

# “Women who have a WASH job like me are proud and honoured”

SUMMARY BRIEF

December 2021



A summary brief on how women can participate in and benefit from being part of the government WASH workforce in Cambodia

The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) workforce in Cambodia includes utilities, government agencies, commune councils, private sector and enterprises. To better understand issues related to gender equality and inclusion within these organisations, East Meets West Foundation (EMWF) and the University of Technology Sydney Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS-ISF) conducted a research project to investigate how women can better participate in and benefit from being part of the government WASH workforce in Cambodia. This research was conducted in 2019-2020, and this summary document outlines the key findings of the research. It also provides recommended actions for WASH actors to consider in addressing the challenges and opportunities identified in the research.

Globally, there is a reported gender gap in water and sanitation management in utilities (World Bank, 2019), and at all levels of government (national, municipal, and local) that needs to be addressed in order to achieve the mutually dependent Goals 5 (gender equality) and Goal 6 (water and sanitation for all) by 2030. This research helps to support Cambodia’s efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, at all levels of government, and within all sectors, including the WASH sector.

EMW and UTS-ISF wish to thank the 41 research participants (interviewees) at the commune and district levels of government. The research was conducted in the provinces shown in Figure 1 in Cambodia.

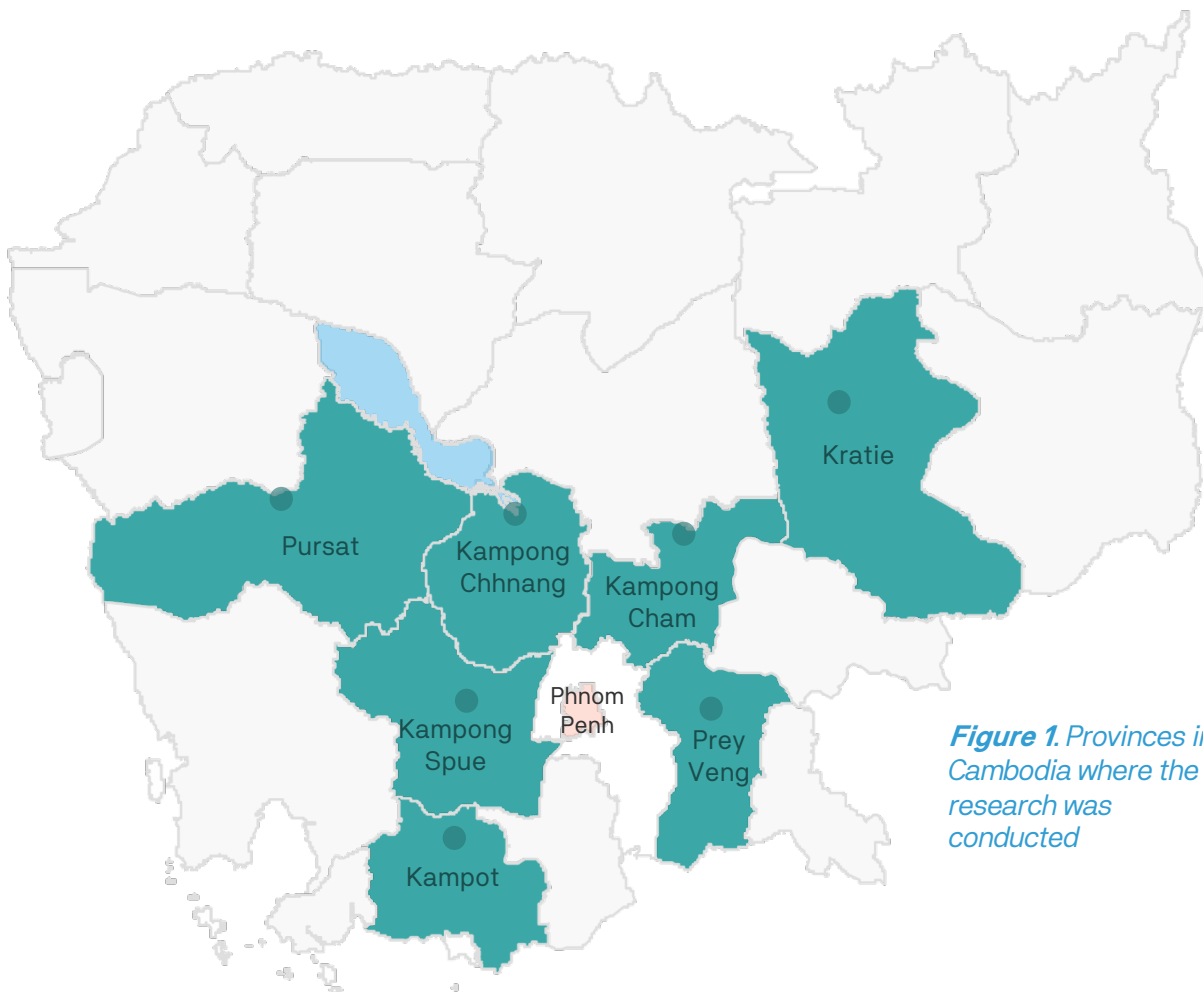


Above: Researchers from East Meets West Cambodia and UTS-ISF interviewing participants.

## Background and Methods

Cambodia has an affirmative action policy at the commune level whereby the Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) Chair is a women, and she is given a mandate to carry out WASH related activities for the commune. There are also targets in place for women to stand for, and be elected to the commune council. While the policy is for 30% of women to be elected to the council, the number of women currently sitting on the council (usually of approximately 11 members depending on the size of the commune) is less than that, and often only 1-2 women are part of the commune council. The CCWC Chair role was established by the Ministry of the Interior, has access to a budget and is part of commune planning processes.

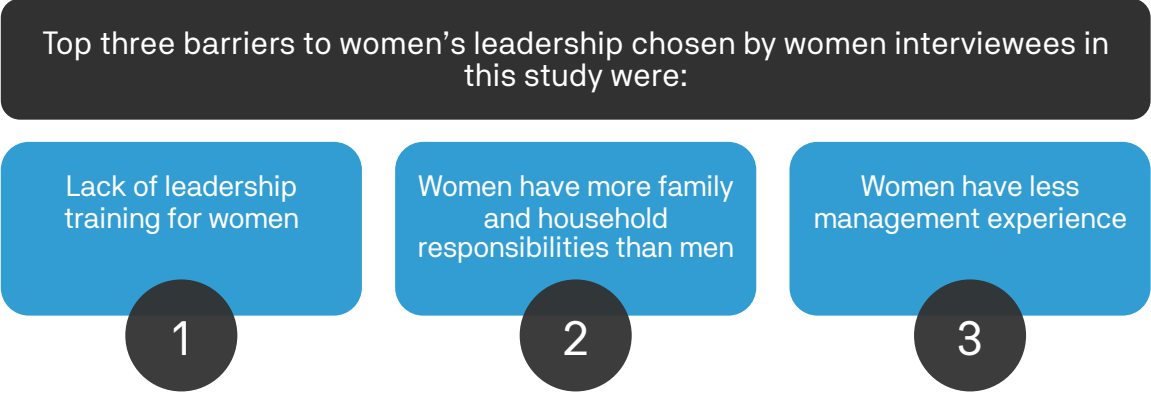
This summary of the research draws on interviews with 41 stakeholders including 10 District level representatives (5 women and 5 men) [n= 10]; and 31 Commune level representatives made up of Commune Committee for Women and Children Chairs who are women [n= 24]; 7 male commune council representatives [n= 7].



