

Advancing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Case Study of Women Working in Rural Cambodia's WASH Sector

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This paper explores Cambodia's progress in gender equality over the last 25 years, focusing on its adherence to international human rights treaties, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the implementation of the Neary Ratanak Strategic Plan. Despite advancements, challenges persist in women's empowerment. The study presents a case study of a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) development intervention to promote women's empowerment at the commune and village levels. It suggests key strategies to enhance gender equality, including providing training and awareness, promoting participation, offering job opportunities and financial support, facilitating decision-making roles, and enforcing laws related to women's rights. The findings underscore the importance of training and networking opportunities for female WASH suppliers, emphasizing the need for more training, education, and awareness. The paper concludes with implications for policy to enhance gender equality and women's empowerment in Cambodia, aligning with the Neary Ratanak V strategy's goals.

Keywords: gender equality, women's empowerment, rural Cambodia, WASH, Cambodia Committee for Women and Children, WASH suppliers

INTRODUCTION

Cambodia, a signatory to key international human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, has demonstrated significant progress in gender equality over the last 25 years (UN in Cambodia, 2022). The country has actively embraced Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) and the National Five-Year Strategic Plan for Strengthening Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Empowerment called "Neary Ratanak" (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

According to a report by the World Economic Forum (WEF), Cambodia has made strides in reducing gender gaps, moving from a ranking of 108th in 2014 to 89th out of 153 countries in 2019 (MoWA, 2020). The Royal Government of Cambodia emphasizes gender mainstreaming in policies and plans across all sectors and levels, aiming to integrate gender-transformative approaches and inclusivity into legal and policy frameworks, strategic plans, programs, and sectors. However, despite these policy initiatives, there has been limited progress in women's empowerment.

This paper presents a case study of a WASH development intervention aimed at promoting women's empowerment at the commune and village levels, providing insights into the understanding and enactment of policies at the community level and offering implications for policy to enhance gender equality and women's empowerment in Cambodia.

Overview of Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policies and Issues in Cambodia

Policy Framework: Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023)

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), mandated with guiding and leading the promotion of gender equality and monitoring the implementation of gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment, formulated and updated the Neary Rattanak Strategic Plan. It builds on the progress of Neary Rattanak IV (2014-2018). It is linked to the principles of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the rule of law, national policies, government reforms, and sectoral frameworks, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to confirm that no one is left behind. Moreover, it responds to priority development issues and regional and global development trends. Neary Rattanak V (2019-2023) promotes gender mainstreaming in policies, strategic plans, and development programs across all sectors and at all levels, especially in critical strategic areas related to the economy, education, health, legal protection, governance and climate change. The five-year strategic plan for strengthening gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment is supported by an institutional support strategy concentrating on capacity development and efficiency programs, vital for achieving Neary Rattanak V’s approaches and targets. Capacity development and institutional development programs must respond to development trends and transformations, including the 4 Industrial Revolution and Digitalization, and new and changing contexts — globally, regionally, and nationally.

The vision of the Neary Ratanak V states that “All Cambodian citizen enjoys equal rights under the law, in particular women and girls, to have personal safety, fully participate in public life, work, be empowered and make decisions at all levels and in all fields equally with men and boys to ensure self-ownership and harmony in family, community and society” (MoWA 2020, 11).

Neary Rattanak V focuses on gender mainstreaming as the core and cross-cutting strategy with six sectoral strategies and is supported by the Institutional Support Strategy on Capacity Development Efficiency. Gender Mainstreaming Framework covers Legal and Policy Frameworks, National Programmes and Strategic Plans and Public Behavior Change. The Institutional Support Strategy (Capacity Development and Efficiency) consists of Implementing Public Administration Reform, Public Financial Management Reform, Deconcentration and Decentralization program, Upgrading the Institution, Human Resource Development, M&E System, Information Management and Cooperation (MoWA, 2020).

Neary Rattanak V has several key priorities, including expanding research and assessment programs on gender to formulate and implement the first National Policy on Gender Equality and sectoral programs. They also work to promote and facilitate gender mainstreaming within strategic plans and national programs, such as the Public Administration Reform (PAR) program, the Decentralisation and Deconcentration (D&D) program, and the Public Financial Management Reform Program (PFMRP). Additionally, they aim to strengthen the capacity of gender mainstreaming mechanisms at all levels, including various committees and working groups. Neary Rattanak V also focuses on enhancing systems for monitoring and evaluating gender mainstreaming efforts, promoting public awareness and support for gender equality, and sharing best practices for implementing gender mainstreaming in policies and programs.

While the Royal Government of Cambodia has introduced these gender-related policies, with inputs from civil society organizations (CSOs) including NGO-CEDAW, that recognize women as key drivers of sustainable development and the backbone of the economy, there has been limited effort to mobilize these policies into action, leading to minimal progress (NGO-CEDAW, 2020). Specifically, there has been little to no progress in employment and rural women empowerment, despite some activities aimed at regulating microfinancing institutions, improving access to low-interest loans, and supporting large women-owned businesses. These efforts have been characterized by limited engagement, limited planning, minimal implementation progress, and lack of effective monitoring evaluation of policies and programs (NGO-CEDAW, 2020).

