Transforming gender relations: Achieving and reinforcing change through water, sanitation and hygiene programming and monitoring in Vietnam

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This article presents the results of empirical research conducted in Central Vietnam in 2016 into WASH initiatives. It uncovered changes in gender relations and power dynamics at both household and community levels, aiming to explore the extent to which both practical and strategic interests of women can be influenced and changed by WASH policies and programming. In particular, we were interested in assessing the impact of a Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool (GWMT), developed by Plan International Australia and Plan Vietnam, on women's strategic gender needs. In this article, we discuss the types of changes reported by women and men of different ages and ethnicities and the reasons for their occurrence. There were a wide range of reported reasons for change, with implications for our understanding of the relationship between changes in gender relations at household level and community level. We also consider the relationship between wider shifts in social norms in the context of rural Vietnam. The Vietnam research highlights the roles that WASH initiatives can play in furthering strategic gender needs and hence promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. It also shows the importance of addressing SDG5 (on gender equality) and SDG6 (on water and sanitation) together.

Keywords: *gender equality, gender outcomes, water, sanitation, hygiene, Vietnam*

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to evidence of the ways in which water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programmes can influence and change the underlying gender relations between men and women – and how the *strategic gender needs* of women can be met through a combination of WASH programming and effective monitoring. Strategic gender needs are defined as distinct from practical gender needs (based on the work of Moyneux (1985) on gender interests), and a useful definition is provided by Moser (1993):

Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their society. Strategic gender needs vary according to particular contexts. They relate to gender divisions of labour, power and control and may include such issues as legal rights, domestic violence, equal wages and women's control over their bodies. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position.

Practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. Practical gender needs do not challenge the gendered divisions of labour or women's subordinate position in society, although rising out of them. Practical gender needs are a

response to immediate perceived necessity, identified within a specific context. They are practical in nature and often are concerned with inadequacies in living conditions such as water provision, health care, and employment.

This article draws on research in three locations in Central Vietnam to provide insights into how WASH programming implemented by district and commune level government agencies, with the support of the international NGO, Plan International **[1]** was able to contribute to meeting women's strategic gender needs.

WASH is not only a practical technical concern: lack of water and sanitation – and other basic needs - arises from complex societal inequalities, including gender inequality. At the level of policy, the relationship between poverty, deprivation and inequalities is recognised in current global thinking on development. During the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) there was a growing awareness in the international community that to fulfil the ambition of safe water and sanitation for all, women's empowerment and gender equality needed to be addressed simultaneously (Willetts *et al*. 2010). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development go further in many respects with a twin focus on basic needs, and equal rights. However, this commitment still does not fully address issues of poverty and inequality together. While gender equality is the focus of the stand-alone 'gender goal', SDG5, gender issues are also integrated to a varying extent into the other 16 goals. SDG6, which aims to attain water and sanitation for all (implying women, men, girls and boys), also explicitly mentions women and girls in one target (6.2), however the relevant global indicators are not designed to adequately capture gender differences, since they focus on household, rather than intra-household, differences.

At the level of practice, gender mainstreaming efforts over the past two decades have attempted to integrate gender equality into sectors of development which focus on satisfying the practical needs of women and men living in poverty, including the need for water and sanitation. Many WASH programmes now also actively seek to make contributions to gender equality or women's empowerment outcomes, based on the realisation that WASH can be a strategic entry point for further change in gender relations (Carrard *et. al.*, 2013). Yet understanding of what this means, and in particular the need to focus on women's strategic needs, is not as widespread as it could be and the implications for programming less well-understood.

With this in mind, this article supports the idea that integration of these SDGs 5 and 6 is essential, and offers insights here from our research from Vietnam to contribute to an evidence base on this. We hope that this will support WASH practitioners to develop their ability to work to address both practical and strategic gender needs, in an integrated way.

Research background: the empowering potential of WASH

From the early days of gender and development, it has been recognised that men and women will be affected differently by development initiatives, given their different socially constructed roles and responsibilities, opportunities and constraints influenced by these and the value placed on gendered roles and responsibilities. Women's interests relating to water and sanitation provision have a direct impact on the way they experience life, the tasks they perform, their potential and the opportunities and difficulties they face (Fisher 2008). Women's practical needs (Moser 1989) can be met by furnishing women with resources, including water, sanitation and hygiene, to meet needs arising from their positioning in the existing (unequal) gender division of labour. But in addition, women have a strategic gender interest (Molyneux 1985) in challenging gender inequality, which can be furthered by development interventions of various kinds.