*Figure 1. Provinces in Cambodia where the research was conducted*

# Barriers to women’s leadership

Primary barriers to women’s leadership were identified by women interviewees as being a lack of leadership training, women having more family and household responsibilities than men, and women having less management opportunities and experience. Interviewees were presented with a list of fifteen barriers to women’s leadership, drawn from a study conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2015. From this list, the following barriers were ranked as the top three by the female Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) Chairs and district level representatives.



The following table shows the top five barriers to women’s leadership as identified by female respondents in this study in Cambodia (left hand column), compared to the ranking that was found in the ILO (2015) study (right hand column), demonstrating several similarities. The three barriers common to both studies were: a) women have more family responsibilities than men; b) women have less management experience; and c) few role models for women.

**Table 1.** Top barriers ranked by women research participants alongside ILO study reported barriers

UTS-ISF study (2021) – top five barriers to women’s leadership in Cambodia (female respondents)		ILO Study (2015) – top five barriers to women’s leadership	
1	Lack of leadership training for women		Women have more family responsibilities than men
2	Women have more family and household responsibilities than men		Roles assigned by society to men and women
3	Women have less management experience		Masculine corporate culture
4	Few role models for women		Women with insufficient general or line management experience
5	Management is viewed as a man’s job		Few role models for women

**Note:** the International Labour Organisation (ILO) study published in 2015 examined barriers to women’s advancement in business and management. The study was based on a 2013 survey of employees in 1,300 private sector companies in 39 developing countries (ILO, 2015).

# Unpacking the top three barriers identified by women working in the local government WASH workforce in Cambodia

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## Lack of leadership training for women

Commune Committee for Women and Children (CCWC) Chairs perceived a lack of leadership training for women as a significant barrier to leadership. Many expressed a desire for more training, and training tailored to women’s realities and needs. At the commune level, some leadership training was received but considered to be insufficient, as stated by a CCWC Chair that they “...receive a *two-day leadership training per year for women, which is not enough*” and another CCWC Chair stated that they “...do not have *new training courses related to leadership*”. The inability for some women to travel easily (due to social norms, other responsibilities and safety issues) and a lack of tailored training options were also identified as barriers: “*Women have difficulty in traveling far from home and cannot go away long from the house for the training. Also, we do not have many leadership training courses for women*”.



Photo: IUCN; <https://www.iucn.org/news/cambodia/201709/regional-integrated-coastal-management-training-course-extended-cambodia>

CCWC Chairs identified women's family and household responsibilities as a significant barrier to women's leadership. One CCWC Chair explained that according to Khmer (Cambodian) culture: *"...housework is the responsibility of women. Therefore, women have more family and household responsibilities than men"*. Considering this, most men did not assist women with housework, with some exceptions: *"Most men push women to do all housework, though some men help do housework"* (CCWC Chair). Some interviewees expressed that women were taking a greater responsibility for family duties: *"Women have more family and household responsibilities than men because women are in charge of the whole family"*. Family responsibilities impinge on the time that women have available for work and other roles that might advance their careers and leadership opportunities.



Photo: UN Environment; <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/cambodia-finding-solutions-climate-change-empowering-women>