Economic Opportunities for Women

Women in Cambodia contribute significantly to the economy through their ownership of most micro-businesses, though their presence is less pronounced in small- and medium-sized enterprises. They continue

to face obstructions to funding and registration. Barriers to funding include the absence of collateral and formal registration. The complexity and demands of the registration process present obstacles for micro and small entrepreneurs. Following registration, entrepreneurs must navigate various regulations, which entail complex administrative tasks. Unregistered businesses in the informal economy could not access assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overviews of the labour market display structural disparities, with women over-represented in lower-paid, less-valued jobs and under-represented in more senior and higher-paying occupations. This trend is worst in male-dominated sectors, such as construction and agriculture, in which women comprise more than 40% of waged workforces but are almost absent from managerial or professional positions (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

The skill and capacity of women's participation in economic activities remain limited. The opportunities and resource management open to women remain lower than men, with barriers to access including time availability and access to information, production resources, finances, and technology (MoWA, 2020).

Due to women's responsibility for the child and household care, they have little time left to expand their business or take a leadership role. Women-owned businesses are less likely to be registered, are under-served by banks, and lack collateral and gender stereotypes (International Finance Corporation, 2019). However, these barriers to financing seems to be reducing. According to the Network Information Exchange, which collects data from those microfinance institutions and organizations, women borrowers reached nearly 1,006,700, or 80% of the total clients of 37 microfinance institutions and five organisations in 2013 (ADB, 2015).

Women's lack of access to production resources and technology is evident in the agricultural sector. ADB (2015) pointed out women's lower access to land, extension services, financial services, markets, and technology. Households headed by women comprised 20% of agricultural households in 2008, and compared with households headed by men, they had smaller amounts of land with 1.1 hectares compared with 1.5 hectares for men.

Households headed by women have less access to farm equipment, tools, and communication devices. For example, 31% of households headed by women had access to ploughs compared with 48% of households headed by men, and the gender gap was over 23 percentage points in the plateau and mountain areas of the northeast. Only 15% of households headed by women, compared with 27% of households headed by men, had access to a telephone (FAO and NIS, MOP, 2010). Women also have less access to technology, and activities in which women could utilize increased technology, such as fish storage and processing, remain underexamined (ADB, 2015).

Gender norms are echoed in the unequal division of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, with women doing 90% of that work on average. Without other supports, unpaid work may be shifted to older women in the family or girls, often with an undesirable effect on their education. They cannot go to schools or technical colleges because they must do domestic care. Balancing livelihoods with unpaid errands lead many women to have vulnerable work. It is an obstacle to women growing businesses, moving forward, or taking leadership positions. Yet public policies or development efforts rarely address the pressure of unpaid care and domestic errands, even though it is one of Cambodia's biggest hindrances to gender equality. (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

The gender wage gap is also the biggest in male-dominated industries; in some sectors, the gap is small at the lowest paid levels and tends to increase at higher salary levels. Differences in education and experience account for a minimal gender wage gap, with discrimination as the main factor (UN in Cambodia 2022). In 2016, women and men earned almost the same in the lowest-paid positions, but the adjusted wage gap increased at higher salaries. Women are being paid less than men with similar demographic profiles, equal qualifications, and occupations in the same sector. Women earned 12% less than similarly qualified men in the upper quintile of wages. In 2016, the unadjusted hourly gender wage gap was the highest in male-dominated industries. Men were paid 29% more than women in construction and 25% more in trade. The hourly earnings gap was 18% in agriculture, where women have a higher share of employment (Gavaluygova & Cunningham, 2020).

Women in Leadership and Decision-Making

The under-representation of women in decision-making is a consequence of gender inequalities. Improving women's impact on the decisions that affect their lives and communities is also a means for women's interests to be reflected in development outcomes. Women remain underrepresented in management positions across sectors, trade unions, political parties, and government levels (UN in Cambodia, 2022). Women labor force participation rate was only 84.1 percent, while that of men was 91.0 percent in 2019/20, although women's participation rate had been steadily increasing (NIS, MOP, 2020).

On national averages in Cambodia, women have a moderate say over their earnings and participate in most household decisions. However, women have the least control over visiting their family, with less than one-quarter able to decide independently. Women with disabilities tended to be controlled by partners and other family members (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

Although Mith et al. (2020) note that there has been some improvement in women's representation at different levels of governance, much more is needed. Women's representation in the National Assembly increased to 21 percent, while female senators remained stagnant at 16 percent.

Women's share of senior positions in the government is still small. Women accounted for only 10% of all deputy prime ministers, nil% of senior ministers, 10.3% of secretaries of state, and 17.2% of undersecretaries of state, according to the Royal Decree in 2019. Women's share of civil servants is growing, but more than 50% of civil servants are men. The percentage of women civil servants was 32.4 in 2017, 40.5% in 2017, and 41.0% in 2020. Women's share of managerial positions as civil servants at the national level is still small. Women made up only 10% of general directors, 14.0% of deputy general directors, 13.0 of directors of departments, 21% of deputy directors of departments, 24% of the chief bureau or equivalent position, 32% in vice chief of bureau or equivalent position (MoWA, 2022).