The provision of safe clean water, sanitation and hygiene affects women – and men - on both practical and strategic levels. Biological differences between women and men create gender-specific needs in relation to WASH. In addition to those health needs they share with men, women have a range of gender-specific health needs relating to reproductive and maternal health. These require WASH programming that includes menstrual hygiene management and the provision of safe water and sanitation facilities to improve outcomes for pregnant and new mothers and their babies (Tarrass & Benjelloun, 2012).

In addition to these practical health needs, WASH also clearly has an impact on other practical needs of women arising from women's positioning in relation to men in society. Women typically perform care work for their households, ranging from water collection to preparing, cooking, and serving food and drinks, and delivering basic hygiene and health care to children and older people. Improving WASH conditions in households usually supports women in these unpaid domestic caregiving roles, linking to SDG5's focus on caregiving and unpaid domestic work as a driver and a result of gender inequality (Razavi 2016).

In relation to violence against women and girls (VAWG), the distinction between practical and strategic needs is less clear. Women and girls are often at risk of violence when collecting water, bathing, or living in locations without adequate sanitation designed with safety in mind. Considerations such as facilities closer to home meet practical needs and can be very effective in reducing vulnerability to VAWG (House *et. al.*, 2014). Conversely, if WASH interventions are planned without considering such issues, they may result in programming that aggravates the problem of VAWG, rather than solving it, for example if women start to take on traditionally male roles in households or communities (*Ibid*).

Above and beyond practical needs, WASH programmes can explicitly aim to address women's strategic gender needs. WASH has an impact at a strategic level in terms of the processes used in the planning and implementation of programming. WASH programming

can further women's strategic gender interests, by supporting women's leadership and participation in development and governance (Willetts *et. al*. 2010). Finally, WASH provisioning has potential to have a strategic impact on women and girls by freeing them to spend time in activities that bring material benefits, notably income generation or education, however the global evidence base on these impacts is relatively weak and requires further research to prove with rigour.

Different authors writing specifically on WASH and empowerment vary in their view of the role of WASH programming in the empowerment of women**.** Saskia Ivens (2008) cautions against assuming that fulfilling practical needs of women leads to increased gender equality, pointing to a lack of evidence showing that advancement of women's access to water and participation in WASH-related decision-making has led to women's empowerment. In her work, Saskia Ivens draws on a UNFPA definition of empowerment, that it is identifying and redressing power imbalances in order to give women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Programming that delivers benefits for women may appear to be intrinsically empowering, but some studies show that if issues of power and the political nature of participation are not adequately considered in WASH-related decision making bodies, women's influence will be limited (Kemerink *et. al*. 2013).

Notwithstanding these cautionary comments, there is a growing recognition that WASH programming can provide an entry point for gender equality, and can lead to genuine shifts in power between women and men (Fisher 2008; O'Reilly 2010; Willetts *et. al.* 2010; Kilsby 2012). To achieve these changes, however, requires a specific effort to use empowering and participatory approaches (Ivens 2008). Although she does not explicitly focus on WASH **[2],** Naila Kabeer's model of empowerment conceptualises the provision of material resources to women as the starting point for a process whereby they are able to put their choices and aims into action, ultimately achieving empowerment.

It has been argued that within WASH programming, in particular, a comprehensive means of documenting and assessing strategic gender outcomes, as distinct from practical gender needs, has been lacking (Carrard *et. al*. 2013). The case to address gender issues in WASH is often made on grounds of enhanced efficiency instead of on the grounds of empowerment or gender equality as policy rationales. Since the 1970's and the UN Water Decade of the 1980s, there has been wide acknowledgement among development practitioners that when women and men are equally involved in WASH programmes, for example through equal and active participation in decision-making committees (commonly water management committees), the programmes can be made more effective and sustainable (Gross *et. al.* 2000; Fisher 2010; O'Reilly 2010).

Despite a recognition that access to water and sanitation are human rights, there is a tendency in the WASH sector to target interventions to meet practical needs, with a focus on efficiency and sustainability of WASH outcomes, and the strategic needs that are linked to these are not often a central focus. However, there is growing realisation that these links

need to be better understood, not least in light of the clearer link articulated in the SDG framework between gender equality and WASH.

The Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool

Against this backdrop, the Gender and WASH Monitoring Tool (GWMT) was originally developed in 2011 by Plan International Australia and Plan Vietnam **[3]**. In 2011, discussions with other development agencies in Vietnam had highlighted that a number of agencies were facing similar challenges in monitoring strategic gender changes in communities where WASH programming was being implemented. It was proposed that a simple monitoring tool could help overcome this challenge. The GWMT duly aimed to monitor changes in gendered social norms, power relations, and the status of women and men (Thomas 2015). As Plan stated in its guide to the tool:

Promoting gender equality demands significant attention in every WASH intervention as gender relations are integral to the effectiveness and sustainability of WASH. The literature suggests that measuring change in the context of gender relations presents ongoing challenges for monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

(Plan 2014, 3)

The GWMT couples a regular monitoring activity with active exploration of gendered relations through a facilitated community dialogue process, to meet two aims. The first of these focuses on programme staff and partners, working at community level on WASH, and within government. The GWMT aims to support them to develop gender analysis skills and better understanding of the role that WASH can play in promoting gender equality. The second aim of the GWMT is to raise awareness among communities about gender roles and relationships in household and community WASH activities, and to promote aspirations for gender equality, providing opportunities for women and men to discuss gender relations, and to set their own agendas for change (*Ibid.*).

Our research in Vietnam

Findings discussed in this paper draw on a 12 month study undertaken by ISF-UTS in 2016 in collaboration with Plan International Australia, Plan Vietnam and the Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies (CRES) at the Vietnam National University. The research was designed to uncover women and men's perceptions of changes in gender relations in Central Vietnam, to determine whether the GWMT was directly contributing to the achievement of strategic gender outcomes. It aimed to explore the contribution of the GWMT (as well as WASH policies and programming) to changes in gender relations experienced during the duration of GWMT implementation **[4]**.

The research locations

Seven communities across three Central Provinces in Vietnam; Quảng Trị, Quảng Bình and Kon Tum were selected for inclusion in the research. These include ethnically diverse, remote mountainous regions. All villages were sites where Plan Vietnam had supported WASH interventions from 2012/2013 until the time of the research and the focus of our research was to explore changes in gender relations over the period in which the GWMT had been implemented. Plan International Vietnam's WASH programming in these locations complements and supports the work of government. Partner institutions include district Centres for Preventative Medicine, the Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development, and local Women's Unions.

Programmes in these locations have included a number of components: community and school-based sanitation improvement and marketing of sanitation products **[5]**; school and community hygiene promotion and behaviour change communication; and water safety planning **[6]** and capacity-building to support community groups in operation and maintenance of WASH infrastructure). Gender and social inclusion components of the programme have included explicit gender equality objectives and targets, formative research on gender and inclusion and dedicated budget for gender-related activities. Separate WASH facilities are provided in schools for males and females, and menstrual hygiene management sessions are conducted in schools. Female representation in management and technical positions, trainees and community meetings is between 30-52 per cent.

Research approach

The research used a conceptual framework – the Gender Outcomes Framework (GOF) **[7]** – which classifies gender equality changes associated with WASH programmes. The Gender Outcomes Framework aims to assist WASH practitioners and policy makers to more explicitly pursue strategic gender outcomes (that is, positive changes in gender power relations, in the direction of gender equality and women's empowerment) in WASH programming and policies. It aims to assist practitioners and researchers in designing programmes, monitoring and documenting progress to achieve strategic gender outcomes (Carrard et. al. 2013).

The GOF's design was used in the participatory processes employed for the research, and was also used to categorise, assess and quantify the changes described by research participants. The GOF categorises the gender outcomes associated with WASH initiatives as relating either to individual changes or changes in relationships, and identifies three spheres within which these changes can occur. These are: the household sphere; the local public arena (that is, social and community networks); and the wider public arena (including governance institutions and beyond) (ibid).

The research focused on a selected set of seven strategic gender outcomes that had been identified prior to the research. These were relevant to Plan's evaluation of the impact of its work in these areas of Central Vietnam. All affected gender relations in the household sphere or the local public arena. Changes in the wider public arena were not a focus for this research, since the GWMT is not directly aimed at this level. The research was carried out in awareness of the challenges of attribution in that change is complex and can never be wholly or directly linked to a single factor.

Table 1 presents the strategic gender outcomes (SGOs) that were selected for exploration in this research.

[INSERT Table 1 AROUND HERE]

A range of social, economic and environmental factors determine a person's experience of change. In recognition of this, the research disaggregated results by a number of these factors. These included gender, age, ethnicity and location.