**Figure 3.** Researchers interviewing commune council officials

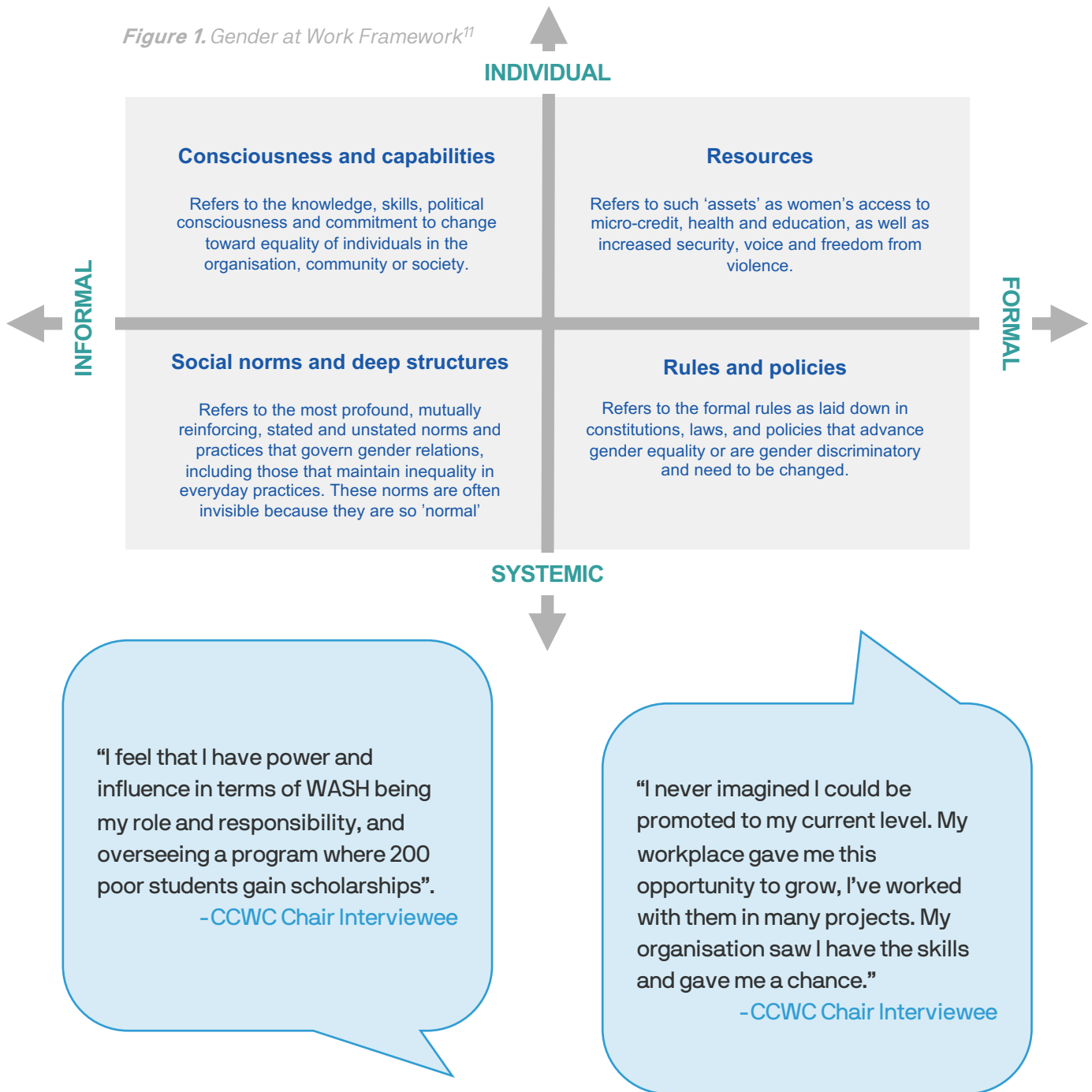
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## Women have less management experience than men