Women's leadership in land conflicts and forced displacement was high profile and frequently held up as an example of women deviating from traditional gender norms. (Hennings 2019, 5). Women's leadership during land struggles was not interpreted as better access to decision-making power when the conflict was solved (Hennings, 2019; Lamb et al., 2017).

Women tended to be more prominent than men as partakers managing local resources, such as fisheries or forests. Still, few of them had paid roles (e.g. 42 out of 1200 park rangers³¹), and their representation in decision-making was still weak (Schröder & Young, 2019).

In Cambodia's proportional representation system, political parties are gatekeepers to chosen offices. Women's representation would be enhanced when more women are assigned to higher roles on the party lists. There is no quota requiring parties to include a minimum of women's representation. While political parties have internal rules, 'equality' appears to be interpreted as 25 or 30% representation, and those targets are seldom met. The most common reasons were that no 'capable' women were adequately dedicated and without household responsibility. (Sedara et al., 2014).

The Role of Women's Organisations

The mission of Neary Ratanak V states that The Ministry of Women's Affairs' mission is to lead, partner, cooperate with line ministries and partners to lead the way for gender equality and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and girls in society through several initiatives. Firstly, mainstreaming gender through formulating and implementing law and policies. Secondly, stipulating the need for government reform programs, national strategic plans, and sectoral policies. Thirdly, leading cooperation and partnerships with line ministries and partners, including civil society, development partners, the private sector and sub-national administrations in designing, implementing, and monitoring national programs, action plans and policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Fourthly, strengthening the capacity and effectiveness in performing the mechanism's functions at national and sub-national levels to promote gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment. Fifthly, promoting and encouraging the implementation of specific measures and initiatives to promote gender equity, women's empowerment and inclusion via economic growth, social protection and good governance. Lastly, expanding the research programs on gender impact by sectors and target groups to promote inclusivity development and the new social contexts, and to explore responsive measures (MoWA, 2020). Besides

governmental organizations, international and local non-governmental organizations also play essential roles in promoting gender equality and women empowerment, such as UN Women, NGO-CEDAW, and many other NGOs.

UN Women in Cambodia has undertaken various initiatives to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, including strengthening the economic empowerment of marginalized rural women through the Fund for Gender Equality (FGE) Programme, expanding democratic governance by increasing women's participation in formal and informal decision-making processes, engendering national planning and policy-making, promoting the economic empowerment of marginalized groups such as ethnic minority women, HIV-positive women, and women with disabilities, supporting the leadership and involvement of HIV-positive women's organizations, mapping the status quo of women with disabilities in Cambodia using the framework of CEDAW, and addressing violence against women (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

Gender Norms and Belief

In Cambodia, social norms and beliefs continue to limit the opportunities available to women, assigning higher value and power to men. Social expectancies of women and men are apparent in daily relations in workplaces and communities and are often quoted as obstructions to women taking leadership.

Many of the norms that still shape the lives of Cambodians today are codified in the Chbab Srey and Proh codes of conduct for women and men that were developed over several centuries. These codes identify women as 'head of the household' and advise them "to maintain peace within the home, walk and talk softly, and obey and respect her husband" (Anderson & Grace, 2018, 16). In contrast, men are identified as heads of the family, breadwinners, and responsible for protecting women and making decisions. It creates a hierarchical relationship with men positioned above women (Lamb et al., 2017).

Expectations of the ideal Khmer woman are also reinforced and negotiated in day-to-day interactions in households, communities, and workplaces. Women entrepreneurs face negative judgements by their families (54%) and community (71%) when starting their businesses (UNIDO & UN Women, 2020). And others report limiting their sales because they cannot travel far from home due to reputational and safety concerns (Soeters et al., 2020).

Men tend to be seen as more strategic and suitable for leadership roles. This gendered view affects women across sectors. For instance, women managers in the health system report that their voices are less respected, and they have to work extra hard and achieve a higher standard than men to gain the trust they need to do their job (Vong et al., 2019).

Gender norms are also embedded in government policies, such as the National Childcare Policy, which supports the idea that women are liable for children and household care instead of redistributing care labour and costs from the family to the public sphere or between genders in the family (My, 2021). Another example of a policy that explicitly contributes to normalization of women as subordinate to men is the Civil Code Article 950, which prevents women (but not men) from marrying for 120 days after divorce (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

THE CASE STUDY: WOMEN IN RURAL CAMBODIA'S WASH SECTOR

This case study examines a Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) development project (the Project) that spanned from 2018 to 2022 to provide WASH services to impoverished and vulnerable households in rural Cambodia through an output-based subsidy scheme. The project, funded by the Australian Government's development assistance program, was implemented in collaboration with the Cambodian government, specifically the Committees for Women and Children (CCWC), at district, commune, and village levels. The project involved 27 women WASH suppliers and 277 CCWC women engaged in household mobilization activities.