Research methods

In total, the research engaged 187 men and women: 48 participants in semi-structured interviews, and 139 participants in pocket-voting. Participants in the research were selected by the Vietnamese research team from the (CRES) researchers who applied random sampling to GWMT participant lists obtained from Plan Vietnam and population lists obtained from government. Participants comprised 92 men and 95 women, people of different ethnic groups (Vân Kiều, Mơ Nâm and Kinh), younger people aged 18-30 and adults aged over 30, and three people living with disabilities participated in the research.

Semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions to encourage people to share particular experiences of gender-related change in relation to management of water, sanitation and hygiene activities in their households and communities during the time period that the GWMT had been implemented. Interviews were conducted by CRES researchers with individual men and women in a private setting and lasted approximately one hour. Probing questions helped to uncover the strategic outcomes people had experienced. Researchers then asked participants directly about the reasons that they thought such changes had occurred. For those participants who had taken part in the GWMT a final question asked them to rate the level of influence the GWMT had on the gender-related changes they had experienced. Responses derived from these interviews formed the basis of detailed analysis which was complemented by the results of a pocket voting process.

A quantitative 'pocket voting' method invited groups of men and women cast votes individually and in secret based on their experiences and perceptions of changes in relation

to six of the seven strategic gender outcomes in the home and community. They voted that they had experienced 'a lot of change', 'no change', or 'a little change'. These categories cannot reveal the extent of change that was needed: context-specific and detailed analysis is needed beyond this relatively simple tool to give an indication of progress. For this reason, pocket voting results served as a rough gauge of progress to complement the detailed analysis of responses derived through the semi-structured interviews. Voting results were revealed and participants were asked direct questions based on results. They were invited to report on their own first-hand experience or their observations of change happening around them. The discussions with groups of women and groups of men also revealed people's thinking about the reasons for change taking place or not over the period of GWMT implementation. A wider discussion with both women and men together then provided a space to compare analyses, share experiences and perceptions, and discuss possible explanations for these. Analysis of the findings was conducted using quantitative and qualitative tools [9], and the research was approved through the ISF-UTS university ethics approval process [10].

Research findings

Selected findings of the research are presented here in order to paint a picture of the gender change uncovered in the research sites, the different experiences of groups within the research, and the reasons given for why change happened. Complete findings of the research, including in relation to the impact of the GWMT can be found in Caitlin Leahy *et. al.* 2016.

In relation to amount of change, the research revealed participants' perceptions that considerable change had occurred in gender relations. Most of this was positive – that is, gender relations were now more equal and women more empowered – although there were some examples of negative change taking place. Thirty-nine of the 48 participants interviewed (that is, 81 per cent) described at least one change over the previous three years that indicated a positive shift in power relations between men and women. In addition, pocket-voting results revealed that these results were widespread, and not confined to the interview sample frame. On average, 68 per cent of all votes cast by both women (72) and men (67) were cast for 'a lot of change' in relation to each of the six strategic gender outcomes identified at household and community level.

Experiences of different gender, age and ethnic groups

Over three quarters of research participants, of both sexes (78 per cent of women, and 84 per cent of men) reported during interviews that they had experienced at least one of the six strategic gender outcomes identified for the research. However, pocket-voting discussions revealed qualitative data showing gendered differences in perceptions of change, and assessments of how empowered women were (or had become). For example, in

three villages, discussion revealed that women perceived themselves to have become either more or less self-confident than men perceived them to be. This highlights the importance of hearing from both women and men separately in any efforts to understand gender changes.

Participants in the 18-30 age group reported more change than the older (30+) age group, (91 per cent compared with 72 per cent). One possible explanation for this is that young people may be experiencing change for the first time and therefore talk openly about their experience. Younger people also sometimes described change in relation to their parents or grandparents as a point of difference. In regards to ethnicity, compared to the Kinh majority, participants in the Mơ Nâm and Vân Kiều ethnic groups more commonly reported strategic gender outcomes (56 per cent Kinh, 95 per cent Vân Kiều, and 92 per cent Mơ Nâm). This was despite the fact that particular customary or cultural norms were reported by Vân Kiều women and men, as barriers to change in the division of labour, particularly at the household level. One younger Vân Kiều man describes this as follows:

Our Vân Kiều ethnic people are used to distributing all housework to their wives, men have never washed clothes because they are shy, and they are afraid that someone else would see them wash clothes.