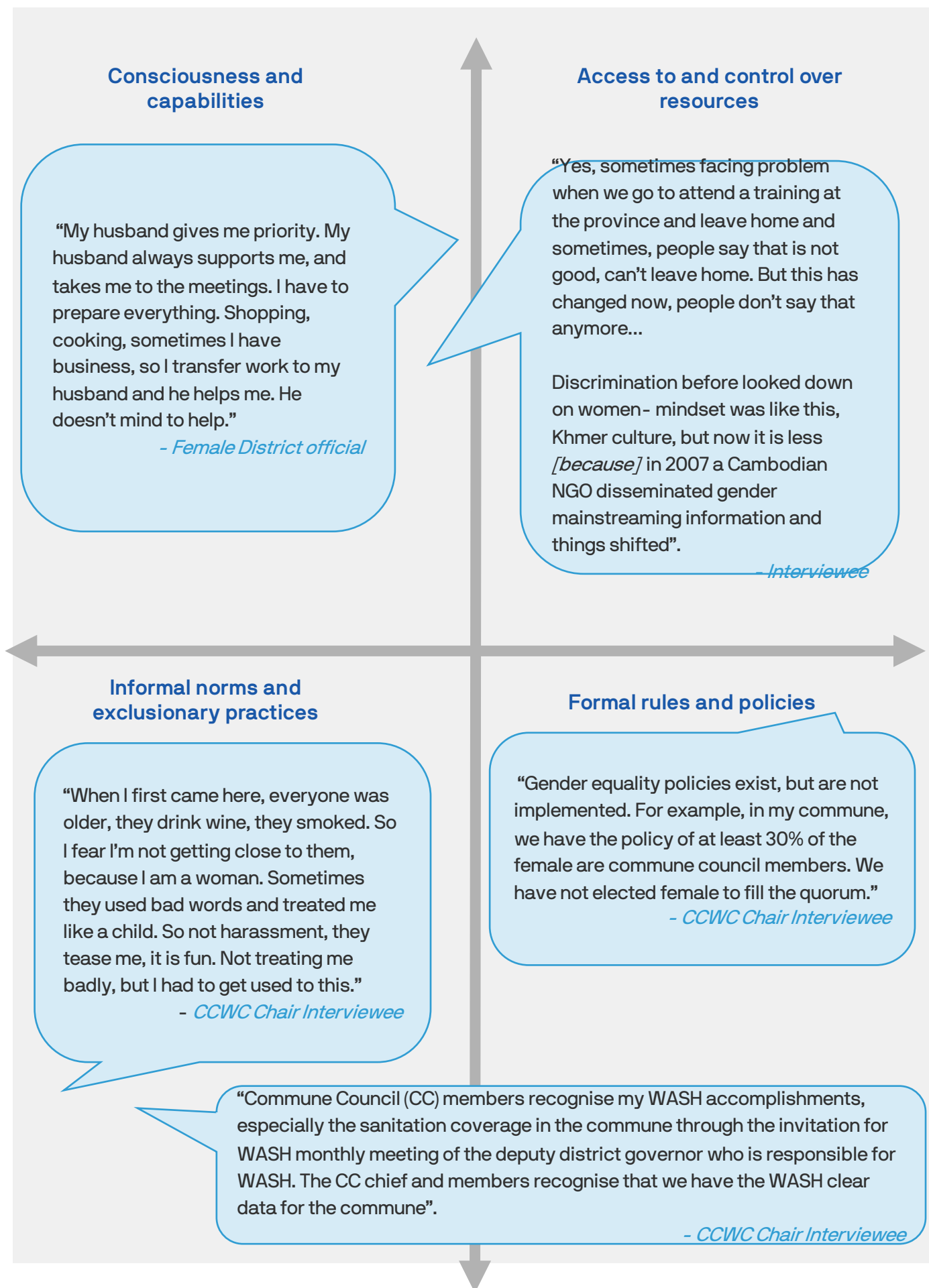
Another significant barrier to women's leadership identified by the CCWC Chairs was that women were perceived to have less management experience than men. One CCWC Chair explained this was because *"...most of the women are not provided management roles, i.e. managing people and data. Thus, women have less management experience"*. Another interviewee stated that *"men think that women have less management experience. Therefore, men occupy the management training which is conducted far from the commune"* thus limiting women's opportunity to increase their management skills through training. Women's household responsibilities and limited mobility were compounding factors that limited women's management experience, as one CCWC Chair outlined: *"women focus more on housework. For management level, sometimes we need to travel far away from home. Husband's do not allow their wives to travel far from homes. So, women have less management experience"*.

To investigate a range of dimensions of women’s experience working in the WASH workforce, the following framework was drawn upon, and informed the questions that stakeholders were asked about gender equality in the workforce. This framework is known as the “Gender at Work Framework” (Rao et al. 2017).