The project's key focus on gender inclusion and women's empowerment aimed to improve the CCWC's project implementation skills and decision-making capabilities. Specific objectives included building the capacity of women to mobilize rural households without access to WASH services and empowering female

entrepreneurs and sanitation providers to expand their customer base and improve their ability to serve impoverished and vulnerable households.

The study aimed to answer two research questions:

1. What opportunities are available to the women CCWC and WASH suppliers in this WASH project about leadership and decision-making, and which factors contribute to these opportunities?
2. What constraints do these women encounter in their work concerning leadership and decision-making, and what factors contribute to these constraints?

Methods

The main method of data collection was survey of the women CCWC and WASH suppliers involved in the Project. The author developed the survey questionnaire based on the key issues identified in the previous section of this paper. The questionnaire covers the following key aspects relating to gender equality and women's empowerment: access to training and resources, employment and income opportunities, activities in the family and community, wash service provision, and attitudes and norms. The questionnaire was translated to Khmer by a research consultant and deployed on the Qualtrics platform in both Khmer and English. Three Cambodia enumerators were hired to conduct phone interview with the women CCWC and WASH suppliers to complete the questionnaire. This process took two months from July to August 2022, with 160 women completing the survey, representing 53% of the total population of 304 women involved in the Project.

Most of the respondents were older than 31 years old. The age group that has the highest proportion is 61-year-old (37%), followed by 51-60 years (20%) and 31-40 years (20%). The majority of respondents had lower secondary school education (46%); those with secondary school education (21%) constitute the second largest proportion; the third largest proportion is upper secondary school education (20%). Regarding marital status, 65% were married, 23% were widows, 10% were single, and 2% were divorced.

Results

Access to Training and Resources

The findings indicate that two variables, "duration of time in the Project" and "age" are positively correlated with access to training and resources. Conversely, the duration of paid work and housework show negative associations. Participants who spent more time in the Project and older tended to have better access to training, while those with longer durations of paid work and housework had slightly less access to training. This aligns with a UN report (UN in Cambodia, 2022) suggesting that older women and girls often bear the burden of unpaid work, impacting their education and opportunities for personal development. The study also highlights the significant role of the Project in enhancing women's access to training.

Marital status was found to play a significant role in women's networking with other women. Married individuals and widows reported no networking with other women, while single individuals were less likely to engage in such networking. Additionally, those with longer periods of housework were slightly more likely to engage in networking activities with women.

Furthermore, the study identified two factors that enable business and entrepreneurship networking: the duration of involvement in the Project and being a private-sector water supplier. Longer participation in the Project was associated with increased business and entrepreneurship networking activity. Additionally, private sector water suppliers exhibited slightly higher levels of business and entrepreneurship networking activity compared to others.

Employment and Income Opportunities

As shown in Table 1, the findings suggest that involvement in the Project significantly contributes to employment and income opportunities. However, factors such as paid work, housework, and age hinder these opportunities. Housework emerges as a significant obstacle for women seeking employment and income opportunities, consistent with existing literature. The barrier posed by paid work could be attributed to the nature of employment and income opportunities, which are more prevalent in the WASH sector.

Notably, most respondents are government employees; therefore, longer paid work hours could potentially limit their opportunities for employment and income in the WASH sector.

TABLE 1
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT AND
INCOME OPPORTUNITIES

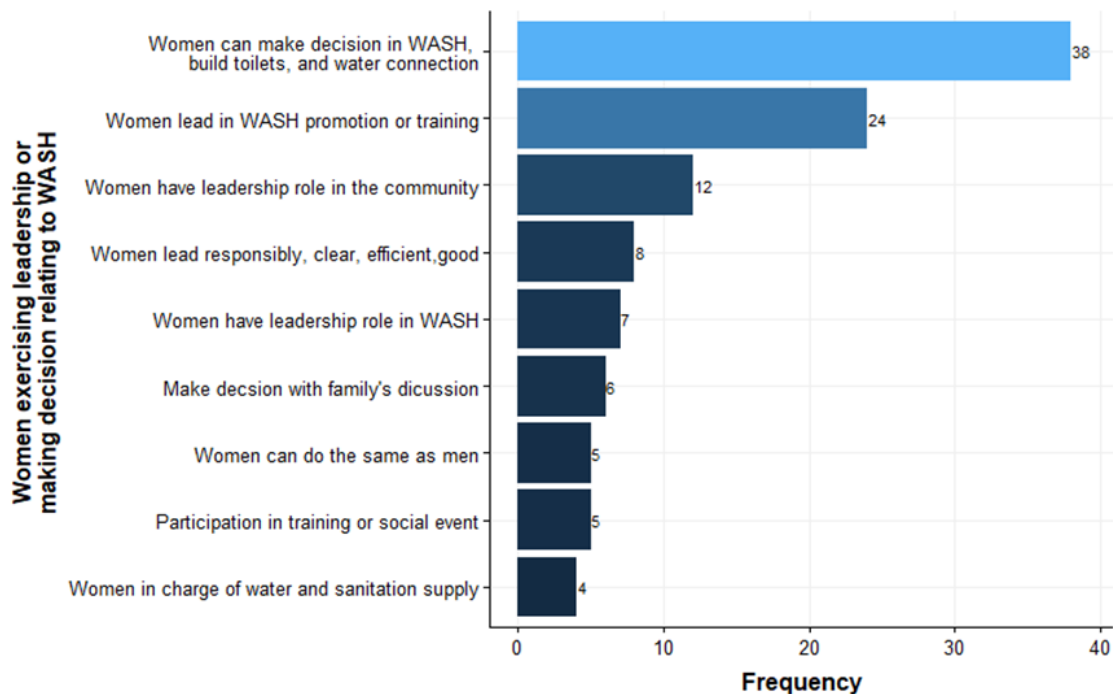
term	std_estimate	p.value	p.signif.	correlation_strength
WOBA duration	0.3	0.0001	***	Fair
Paid work	-0.3	0.0007	***	Fair
Housework	-0.2	0.0035	**	Somewhat
Age	-0.2	0.0394	*	Somewhat