(Interview, Tà Lềng village, 9 May 2016).

Examples of positive and negative change reported

The research revealed that experiences of change were more commonly reported at household leve, rather than community level, a finding demonstrated through both interview responses (59 per cent of outcomes were reported at household level, compared with 40 per cent reported at community level) and pocket-voting results (55 per cent of all votes for 'change a lot' were for household-level changes, compared with 45 per cent at community level).

The most commonly reported outcome experienced at the household level, was improved communication between male and female household members, in which women increased their influence over decision-making. A total of 39 per cent of women and 48 per cent of men reported such a change. The following example was described by one younger Kinh man;

Before, making decision who work what in the family belonged to me, my wife do all houseworking, and cut grass near the house, husband go to the forest, field. Now, I and my wife discuss all works, sometime she makes the decision

(Interview, Tà Lềng village, 9 May 2016).

The next most commonly reported outcome experienced at the household level was women's increased self-confidence in intra-household relations. A change of this nature was

reported by 35 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men, including this example given by one younger Vân Kiều woman;

Compared with 3 or 4 years ago, I changed a lot, I am self-confident to talk out what I want or don't want. I dare to ask my husband to sweep house or wash up, take a bath for babies whenever I am busy, and my husband is happy to do that

(Interview, Ly Tôn village, 11 May 2016).

At the community level, the most common outcome reported was a change in women's self-confidence**,** including self-confidence to participate in community meetings or forums. Overall, 35 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men interviewed for the research reported examples of this type of change. One younger Vân Kiều woman reported that;

Women have more self-confidence. They speak up more often. They were reluctant to speak up before because they were afraid of men criticizing. Women can say that men are wrong and ask for help. Recently they asked men in the village to fix water pipes because they are too tired to do it. They used to be too shy to talk to men. But now they meet and talk to men many times they are not shy anymore.

(Interview, Ly Tôn village, 11 May 2016).

In relation to women's occupation of public and influential roles, many examples were given of women attending meetings, with a small number of examples given of women in leadership roles. During interviews, 26 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men reported such changes. Some examples referred to women increasingly taking part in 'communal works' such as village cleaning or construction, cleaning and maintenance of public water sources. These examples tended to suggest a more shared public work role between men and women – suggesting a positive change in gender relations that empowers women - rather than women simply taking on the burden of communal work. As reported by one older Kinh woman:

Before, the leader of clusters were mostly men, now, many cluster leaders are women. They mobilize the masses to clean up the village road and invite the men to participate. They give their ideas more.

(Interview, Cây Dầu village, 6 May 2016).

Some negative changes were reported by participants. A total of 101 changes in gender relations were reported during interviews, of which eight changes were negative. All but one of the participants reporting negative changes also reported positive changes during their interviews. This reminds us that change to gender relations is not a linear, simple process. Three younger Vân Kiều women reported negative changes involving an increase in men's drinking. One explanation for this was an increase in standards of living, which resulted in men drinking and not wanting to help with other activities.

One of these women stated that;

"…before, the men in this village sometimes also helped their wife to do houseworking, [but] some years recently, they do nothing, they are so lazy, they only drink all the time with each other, they don't hear any advice."

(Interview, Khe Ngài village, 13 May 2016).

What factors contributed to positive change in gender relations?

Social change is complex, and attributing it to particular factors can be subjective. Participants involved in the research gave accounts which included their own opinions on the reasons for change. Of all changes which emerged in the research, nearly one third (31 per cent) appeared, through our analysis, to be directly attributable to a WASH process, policy or outcome. The remainder were linked to a broader set of factors and participants provided a range of interlinking reasons for why change had taken place in households and communities. This example, provided by an older Kinh woman, illustrates her perception of the role of targeted WASH interventions as these are situated among broader societal factors:

The women now are more self-confident, they are so active in ordering people to participate in cleaning up [the] *village road, to keep it more clean. They dare to give more ideas at the meetings, when the men give ideas that they don't feel comfortable with, they will ask again. Before, whenever the women's association had meetings, there were many women did not participate or they gave up the meeting when the meeting was not finished, because of the low education and poverty.* [Change happened] *because of the life style, before, the women were not treated well, the life was so poor, they were hard working, now the living standard is better, the women are trained more, have more knowledge. Three or four years ago, when Plan introduced the community to do WASH, they integrated to introduce the women to know about the women's right, every house see each other to live better, every one more pay attention.*

(Interview, Hát village, 3 May 2016).

