knowledge. The improved water supply also gave them more time to take care of their children, for resting, and for community activities – or just for spending time by themselves.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DIFFICULTIES FOR MALE AND FEMALE RWSS MOTIVATORS?

In the four communes, selected people worked as village motivators, communicating the benefits of investing in improved water supply and sanitation to other villagers. Their work was an important part of the mobilisation of the rural population. The motivators were both men and women and it is therefore relevant to consider whether they have different difficulties and advantages in their work, depending on their sex. The same issues were identified in all four communes

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”The difficulties for women are the advantages for men”.

(Thanh Loi, male village motivator)

Men

Advantages

- Both men and women agreed that men have **more spare time**.
- The men are thus more **flexible** to go and talk to people at all times of the day, and for as long as it is necessary.
- Both men and women pointed out that men have a **higher knowledge**, which was seen as a main advantage.
- Men were perceived to have **stronger ideas** and to be more **convincing** than women when discussing the advantages of investing in improved water supply and sanitation.
- Men and women agreed that men have **a better understanding of the technical issues** and should therefore be in charge of the construction of water supply and sanitation facilities.

Difficulties

- The **lack of patience** was emphasised as being the main difficulty for men. Therefore, the male motivators do not go back to hesitant households as many times as the women, to inform about the benefits of investing in improved water supply and sanitation.

Women

Advantages

- One of the women’s main advantages seemed to be that they are the primary users of water and therefore have **a better understanding of the reasons, benefits and need for improved water supply**.

- Women are therefore **able to inform out of experience**.
- It was also highlighted that the women are **in a better position to communicate with all levels in the village**, because they - through their work tasks in the market, in the field etc. - relate to many different people.
- Both men and women emphasised, that **women are better at talking to other women** than men are.
- Women are more **patient**.
- Besides these advantages, the women themselves claimed that they were **more hard working and enthusiastic** as motivators than the men.

Difficulties

- Because of women's big workload, **the lack of time** was the primary difficulty for women working as village motivators.
- **Lack of confidence** also makes it difficult for women to do their work as motivators.
- **Women's lack of knowledge** was an issue that both men and women pointed out over and over again. In the commune group discussions it was clear that neither the men nor the women had much confidence in women's knowledge. The women themselves saw this as a result of their big workload and lack of spare time. They did therefore not have opportunities to increase their knowledge by attending meetings, reading the newspaper, watching television and just having the time to discuss relevant issues like the men did.

Question:

- How can women get more confidence in their own abilities – and how can men increase their confidence in women's abilities?

WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS ON WATER SUPPLY, SANITATION AND HYGIENE ISSUES?

The discussions on how to improve water supply and sanitation facilities take place at different levels. However, the main decisions on investments are made at household level – and to some extent at village level.

Household Level

“The decision-making process can be compared to a board meeting: everybody discusses and gives opinions, but the chairman is the one who makes the final decision.”

(Phuc Dong, Member of the Commune Steering Committee)

The women in Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh mentioned that within the household the man normally made the decisions related to water supply and sanitation. However, before making decisions he discussed the issues with his wife and made an agreement with her. In fact both many men and women said that they together made the decisions on water supply and sanitation. However, due to traditional customs the man was a better man - and the wife would be more proud of her husband - if both of them publicly said that the husband made the final decisions. Along with the responsibility of making the final decisions, the man was also responsible for executing the decisions.

The women expressed satisfaction with this way of making decisions. The women would only consider it an extra burden if they had the responsibility of making the final decisions. The women in Gia Pho commune expressed their content with the present arrangement of decision-making by saying:

”After the decision is made, the woman gives the money to the husband and goes to sleep. The husband then has to worry about the execution of the decision and will end staying up all night because of it!”

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In Xuan Thoung commune the decision-making process was a little different. Since the men often worked far away from home, the women were left with more responsibilities. In some cases the women were therefore the ones who publicly made the final decisions both in general and specifically on water supply and sanitation.

As mentioned earlier, the women were generally in charge of keeping and saving money. However, when spending money the men and women in Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh followed traditional customs. This implies that for spending small amounts, the women could decide, whereas for larger investments the man would decide. This kind of arrangement can result in women having very little bargaining-power in the negotiations on water supply and sanitation investments. **As one woman in Gia Pho said: “If the wife does not agree with the way her husband spends the money, the wife only has one way to pressure him: by not preparing food for him.”** Although decisions were made after a mutual agreement, this kind of arrangement - combined with women’s difficulties in taking part in community activities - could leave women without direct influence on decisions related to water supply and sanitation. Since women might have a higher motivation for improving their water supply and sanitation situation than the men, this arrangement can also make it more complicated for the women to have their needs and wishes fulfilled.

Questions:

- How can women’s bargaining power be improved?

Village Level

Though the most crucial decisions on water supply and sanitation were made at household level, some decisions were also discussed and made at village level. Discussions on water supply and sanitation took place at different types of meetings - in the communes visited the hamlet meetings were mentioned as particularly important. In these four communes both men and women took part in the hamlet meetings but the number of women attending the meetings was generally very low. In the two communes in Ha Tinh the percentage of women in the meetings was estimated to be 20-30%. In Thanh Loi commune no exact number was mentioned, but according to both men and women only few women attended the hamlet meetings. As for Xuan Thoung commune the percentage of women could be as high as 60%. This should be seen as a consequence of the men working far away from the commune. Since it was not possible

for the men in Xuan Thoug commune to attend the meetings, the women attended instead.