r.squared	adj.r.squared	sigma	statistic	p.value	nobs
0.3540897	0.3323785	1.147092	16.30903	0.0000000001119475	124

Decision Making

Figure 1 illustrates the frequency of examples where respondents have observed women exercising leadership or making decisions related to WASH in their organizations. The top five examples, ranked by prevalence, include women making decisions regarding WASH, building toilets, and water connections; women leading in WASH promotion or training; women holding leadership roles in the community; women demonstrating responsible, clear, efficient, and reasonable leadership; and women taking on leadership roles in WASH initiatives.

FIGURE 1
OBSERVATION OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP



Attitudes and Norms About Women Empowerment

The results show that participation in the Project improves attitudes and norms about women empowerment. As shown in Table 2, those with longer time in the Project are likely to have better attitudes and norms about women empowerment. As stated in the Project’s mid-term review report, CCWC women’s willingness to discuss socially imposed gender roles could increase their understanding of inhibiting normative assumptions (Pham & Ang, 2021). However, older respondents tend to have poorer attitudes and norms about women’s empowerment than the younger respondents. As stated in the policy review section above, social norms and beliefs still constrain what women can do and be and give men higher value and power. Social expectancies of women and men are apparent in daily relations in workplaces and communities and are often quoted as obstructions to women taking leadership. Those with longer hours of paid and housework tend to have poorer attitudes and norms about women empowerment than those with shorter hours of paid and housework.

**TABLE 2
ATTITUDES AND NORMS ABOUT WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

term	std_estimate	p.value	p.signif.	correlation_strength
Age	-0.2	0.0027	**	Somewhat
Paid work	-0.2	0.0046	**	Somewhat
Housework	-0.2	0.0099	**	Somewhat
WOBA duration	0.4	0.0000	****	Fair
(Intercept)		0.0000	****	

r.squared	adj.r.squared	sigma	statistic	p.value	nobs
0.3939544	0.3735831	1.08032	19.33872	0.000000000002800083	124

Path analysis was conducted to examine the potential interactional effects between access to training and resources and various factors related to women’s empowerment, including networking activities, employment and income opportunities, decision-making in the family, and attitudes and norms about women’s empowerment. The results reveal the following associations that were statistically significant.

Employment and income opportunities are associated with access to training, indicating that individuals with greater access to training are more likely to have increased employment and income opportunities. Access to training is also positively correlated with networking by women for women.

Attitudes and norms about women’s empowerment are found to be significant factors. A positive attitude is positively correlated with employment and income opportunities, suggesting that individuals with more employment and income opportunities tend to have more favorable attitudes. However, attitudes are negatively correlated with networking with women.

Employment and income opportunities are positively associated with attitudes but negatively correlated with networking with other women. This implies that individuals with more employment and income opportunities are likelier to have favorable attitudes but may be less involved in networking activities with other women.

Women networking is negatively correlated with attitudes, indicating that individuals who are more engaged in networking activities may have less favorable attitudes. This suggests that promoting access to training and, employment and income opportunities may be more effective in improving attitudes towards women’s empowerment than focusing solely on networking activities.

These findings are consistent with existing literature, which suggests that training can enhance decision-making capacity, sense of community, and self-confidence among female businesspersons through the sharing of best practices, ideas, and information (iDE, 2019; Grant et al., 2018; WaterSHED, 2020).

Opportunities Through Participation in the Project

The respondents identified several individual opportunities that could arise from their participation in the Project, including increased knowledge and skills in WASH; receiving financial compensation for mobilizing households; more opportunities to deliver WASH services; increased job opportunities in WASH; equal income compared to men; and the ability to use water more productively to expand and diversify livelihoods. These opportunities were rated above 3 (on a Likert scale from 0 to 5) as shown in Figure 2. However, they did not identify increased income due to improved business skills, increased income due to increased demand for WASH services, increased salary due to increased WASH skills and knowledge. They gained access to credit facilities as opportunities available to them as a result of their participation in the Project, as these were rated below three on the scale.