The contribution of WASH to change in gender relations

The specific WASH interventions cited by participants as contributing to positive change in gender relations are outlined here in order, from most-reported to least-reported.

In the three contexts we studied, WASH programming was found to have equipped women with information and knowledge, particularly technical knowledge, which contributed to them having a voice in decision-making in homes and communities. This strategy was shown in all three settings to be effective in relation to WASH-specific information and more general access to education and training. WASH-specific activities feed into wider processes of public information and peer-to-peer learning that are occurring in the broader context.

The most reported example of this was WASH meetings and training - either technical WASH-related training (how to build and maintain a toilet, a water tank or water pipes; the benefit of using soap in hand washing; clean water) or specific training offered to both women and men on gender equality and rights.

Whilst the space given for women to share ideas and gain confidence was seen as important, access to technical information in itself was also a key factor because this allowed women to more confidently negotiate about roles and decisions in the home. One older Vân Kiều woman explained:

My husband used to decide everything in our home. But he listened to me and built the toilet because I told him that it made it easy for all of us when it rains, and that I could tell him how to build a toilet.

(Interview, Tà Lềng village, 9 May 2016).

An improvement in WASH-related infrastructure at household or community level (for example new water pipes, a communal water tank or a new toilet) was also identified as an important contributing factor that had brought about positive changes in gender relations within marriage and the family. An improvement in WASH infrastructure had, for example, changed the nature of household work, leading to a reduction in the workload associated with domestic water use, and sometimes encouraging men to take on some of this work - thereby redistributing roles in the household more equally between women and men.

However, it is also important to note that an improvement in WASH infrastructure does not necessarily change power dynamics between women and men. It may even increase women's workload in particular contexts, underlining the importance of careful research at programme planning stage to ensure this does not happen. An older Kinh man described the increased workload of his wife after they gained access to a water well:

The difference is in the past everyone bathed at the stream and did their own clothes washing. Now when we have a water well, my wife do laundry for everyone. My wife does laundry for all at the same time for saving detergent.

(Interview, Hát village, 4 May 2016).

The involvement of leaders and figures of authority in WASH programmes or strategies was also identified as contributing to changes. These people can encourage equal participation of women and men in WASH activities (including meetings), and can help raise awareness of the importance of gender equality in households and communities. Although a change brought about by an authoritative command may not signal a genuine shift in gender relations, the research identified that where this brought about initial participation by

women in community meetings or activities, it could lead to more sustained participation as a result of growing confidence of women.

For example, one younger Mơ Nâm man observed that;
[The] *reason for more participation of woman is: a woman goes to a meeting, the woman gets to know others, so she is more self-confident. The more participation the more happy the women are because they can talk more about works and business.*

(Interview, Kon Leng 2 village, 18 May 2016).

Interestingly, the research did not find a direct link between the use of the GWMT and the achievement of strategic gender outcomes. However, use of the GWMT could be seen as a way to reinforce and bring visibility to efforts made in WASH programming to support gender equality.

The contribution of other factors to gendered change

Importantly, nearly two-thirds (69 per cent) of reasons for strategic gender outcomes described by participants were mainly attributable to a wide range of other factors. This is not a surprising result and suggests that WASH interventions need to be seen in the context of broad, ongoing social, economic and political factors that will influence social relations, including gender relations. It also reinforces the importance of research methodology that is not based on a skewed understanding of the role of planned development in contributing to broader change. Development practitioners and policymakers need to genuinely understand this if they are to ensure their planned interventions, in WASH and in other sectors, are to contribute to the continuous broader trends of challenge and change to gender relations.

The range of factors that came up in the research as responsible for positive change in gender relations is briefly outlined here in order, from most-reported to least-reported. Some factors echoed similar WASH-specific factors.

The most common factor was increased access to information and education, particularly for women. Both formal and non-formal channels were identified, including formal schooling and training but also public information – referred to by some as 'propaganda', as in the example that follows below. This information was conveyed in various channels including through public announcements and television, and peer-to-peer learning. The impact was described as both enabling women to become more knowledgeable and also increasing women's and men's (and boys' and girls') understanding about gender equality. One younger Mơ Nâm woman shared her experience that:

I found my husband often help me more in housework. Thanks to propaganda, my husband and son understand that they have to help me

(Interview, Kon Leng 2 village, 18 May 2016).

Such public education is provided by Vietnam Women's Union and local officials. Several participants (mostly from the two ethnic minorities) referred to 'cadre' which can mean government figures but can also mean other important figures outside government).

