



Strengthening Women's Leadership in the Rural Water and Sanitation Sector in Vietnam

SUMMARY

Despite gains, women remain significantly underrepresented in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector workforce, particularly at the highest levels. In Viet Nam, only 19.5 per cent of employees at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's Provincial Centers of Rural Water Supply and Sanitation are women. The exclusion of women from the WASH sector labour force deprives the sector of qualified workers at a time when needs are increasing and contributes to gender inequalities and the gender wage gap in Vietnamese society. To start to dismantle these barriers and increase the proportion of women working in Viet Nam's rural WASH sector, UNICEF and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development initiated a women's leadership development and networking initiative in 2022. The initiative has reached over 50 women working in the WASH sector and secured commitments from the National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation towards gender equality in the WASH workforce by 2027.

Introduction

Despite gains, women remain significantly underrepresented in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector workforce, particularly at the highest levels. A World Bank report from 2019 found that, while the proportion of female water sector professionals had increased, the pace of change was far too slow to achieve gender parity. The same study reported that the average share of female employees in water utilities was 17.7 per cent.¹

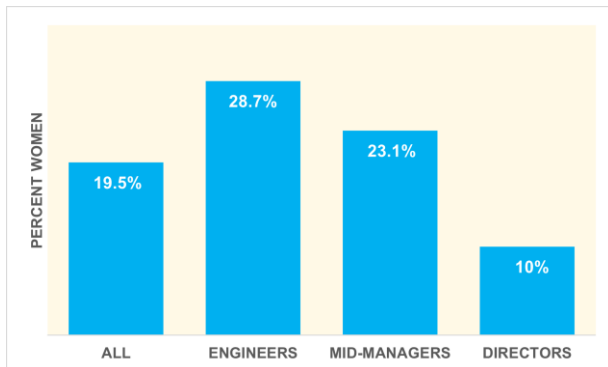
In Viet Nam, the Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation is the government leading agency

for rural water supply and sanitation under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. This agency operates through the National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (NCERWASS) and subnational Provincial Centres for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (PCERWASS). Data collected by NCERWASS in seven provinces in Vietnam show that the percentage of female employees in PCERWASS is significantly lower than that of men: on average, only 19.5 per cent of PCERWASS's 313 employees are women (see Figure below). The disparity is most pronounced amongst leadership. While 28.7 per cent of engineers and 23.1 per cent of middle managers in PCERWASS are

¹ World Bank (2019). Women in Water Utilities: Breaking Barriers. World Bank, Washington, DC. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32319>

women, only 10 per cent of directors are women. In addition, the distribution of women in the PCERWASS system is not even, with over a quarter of all PCERWASS offices reporting no women among middle managers.

Figure 1: Proportion of women employees in PCERWASS in seven provinces



Source: PCERWASS, 2021

Studies all around the world show that increasing gender diversity in the WASH sector workforce will expand the talent pool and strengthen water and sanitation utilities' financial performance, innovative capacity, operating efficiency, customer relations. A gender-equal WASH workforce better reflects the needs of women; children's rights and well-being are also more likely to be achieved when women's rights are protected. The exclusion of women from the WASH sector labour force also deprives the sector of qualified workers at a time when needs are increasing. Though Viet Nam has made great progress towards improving water supply and sanitation services due to government efforts over the past 20 years, over 35 million people lack safe water, and 55 million people lack safe sanitation. Eliminating the barriers to women's employment and career progression in the WASH sector can increase the overall pool of talent for the sector while bringing economic benefits to families and

communities and advancing gender equality in society.

Beyond the impact just on WASH, the lack of women's participation in the workforce is a driver of gender inequality. The gender wage gap favouring men has persisted in Viet Nam and is currently at 13.7 percent for formal workers. In Viet Nam, women's workforce participation is deprioritized with women considered the 'secondary earner' in contrast to the primary status of men². Viet Nam ranked 83 out of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022.

Description of intervention

NCERWASS and UNICEF initiated work in 2022 with the goal of increasing the number of women working in the rural WASH sector in Viet Nam, leading to better service quality and contribution to gender equality within Viet Nam. Achieving this requires working towards the dual outcomes of developing opportunities for women to advance and pursue meaningful careers in the WASH sector and developing women's skills and competencies to make the most of the opportunities as they arise.