**FIGURE 2
PERCEIVED OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH THE PROJECT PARTICIPATION**

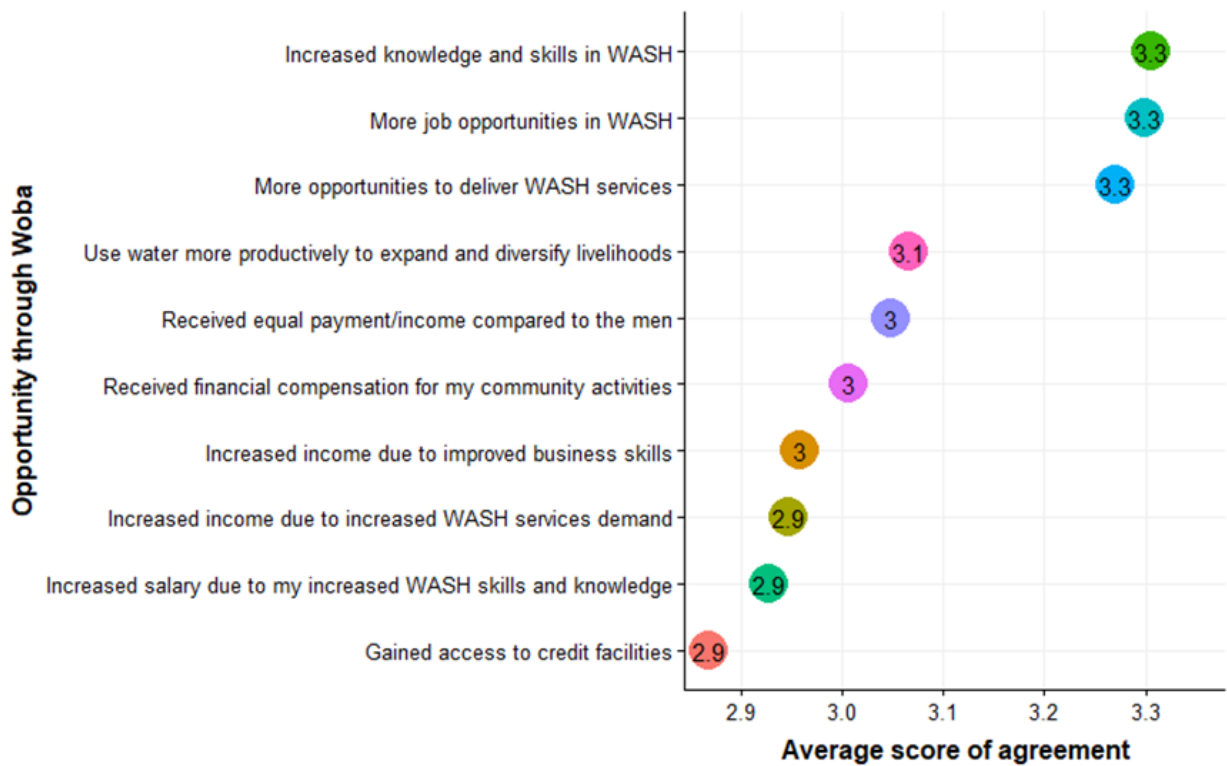


Figure 3 illustrates the average responses above 3 (on a Likert scale from 0 to 5) regarding agreement with a range of items related to personal change among respondents. The changes that were highly agreed upon by respondents include increased awareness of women’s rights about WASH access; heightened awareness of the needs of women; greater recognition for their contributions in WASH activities; and acknowledgment of women’s potential to play a key role in WASH operations and policymaking.