Figure 1. Gender at Work Framework<sup>11</sup>







Above: Examples of responses from interviewees loosely placed against the Gender at Work Framework

## Consciousness and capabilities

'Consciousness and capabilities' relates to individuals' knowledge, skills, political consciousness, and commitment to change toward equality. It is the state of knowing that inequality exists, and wanting to be part of changing social norms that perpetuate inequalities. We found that while some interviewees mentioned that women were perceived by men to be physically weaker, on the whole, interviewees reported that the "times were changing" with respect to gender discrimination, and women being excluded from parts of society.

Overall, interviewees responded that gender equality meant equal participation and ability for women to take up any role in society that they wanted. However, interviewees explained that that selection of candidates and commune councillors was determined by higher levels of government, which may preference male candidates indicating there was a long way to go before gender equality was achieved. While WASH roles were perceived to be available to both men and women alike, some areas of WASH were understood to provide more opportunities for men, due to their perceived physical strength and differences in mobility outside the home (what is allowed and socially accepted). The issue of women's ability (or inability) to leave the house and travel based on social norms and family and societal expectations, is an area in need of deeper research to compliment the present study. This study showed that many male interviewees understood gender equality to mean equal opportunities for all, but that they may not understand the reasons that women have not had equal opportunities in the past, and how social norms and history impacts women today.

## Access to and control over resources

Financial, education, and training resources were the key enabling factors that participants discussed when interviewed for this study. Some CCWC Chairs reported that they received a low salary for their role, yet what this meant for their lives or ability to carry out their role was not elaborated. Interviewees reported that some training had been conducted, but access to it was not always available, men were preferenced for training, and it was typically delivered by a range of organisations (NGOs and government). Male commune councillors saw that education, training and encouragement was needed to support women to do WASH work at the commune level. Female commune councillors also identified training, family support, volunteering, and the need to prioritise women for commune WASH roles. Both men and women councillors and district level interviewees expressed confidence over, and control of, budget and financial resources, though men expressed slightly more confidence, especially around budget allocation.

## Informal norms and practices

The male dominated work culture in commune councils and in district agencies can be challenging for women, especially when they are first elected and join an organisation. One interviewee reported being teased and not feeling part of the work culture, but that she got used to it. Interviewees reported that men and women have different challenges and therefore that their challenges are gendered. Overall, it was observed that leadership styles did not differ greatly between women and men, but what did differ were their roles and responsibilities. Interviewees perceived that women missed out on opportunities to access training, in part due to societal norms around who was considered to be a manager or leader, mobility constraints, and other expectations of the roles that women play in work and society (largely related to taking care of the family).

Interviewees reported that support from colleagues and relatives were essential ingredients for women to perform WASH roles such as being the CCWC Chair and being an elected official. This potentially pointed not only to the practical support they received (for example, help with making food and caring for children) but also having the social capital and space to pursue their interests and ambitions.

CCWC Chairs considered the best elements of their jobs were flexibility, support from commune councillors and colleagues, and decision-making ability and autonomy.

## Formal rules and policies

Maternity leave policies were reported to be in place, though the amount of money and time that women receive differed from commune to commune. Interviewees also noted the affirmative action policies in place, but the 30% target of female commune councillors was not yet reached. The failure to reach the target is understood by the researchers to be due to the pre-selection and election process at the commune level. Most communes who were part of this study had one to three female commune councillors, including the CCWC Chair out of approximately 11 councillors within each council. The number of councillors differed based on the size of the commune.

Interviewees made mention of anti-harassment policies, though no details were provided about how these policies were enacted in practice. Some formal social-security policies for members of the commune council were reported to be in place to support people who are poor, or if there is was a death in the family. Both male and female interviewees said that they felt recognised and valued by colleagues who saw the benefits of teamwork and their achievements. Almost half of female CCWC Chairs reported that their personal achievements were recognised formally in meetings and reporting.