In 2022, NCERWASS and UNICEF launched activities aimed at the second outcome of developing women's skills and competencies through training and networking for female professionals in the WASH sector at both national and provincial levels.

Empowering women to pursue leadership position in the WASH sector

In May 2022, UNICEF Viet Nam supported training on women's empowerment for 40 women providing them with fundamentals on gender equality and women's empowerment to motivate them and build confidence in their career paths. The participants came from NCERWASS,

² UN Women (2021). Country Gender Equality Profile Viet Nam 2021 <https://tinyurl.com/2mveyve4>

PCERWASS, Viet Nam Disaster Management Authority, Viet Nam Women's Union and two NGOs.

Photo 1: Participants at the training on women's empowerment in WASH sector



Source: NCERWASS

Most of the women were in their 30s and 40s ages where women are more likely to drop out of the workforce or step back from promotion opportunities.

The training covered the fundamentals on gender and women's empowerment, the current status of gender equality in Viet Nam and the legal and policy system on gender equality in Viet Nam. It provided an opportunity for women to discuss and share their career barriers and challenges. Women shared that the burdens of housework, caring responsibilities, and family expectations prevented them from taking on more responsibilities at work and discussed the need for changes in gender norms in society and in their own lives.

As a result of the training, participants better understood the concept of women's empowerment and developed a list of opportunities for building skills, competencies, and confidence. Women wanted further opportunities to develop better leadership and

time management skills, as well as opportunities to learn technical skills that could lead to promotions. After the training, the participants established a network to strengthen professional relationships and share experiences about work and life.

Developing relationships and sharing experiences

Following the training, the Women Empowerment Network in WASH sector was established at both national and provincial levels with a focus on two objectives (i) provide capacity building in WASH sector; and (ii) improve soft skills, inspire and motivate female professionals to make positive changes for career development and improve self-confidence. It is also an opportunity to create friendships, find mentorship, and connect women to each other for personal and professional purposes.

In June 2022, UNICEF Viet Nam hosted the first event for the newly created network. The

objectives were to inspire and motivate female professionals to work towards positive changes for career development and improve self-confidence. The event was held as a ‘talk show’, where senior women in the sector shared their personal experiences and inspired younger women to overcome barriers to develop their careers in the sector. The event brought together around 50 women in-person and online, from national and provincial government, NGOs, professional associations, and the Australian Government. The Deputy Director of NCERWASS also attended and spoke about gender equality commitments in the workplace, as well as his personal experiences. More events were held throughout the year to develop leadership skills, build confidence, and exchange knowledge among network members. Learning opportunities were provided on the need to acquire self-leadership skills as the foundation of success.

Changing mindsets and notions about leadership and self-leadership is the starting point for women’s journey to building confidence and developing leadership skills. An exchange was held with the Women in Engineering Network of Timor-Leste to learn from international experiences and demonstrate how women’s professional networks have the potential to influence not only young women’s career paths,

but also national WASH sector policies. More organizations joined the informal networking, including women working at the World Bank, WHO, and other WASH sector NGOs.

Results

In its role as the sector lead agency, the National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (NCERWASS) committed to three actions to increase the participation of women in the WASH workforce:

1. Review and develop an enabling environment plan for women in the CERWASS system, including a commitment of at least 25 per cent women in leadership positions in the next five years.
2. Develop and implement an annual capacity-building plan for women, including training, coaching, mentoring, on-the-job training.
3. Develop and implement a plan for mainstreaming gender into the WASH program to not only look at leadership for women but also have a broader vision of gender equality in the WASH sector.

Photo 2: First networking event for female professionals in the WASH sector



Source: NCERWASS

These powerful commitments have the potential to galvanize change within the WASH sector workforce. To do this, the commitments must be supported by a clear action plan, resources, and incentives.

The Women's Empowerment Network has demonstrated the value of connecting women to share their challenges and successes and develop their personal skills and motivation.

This women empowerment initiative has been replicated in the urban water sector. UNICEF has shared the process and techniques with the Australian Water Association to implement women empowerment activities for urban water utilities in four provinces and cities of Viet Nam. Furthermore, the Australian Water Association planned to scale up this initiative at the national level through building capacity for the Viet Nam Water and Sewerage Association.