**FIGURE 3
OBSERVED PERSONAL CHANGES**



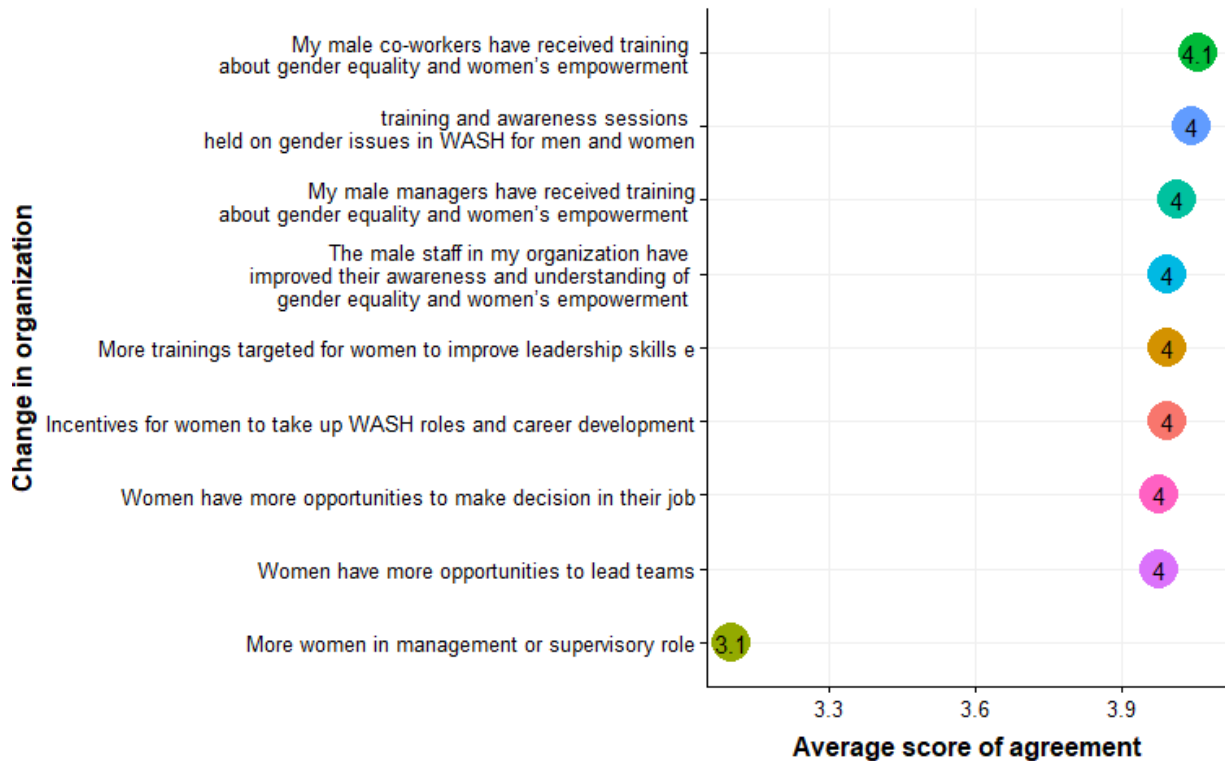
The results indicate that paid work duration, housework duration, and age are perceived as obstacles to opportunities through participation in the Project, while time spent working on the Project is seen as a contributing factor to opportunities.

Respondents identified several opportunities within their organizations, including setting targets for women’s employment, targets for the number of women in professional roles, targets for women in management or supervisory roles, policies for equal pay for women and men in similar roles, and more training targeted for women to improve skills and knowledge in WASH. These findings suggest that respondents’ organizations, primarily the Commune Councils, have sufficient regulations or policies to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment. This aligns with a policy review indicating a recognition of women’s roles in the economy and organizations. However, there is still a need to improve the representation of women in management positions across sectors, trade unions, political parties, and government levels (UN in Cambodia, 2022).

As shown in Figure 4, Respondents noted several changes in their organizations regarding gender equality and women’s empowerment, including: Male co-workers receiving training on gender equality and women’s empowerment; Training and awareness sessions on gender issues in WASH for both men and women; Male managers receiving training on gender equality and women’s empowerment; Increased training opportunities for women to enhance their leadership skills; Incentives for women to pursue WASH roles and for career development; Improved awareness and understanding of gender equality and women’s empowerment among male staff; Increased opportunities for women to make decisions about their jobs; More opportunities for women to lead teams; More women in management or supervisory roles. Interestingly, these observed changes had a higher agreement level than personal changes.

Opportunities at the broader level include more WASH policy and strategies that include gender equality objectives, and more training targeted for women to improve skills and knowledge.

FIGURE 4
OBSERVED CHANGES WITHIN RESPONDENTS' ORGANIZATIONS



Discussion

Challenges to Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

Women in rural Cambodia actively engage in various economic opportunities within the WASH sector, assuming roles such as WASH product retailers, sanitation marketing and sales agents, masons, latrine business owners, and piped water entrepreneurs. Despite their active involvement, several challenges hinder gender equality and women's empowerment in Cambodia's WASH sector. These challenges include the double burden of work, limited mobility, financial obstacles, pressure related to perceived capabilities versus gendered capabilities, regulatory obstructions, and limited social and professional networks.

Among the challenges cited by respondents in this Project over the past four years, lack of funds emerges as the most prominent. This aligns with existing literature indicating that financial obstacles significantly limit female businesspersons' ability to manage their businesses effectively. Limited access to low-interest loans/finance and issues with customers not paying on time were concerns highlighted in studies by Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020), leading to negative impacts on businesses and reduced economic empowerment. Grant et al. (2018) also noted that women's reduced access to finance is often due to the need for documented credit histories, which men tend to have more than women, and bias against women from financial institutions.

Regarding involvement in decision-making or leadership in WASH activities, respondents cited challenges such as low awareness, understanding, and knowledge of WASH, lack of budget, funds, resources, and support for activities, lack of assistance and cooperation, lack of participation, and lack of time. The "double burden" of household and care errands alongside income-generating activities restrict women's capability to manage their WASH businesses or achieve compulsory sales outcomes, primarily due to time limitations that was found in Grant et al., (2018) or WaterSHED (2020) appears not as prevalent in this study.