# Recommendations for WASH organisations working in Cambodia, stemming from this research

The following recommendations have been drawn from the ideas and insights of interviewees, as well as through workshop processes with the research partners in Cambodia (East Meets West) and the Australian researcher (UTS-ISF) drawing on relevant literature and similar studies conducted in Cambodia.

## Recommendations to support individuals

SUPPORT FAMILY FRIENDLY WORKPLACES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <b>flexible hours and conditions</b> for all workers so that they can manage their home and work life flexibly. Offering flexibility to all workers may help manage or mitigate backlash (e.g. men feeling like it is not fair, and reinforcing gender norms).</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ask women</b> (and minorities) what they need to be supported with their work-life demands as these needs will be different for different people.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Educate the workforce</b> about gender norms and expectations, where they came from and how they can be changed by society towards equality of choice.</li> </ul>
PROVIDE TRAINING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <b>training and capacity</b> development for women in particular on the technical and systems aspects of WASH, leadership, and communications skills. Other training options and needs identified through the research included Menstrual Hygiene and Health (MHH) ‘Train the Trainer’ training for female CCWC chairs; and the need to provide on-the-job training for female CCs and CCWCs during field visits, i.e. latrine verification and distribution of hand washing devices.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support women to gain increased <b>financial skills</b> relating to budget management (allocation, reporting, fund raising).</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct more detailed studies on <b>women’s training needs</b>, pilot programs in response, and promote these to higher levels of government.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investigate which organisations and agencies provide <b>leadership training in Cambodia</b>, and consider partnering with them.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct <b>train the trainer programs</b>, to reach more women, and to support women becoming trainers themselves, and developing their leadership and training capacities. This also serves to reach more participants.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an <b>online knowledge hub</b> where training can be provided online in Khmer, and knowledge and training needs are assessed and continually updated.</li> </ul>

SUPPORT MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <b>opportunities for learning and exercising management and leadership skills</b>, so that people (especially women and people with disabilities) can have new opportunities, and then are able to demonstrate their new skills in future applications and opportunities.</li> <li>• <b>Actively seek women and other marginalised people for management positions (affirmative action)</b> and create enabling systems and support to enable them to succeed in the roles.</li> <li>• <b>Educate the workforce</b> about gendered norms, roles and expectations, where they came from and how they can be changed by society towards equality.</li> </ul>
SUPPORT WOMEN CANDIDATES IN POLITICS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With respect to the CCWC and roles in the commune council, despite political factors influencing candidate choice, <b>encourage, support and promote more women to stand for election</b> in a range of communes including ‘safe seats’ (i.e. not only those where they have less chance of winning).</li> <li>• <b>Implement quotas at district and commune level.</b> Increase visibility of female leaders and role models, and consider implementing quotas at the district level in line with the policy at the commune level.</li> <li>• If women are hesitant to stand for election due to confidence, and/or family responsibilities, then a <b>mentoring program</b> may be useful, so that younger women are supported by those with more experience.</li> </ul>
ENGAGE MEN AND WOMEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Work with men as allies.</b> Some organisations are involving husbands in program that support and upskill women so that backlash is minimised. Other ways to engage men as allies in the Cambodian context could be further investigated and integrated into programs, such as finding champion Commune Chief’s to profile and to influence others.</li> <li>• <b>GEDSI training for the whole community</b> is another way to increase the understanding of all community members and their awareness of historical and present discrimination of women and marginalised people.</li> <li>• <b>Work with key opinion leaders and influencers</b> at the commune, district and provincial levels to promote gender equality messages and women leaders.</li> </ul>
ENSURE TRAVEL AND THE WORKPLACE IS SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Provide safe transport options</b> for women staff to travel for work including trainings. It is important to ask whether or not people need transportation when tasks or responsibilities are assigned. There also may be a need to provide hotels and/or a place to stay if needed for staff (and their spouse or family member) to travel far from the home. A women staff member may also wish to bring a relative or friend with her for support and safety.</li> <li>• <b>Travel together.</b> It is recommended that people travel in twos, and that this be for men and women (not only women), so that the policy is fair and equal for all.</li> <li>• <b>Support communications.</b> Ensuring that staff have a phone and credit is important to ensure that staff have a way to stay in touch, and call for support if needed.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations to support organisations