³ Ibid

Lessons learned

Gender stereotypes in Vietnamese society affect both women's self-perceptions and personal and professional goals, as well as the opportunities available to them. Initially, some women participating in the network events did not believe that leadership roles in the WASH sector were suitable for women because of the heavy burden of caregiving responsibilities placed on women and the impact on women's ability to carry out their work competently. The widespread belief that women have a 'heavenly duty' (thiên chức) to give birth and take care of children contributes to a 'motherhood penalty' and prevents women's career progression into leadership roles.³ Discussing and dismantling these stereotypes was a major part of the training and networking events, but while women's minds may change, their family and social conditions may remain the same.

Women also cited a lack of family support for women to enter in any of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) work fields. They also cited the perception that WASH sector jobs – which can include fieldwork in remote provinces and may include physical labour – are unsuitable or unsafe for women. This is compounded by pervasive gender stereotypes in the media and under-representation of women as subject matter experts,⁴ including in the WASH sector, where women reported that they were more likely to be in administrative or financial roles.

These entrenched beliefs and norms call for greater engagement between the professional network for women in the WASH sector, and groups focused on the economic and social empowerment of women. Such a linkage would create opportunities to tie the efforts to increase women's participation in the WASH workforce to the implementation of the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2021-2030 and the Gender Equality Law, and potentially to secure resources to assist in achieving NCERWASS's gender equality goals as quotas and sanctions are considered at the national level.

A recurrent recommendation was the need to engage men as part of an overall initiative to change the culture of NCERWASS and PCERWASS towards greater gender equality. Women encouraged NCERWASS and UNICEF to sponsor similar training and support on gender transformation for men working in government and other WASH sector agencies.

Pursuing change through both formal and informal means was seen as an effective strategy to continue. While formal change at the institutional level through NCERWASS and PCERWASS may take years, creating solidarity and support through women's networks has material benefits for women in the WASH sector in the short term. Providing forums for sharing personal and

professional challenges, inspirational stories, mentorship and friendship can also contribute to improving women's experiences and reducing attrition from the sector.

Next steps

UNICEF will continue to support the National Centre for Clean Water and Rural Sanitation (NCERWASS) in fulfilling its three commitments to increase the participation of women in the WASH workforce through UNICEF's Annual Work Plans and support to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Considering the significant gendered barriers facing women in the Vietnamese workforce, the next phase of support needs to focus on developing an action plan with clearly designed interventions, resources and monitoring to achieve NCERWASS's commitments.

The Women's Empowerment in WASH network will continue to focus on solidarity amongst women and developing women's skills and competencies to succeed in opportunities as they arise. The women's network plans to maintain regular meetings while expanding its capacity-building programs, particularly in the so-called 'soft skills' of communication, time management, and leadership. To expand the network's visibility, the Network Management Board developed a social media presence; this will also help to showcase female professionals to female students considering careers in the WASH sector.

Photo Credits

National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (NCERWASS)

⁴ Ibid

Acknowledgements

The Field Note is based on written reports by Pham Thu Hien, Gender Consultant, Minh Nguyen, WASH Specialist, and Hanh Nguyen, WASH Officer, with UNICEF Viet Nam, in collaboration with staff from the National Centres for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation. The Field Note was reviewed by Shreyasi Jha, Regional Gender Adviser, Sayuri Asano, Regional Human Resources Manager, and Rolf Luyendijk, WASH Consultant, with UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office and Anu Paudyal Gautam, Knowledge Management Specialist, UNICEF NYHQ. UNICEF is grateful for the engagement and ideas from the women who participated in the training and network.

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About the Series

UNICEF's water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) country teams work inclusively with governments, civil society partners and donors, to improve WASH services for children and adolescents, and the families and caregivers who support them. UNICEF works in over 100 countries worldwide to improve water and sanitation services, as well as basic hygiene practices. This publication is part of the UNICEF WASH Learning Series, designed to contribute to knowledge of good practice across UNICEF's WASH programming. In this series:

Discussion Papers explore the significance of new and emerging topics with limited evidence or understanding, and the options for action and further exploration.

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Reference Guides present systematic reviews on topics with a developed evidence base or they compile different case studies to indicate the range of experience associated with a specific topic.

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