Another younger Vân Kiều woman reported the influence of other women, in particular older women – in development terminology, this would be seen as 'peer-to-peer learning':

I am more self-confident because I learnt from my mother and others. I found they can do it [ask for husband's help]*, so I also do it.*

(Interview, Khe Ngài village, 13 May 2016).

This example is interesting in that it goes against the notion that change happens when people challenge ideas that have been passed on by parents and older people to accept, thereby associating younger people with change. In fact, individuals may be influenced by many factors to challenge gendered social norms and beliefs, and change can therefore flow in different ways between the generations.

Individual attitudes and values were also identified as contributing to change. This may have referred to personal convictions (to act against customs and norms), a desire to avoid conflict, empathy, and love, leading to a change in power dynamics between women and men. This is demonstrated by this older Vân Kiều man's example:

Now I help my wife more than before. My wife does a lot of work (weeding, sweeping the house, cooking ...) so I wash clothes. Everybody here says that I'm afraid of my wife but I don't care. I help her because I love her.

(Interview, Ly Tôn village, 11 May 2016).

Sometimes a necessity or practicality effected a change in household roles, and had a positive impact on gender equality in the process. One younger Vân Kiều women reported her increased self-confidence as a result of a change in household composition;

Four years ago, since I moved to live independently, I was more forcible and less shy because we had common children and my husband must help to take care of the children.

(Interview, Khe Ngài village, 13 May 2016).

Over and above these reasons cited for change, the impact of broader changes in society on gender equality outcomes came out strongly in the responses provided by participants. Examples referred to a range of factors: generational change; influences from outside the village; increased living standards; television and media; and the influence of social norms in wider society. This broader set of factors was reported as leading to changes in roles and decision making in households, changes in self-confidence of women in the community and the number of women in public roles. One older Kinh man described the impact of wider social norms on roles of women and men in the household and community;

Many men go to work outside. They found men and women are equal there, and applied at home

(Interview, Hát village, 4 May 2016)

Another man also suggested that:

Women in this village often strongly remind their husbands to help them with housework. Because it is the right thing to do. They learn that from society.

(Pocket voting discussion, Cây Dầu village, 6 May 2016).

How can greater gender change be achieved through WASH interventions?

This research confirms that WASH interventions have a significant role to play in supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in Central Vietnam. Here, and further afield, WASH practitioners can learn from what has worked in a particular context, and thereby seek to increase their impact.

As stated earlier, there is an evidence gap in the documentation of the impact of WASH programs on gender relations, at the level of strategic gender outcomes. However, findings from this research are broadly consistent with a later study in Timor-Leste which drew on the same methodology and identified a range of factors bringing about strategic gender change (Kilsby 2012). Factors that were similar to those found in our study included: 'information', understood to include information about water and sanitation options, and possibly about women's rights to participate; women's participation in meetings, which enabled change to take place both in terms of substantive issues considered, and perceptions about the value of women's participation; a recognition within community that allowing women greater rights is the right thing to do; access to new facilities (clean water closer to home and sanitation facilities) led to men doing more of the work (Kilsby 2012). Other factors found in the Timor-Leste study (Kilsby 2012) which were less commonly reported in our research included: women in new roles acting as role models for others; funds and technical support from NGOs; and women staff working in communities.

Strategies to address gender equality need to consider using specific approaches relevant for people of different ages and ethnicities. Identifying generational, cultural and customary barriers to achieving gender equality outcomes and recognising the nuances in these is an important step. Participants described the process of adopting behaviours or values they saw taking shape in wider society into their local context, and this may be built upon through WASH programming in contexts where strong generational, cultural and customary barriers exist.

Recognising the particular role that men play in bringing about positive change in gender relations is crucial for WASH practitioners. The most commonly reported of the four strategic gender outcomes focusing on life in the community was women's increased self-confidence. In contrast the least commonly reported of the four strategic gender outcomes was 'changes in solidarity within and between women and men', and 'changes in the extent to which women's perspectives are listened to at the community level'. This shows that changes are needed in men's perceptions of women, and in particular to their views on the worth of women's community-level participation. Hence, WASH programmes need to work with boys and men in ways that consider their particular gendered relationships with women in households and communities, and ensure they are as supportive as possible to the aims of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Given that our research also found that men and women's perceptions of change differed, it is particularly important to give space within programmes for men and women to discuss their different aspirations and experiences separately, and subsequently together, in a facilitated process such as the GWMT.