<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSION TRAINING</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Facilitate or deliver gender equality training programs</b> for district and commune councillors, to deepen awareness, and support strategies to make workplaces more inclusive. Consider a longer-term phased approach, so that awareness and practical action is built upon over time, and the benefits of the training are sustained.</li> <li>• <b>Consult with the Ministry for Interior (Mol)</b> about how to increase representation of women in the Mol, and at the district level. Work with women’s organisations and government leads to progress and implement strategies.</li> <li>• <b>Provide incentives for achieving the 30% women in commune councils quota.</b> Understanding what could further incentivise communes to choose women candidates, and supporting them and helping them to win elections could possibly increase the number of women elected to council.</li> <li>• <b>Select venues that are accessible</b>, and able to be reached easily by women and people with disabilities. Consider ensuring that women can travel to and from the training without needing to stay over-night if possible (e.g. not starting too early, or finishing too late). Include female village assistants, deputy chiefs, and chiefs in the training.</li> </ul>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">FORMAL RULES AND POLICIES</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider and investigate the sources of the problem related to a <b>lack of enforcement of policies to provide opportunities for women</b> (e.g. for promotion, and anti-harassment). Consider how compliance can be encouraged or enforced and taken up by all levels of government.</li> <li>• Establish ways to <b>profile and recognise the achievements of women</b> working in WASH roles to support recognition of their work, their careers and promotion opportunities.</li> <li>• Build up <b>testimonials from women about the successful work that they are doing</b>, and provide opportunities for these to be showcased to government and the community. This can assist with elevating the profile of role models which are sought after. Ensure that there is budget for rewards, incentives, and communications to communicate the achievements of staff working in WASH.</li> <li>• Include discussions of, and <b>training on, anti-harassment policies, GEDSI processes and awareness</b> in the project orientation when WASH organisations start a new project.</li> <li>• Conduct <b>further research</b> on why the 30% affirmative action target (for commune councillors) has not been reached, and/or partner with organisations that are also interested in this topic and how to address the shortfall.</li> <li>• CSOs can advocate <b>for paid maternity leave of partners and staff.</b></li> <li>• While CSOs might be limited in how they can influence provincial, district and commune government policies or rules, together with district government partners they can <b>advise or influence the commune councils to recruit women commune council staff.</b></li> </ul>
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">ORGANISATIONAL ASSESSMENT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CSOs can undertake an audit of their own organisation and activities, and then draw on the range of ideas for <b>making WASH workplaces more inclusive</b> as outlined in the <a href="#">ISF-UTS database of over 180 GEDSI initiatives in the workplace</a> from across the world.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations to support society at large

### GEDSI TRAINING FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

- Together with district partners, WASH CSOs can provide **gender and disability awareness training at the commune level** when a new project is started (for the whole commune council) and involve the broader community.
- **Engage in further research** about the perception of opportunities that exist in the WASH workforce including WASH leadership roles available, to ensure that expectations are managed, and women are supported to take up roles that exist, have status and leadership potential.
- Consider opportunities to partner with, and engage the **Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA) and the Cambodia National Council for Women (CNCW)**.

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Water for Women is Australia's flagship water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) program supporting improved health, equality and wellbeing in Asian and Pacific communities through socially inclusive and sustainable WASH projects. Water for Women is delivering 18 WASH projects in 15 countries together with 11 research projects over five years (2018-2022).

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For more  
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