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A woman in Phuc Dong explained why there was a difference in the number of men and women taking part in community activities, and why community activities felt like a burden to her:

“Men are not in charge of the housework - they do not have to worry whether the house is clean when they get home late at night after attending a meeting - and it is therefore easy for them to take part in community activities.”

However, in the communes with low attendance of women, the men emphasised that the women attending the meeting spoke up very loudly and made good recommendations on water supply and sanitation issues. The female village motivators met during the field trip attended the meetings frequently and they confirmed that they gave their opinions at the meetings. However, they also confirmed that due to their workload it was difficult for them to come to the meetings. They needed to organise and plan their chores very carefully to be able to attend. The women also mentioned that the men had a better knowledge on some of the topics discussed at the meetings and therefore were better qualified to voice their opinions. This view seemed to be shared by the men.

The above statements could be used to discuss how to encourage women to attend the meetings and take part in the discussions once they are there. To make more women attend the meetings does not only require an effort from the women, but also an effort from the men. The men in the villages need to understand why it is important that women are involved in making decisions on water supply and sanitation. Therefore, to encourage women to attend meetings, the men should be encouraged to help women with the household chores. The commune and village leaders can also play an important role in getting more women to participate in the meetings. Since the commune and village leaders are well-respected men, other men will to a large extent follow their advice. Therefore, if a leader visited a household and specifically invited the wife to join the meetings, then the husband would not want to refuse his invitation and would therefore often agree to let his wife attend the meetings. Furthermore, in the meetings the men need to be encouraged to give the women the time and opportunity to give their views. In some cases specific time could be reserved for women to speak, to ensure that they are involved in decisions related water supply and sanitation.

Questions:

- What can be done to increase women’s incentive to take part in community activities?
- Is it a good idea to have the commune or village leader make house visits inviting the women to join the meetings?
- Is it a good idea during hamlet meetings to reserve a special time for women to give their opinions?

ARE BOTH MEN AND WOMEN PART OF THE ENABLING ENVIRONMENT?

At provincial, district, commune and village levels different working groups and committees take part in encouraging and supporting the households in their decisions on water supply and sanitation improvements. To have a balanced representation of men and women in these groups and committees is important, to ensure that the support and encouragement are in the best interest of both men and women.

Provincial, District and Commune Level

In Nam Dinh and Ha Tinh, the Provincial and District IEC groups and the Commune Steering Committees consisted mainly of men, in most cases with only one or two female representatives. Most of the women were representatives from the Women's Union.

What are the reasons for this dominance of men? One obvious reason is the selection criteria used. One of the main criteria for being on the Commune Steering Committee was having a local leadership position. Most of members of the Commune Steering Committees interviewed were local leaders from different organisations, for example from different mass organisations. The women are leaders in the Women's Union at different levels, but otherwise women in Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh rarely have local leader positions. This selection criterion therefore makes it very difficult to have a gender-balanced representation on the committees.

The problem with the selection criteria indicates that when discussing the participation of both women and men everything is inter-related. For instance, when due to their big daily workload women have little time to increase their knowledge and position in the local community, then it can be very difficult for them to become members of the Commune Steering Committee.

One could ask why it is so important with a gender-balanced representation in the different committees and groups. The number of women might in itself not be so important. It is more important that, with only a few female members, the committees and groups do not get any contributions from the persons who have a daily and practical interest in - and are most motivated for - improving their water supply and sanitation facilities. The selection criteria for the different committees and groups could be made more favourable to women, so that committees and groups can benefit from all their experience and knowledge related to water and sanitation issues. One option would be to have an extra selection criterion regarding the number of female members. There might be several other ways of ensuring – or encouraging – that women are involved in the decision-making processes at commune, district and provincial levels, as far as water supply and sanitation are concerned. It should also be considered how the conditions could be made more favourable to women, once they are involved. Since the lack of time seems to be of primary concern to the women, the committees and groups could consider making the meetings shorter and more to the point. By doing so, it would come at a lower cost to the women to be part of the decision-making processes.

Village Level

At village level, men and women also have the possibility of supporting and encouraging the households to invest in water supply and sanitation facilities. They can for example do this by working as village motivators. One of the main selection criteria for the village

motivators in Ha Tinh and Nam Dinh was to take active part in local community activities, for example by being a member of one of the mass organisations. Also flexibility, good knowledge and abilities, and an enthusiastic and trust-worthy character, were emphasised as important. However, as women did not have much time for community activities they had more difficulties fulfilling the first criterion. Furthermore, women were generally less flexible than men due to their household chores as cooking and looking after the children. The women also did not have the same knowledge or confidence in their abilities as men had.

Of course, the villagers wish to select the best-qualified motivators, but if the criteria are as mentioned above, it is very difficult to give men and women the same opportunities to participate. It should therefore be considered at village level whether additional criteria should be set up to encourage the selection of women as village motivators. The village leader can also play an important role in this connection. As earlier mentioned, the village leader could make household visits to specifically invite women to participate in meetings, and thereby in the decision-making process. The village leader could also during household visits invite women to become members of the mass organisations involved in RWSS activities, not only as members of the Women's Union, but also the Farmers' Association, the Youth Union and other organisations.

Questions:

- How can the selection criteria and the meeting structure from provincial to village level be changed to become more favourable to women?
- Is it a good idea to have the village leader visit households to invite women to become members of the mass organisations involved in RWSS?

Incharge of Publishing :

Dr. Le Van Can

Director Centre of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation

Prepared by:

Charlotte Berghof – Dinh Thi Hai An

Cover photo by: Bach Thanh Dong

Illustration photos: Charlotte Berghof; Ngoc Thanh; Nguyen Xuan Luc

73 Nguyen Hong street; Dong Da; Ha Noi

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