As stated above, the research also revealed some negative changes in gender relations. Some were related to WASH programming, as in the example of the woman who was now washing clothes for her whole household. Other examples were less clearly attributable to WASH programming. This highlights that practitioners need to be aware not only of the complex and non-linear nature of change, but also the importance of mitigating unintended negative impacts on gender equality outcomes as a result of, for example, improving access to WASH infrastructure. Holding community meetings and discussions which take power imbalances into account can help to ensure that women do not shoulder the burden of additional workloads.

While the research did not find a direct link between the current use of the GWMT and the achievement of strategic gender outcomes, we think the use of such a monitoring tool may reinforce and support changes prompted by WASH programming. Monitoring tools which make a clear distinction between practical changes and strategic changes have greater potential to inform an approach to programming which addresses unequal gender relations. The GWMT also ensures WASH programmes are prompted to include processes that this research has shown to be valid and important. These include making specific efforts to include women in discussions; separating women and men for relevant activities by age (to recognise the different experiences of younger and older people); targeting some households who can then set examples that have a positive flow-on effect; and helping people explore their perceptions and expectations of change. Furthermore, gender-responsive monitoring tools can be used as an important capacity building approach for program staff and partners.

Conclusion

The empirical research from Vietnam outlined in this paper reinforces the observation that WASH interventions can and do successfully contribute to gender equality outcomes – at both the practical and strategic level and in both the household and local community spheres. Recognition that WASH programming is an entry point to achieving gender equality is critical for delivering both SDG5 on gender equality, and SDG6 on water and sanitation. However, this depends on the explicit use of contextually appropriate strategies to bring about genuine changes in power dynamics and increased gender equality through programming and monitoring. Making the distinction between practical and strategic gender needs in the design, implementation and monitoring of WASH programmes, including through the use of the GWMT, provides a significant opportunity to ensure that WASH programmes are going beyond an approach that includes women on grounds of efficiency, or claim aims of gender equality without a real understanding of how to achieve this. If WASH practitioners only focus on meeting practical needs of women – as important as they may be – or see the inclusion of women (without any attention to assessing the rationale, the quality, or the outcomes of that inclusion) as 'good practice' for sustainable interventions they will fall short of what they can potentially do on gender equality and the empowerment of women. Seeing WASH programming as an entry point to achieve gender equality provides an important opportunity to effectively integrate SDG 5 and SDG 6.

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Endnotes

1 For further information on Plan International, see **website: https://www.plan.org.au/learn/how-we-work/resources**

2 Much of the literature on empowerment of women that emerged in the mid-1990s onwards actually focused on micro-finance, a sector recognised more widely than WASH as a sector where immediate material and economic need was addressed via activities that could potentially challenge gender power relations and social norms. Much literature on the empowerment potential of development programming focused on the potential of micro-finance to move beyond its immediate economic goals to support women's empowerment and gender equality (Kabeer 1998).

3 For full information, see https://www.plan.org.au/~/media/plan/documents/resources/gwmt-march-2014.pdf (last checked 16 March 2017).

4 The study was funded by the Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, under the Innovation and Impact Fund of the Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Fund (CS WASH Fund).

5 Sanitation marketing refers to the development of enterprises who utilise a marketing approach to sell sanitation products and services, with the aim of increasing latrine coverage in communities and/or institutions.

6 Water safety planning refers to interventions which reduce the risks of contamination to water sources from point source to use/disposal.

7 The framework draws on research carried out by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology (ISF-UTS) and International Women's Development Agency (IWDA) in 2009-2011 (Halcrow et. al. 2010). It was developed by Naomi Carrard and Juliet Willetts from ISF-UTS. For more information, see Carrard et al., 2013.

8 A quantitative approach was used to 'count' the gender outcomes reported by participants to see differences in the experiences of strategic gender outcomes across the different groups. ISF-UTS presented initial quantitative analysis during the collaborative data analysis workshop with partners in order to validate findings and gain contextual insights and explanations. A qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was also undertaken. Within the scope of the strategic outcomes framework a thematic analysis was used to define how the strategic gender outcomes were experienced in the context of rural Vietnam and the influencing factors for this change.

9 Ethical design was informed by the *ACFID Principles for ethical research and evaluation in development*, including respect for human beings, research merit and integrity, beneficence and justice (ACFID 2016). Partners involved in data collection on the ground were trained in these principles and processes.

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