Female entrepreneurs and sales agents in this study also face challenges concerning their ability to travel safely and confidently. Studies by Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020) reported that women often could not travel far from home due to safety and reputation concerns and limited access to sanitation facilities. However, the home-based nature of some WASH income-generating activities, such as managing the accounts of a piped water scheme, was suitable for women (Grant et al., 2018). While prior studies found restrictions to mobility, the women in this Project do not seem to find travel as problematic. This could be attributed to the fact that the CCWC women were solely mobilizing households within the villages of their communes, and the water suppliers were only servicing households within the local area's pipe networks, which are not extensive in distance.

The key challenges for these women respondents are financial obstacles or limited funding, consistent with prior studies indicating that financial barriers significantly constrain female businesspersons' ability to manage their businesses effectively (Grant et al., 2018; WaterSHED, 2020). The literature also pointed out that financial obstacles limited female businesspersons' ability to manage their businesses. Limited access to low-interest loans/finance and customers not paying on time were concerns experienced by women in the studies by Grant et al. (2018) and WaterSHED (2020). They resulted in negative impacts on their businesses and reduced economic empowerment.

Enablers of Women's Empowerment

The top-five enablers of women's empowerment reported by respondents are skills and knowledge, raising awareness and education about clean water and sanitation, self-motivation to contribute, earning income, and budget and fund support. Skills and knowledge, raising awareness and education about clean water and sanitation, are the two most cited contributors. This aligns with existing literature suggesting that training and networking opportunities for female entrepreneurs can enhance their decision-making capacity, sense of community, and self-confidence by sharing best practices, ideas, and information (iDE 2019; Grant et al. 2018; WaterSHED 2020). For instance, WaterSHED has focused on building capacity for local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that make and sell latrines, training independent sales agents in rural communities to stimulate demand, and engaging local government to ensure market sustainability after their exit. Women participants in Grant et al. (2018) also expressed a need for technical training and smoother facilitation of the processing of licenses. They required documentation for entrepreneurs, as well as finance and business management skills training including billing advice.

The finding that social networks contribute to gender equality and women's empowerment in the WASH sector is consistent with prior literature. Additionally, the survey supports previous findings that factors enabling gender equality and women's empowerment in Cambodia's WASH sector include family support, training and networking opportunities, involvement of male family members, and capital investment (Soeters et al., 2020). The emphasis on training and networking opportunities as an enabler for women's empowerment echoes previous studies, highlighting how these opportunities can enhance decision-making capacity, sense of community, and self-confidence among female entrepreneurs (iDE 2019; Grant et al. 2018; WaterSHED 2020).

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

This case study provides valuable insights into ways to enhance policies promoting gender equality in Cambodia, particularly focusing on work, leadership, decision-making in the workplace, and changing attitudes towards women's role in WASH and broader economy. The study's findings highlight the top five suggestions, in order of prevalence, to be providing training, knowledge, and awareness to women; promoting and encouraging participation; offering job opportunities, income incentives, and financial support; facilitating decision-making and leadership roles for women; and acknowledging women and their decisions.

The most frequently recommended suggestion is providing training, knowledge, and awareness of gender equality and women leadership to women, which aligns with previous literature. Training and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs have been shown to increase their decision-making

capacity, sense of community, and self-confidence by sharing best practices, ideas, and information (iDE 2019; Grant et al. 2018; WaterSHED 2020). This study also finds that women seek training as a critical need; therefore, providing more training, education, and awareness is crucial for empowering women. This implication aligns with one component of Strategy 1 of the Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023), stating the intention to expand the environment and support women to acquire professional skills.

Concerning improvements at the organizational and policy levels to enhance women's empowerment, the top five suggestions include disseminating and enforcing laws related to women's rights, empowerment, and protection; providing funding or assistance in WASH projects, business, and gender empowerment; offering more training, education, and awareness-raising activities; empowering women in leadership, community, decision-making, advocacy, and politics; and encouraging women's participation. Disseminating and enforcing laws related to women's rights, empowerment, and protection is the most recommended suggestion, which aligns with one of the elements of the Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023) strategy to promote public awareness and behavior change.

Providing funding or assistance in WASH projects, business, and gender empowerment is the second most suggested action for policy improvement, which also aligns with one component of Strategy 1 of the Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023), stating that expanding economic opportunities in the community, including access to affordable financial services for women, impoverished women, women with disabilities, ethnic minority women, indigenous women, and women who are heads of households (MoWA, 2020).

Finally, empowering women in leadership, community, decision-making, advocacy, and politics is essential to address the underrepresentation of women in decision-making roles, as noted in previous studies and supported by the Neary Ratanak V strategy. This suggestion supports the two elements of Strategy 5 of the Neary Ratanak V (2019-2023), stipulating that firstly, extending the policy that provides an enabling and friendly working environment and support from the stakeholders for women's public leadership and politics at all levels; and secondly, strengthening the network and development of women's public leadership and politics at the national and sub-national levels.

This study's findings provide concrete evidence for enhancing policies to improve gender equality in Cambodia, offering actionable insights for policymakers, organizations, and stakeholders seeking to promote women's empowerment in various sectors and at different levels of society.

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