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SUMMARY REPORT AND POLICY BRIEF

The Gender Responsiveness of Infrastructure and the Relationship between Infrastructure and Women's Unpaid Care Work: A Perspective from the North-West of Vietnam

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Acronyms

AAV	ActionAid Vietnam
AWEEV	Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment in Vietnam
CEMA	Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs
CVN	CARE International in Vietnam
FGD	Focus group discussion
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MOLISA	Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRD	New Rural Development
NTP	National Target Program
SEDEMA	Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas
SPR	Sustainable Poverty Reduction
UCW	Unpaid care work
WB	World Bank
WU	Women's Union

Definitions

Gender responsive infrastructure work is the level at which infrastructure work assures women's participation and benefit in all stages of its investment and use process.

Unpaid care work (UCW)¹ includes indirect care such as taking children to/from school, collecting wood/ fetching water, house chores (food preparation, house cleaning/tidying, washing clothes, going to the market) and direct care of children/the elderly (including the elderly, sick members or people with disability), and some other activities.

Income-generating work includes activities that a person does and can receive payment (wage/salary) or self-employment work such as a small business, small trading, manufacturing/making products for sale, and collecting public waste.

¹ See the definition of unpaid care work of ILO (2018)



1. INTRODUCTION

The unpaid care work (UCW) burden contributes to gender inequality in Vietnam. A survey by ActionAid Vietnam (AVV) and the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) shows that women spend, on average, 4.06 hours a day doing unpaid care work compared to the corresponding time of men 2.36 hours a day (AVV and MOLISA, 2017). Gender-related evidence in infrastructure investment has confirmed the difference in participation, use, and benefit from the infrastructure work of men and women. Such difference relates to gender inequality in the household labour division, decision-making power, ownership, as well as other cultural barriers (ADB, 2019). Meanwhile, assessments on gender integration in the two National Target Programs (NPT) on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTP-SPR) and New Rural Development (NTP-SRD) in 2016-2020 show that infrastructure investment was usually “gender-neutral” (see CVN, Oxfam and SNV, 2018; VWU and UNW, 2020).

CARE International in Vietnam (CVN) is implementing the Project for Advancing Women’s Economic Empowerment in Vietnam (AWEEV) in a number of communes in Ha Giang and Lai Chau.² Within the framework of the AWEEV project, CVN carried out a Study on “Assessment on gender responsiveness level and impacts of rural infrastructure on Women’s Unpaid Care Work” to better learn about the gender responsiveness of infrastructure work invested and built within the framework of the National Target Programs in 2016-2020, as well as the impacts of this infrastructure work on women’s UCW. This is the first study on this issue in Vietnam.

The study was built mainly on a survey conducted with women in six ethnic minority communes in Hoa Binh, Ha Giang, and Lai Chau provinces. The survey sample included women representatives from 236 households, of which 94% of the household heads were ethnic minorities, 30% were poor households, and 29.6% were near-poor households.³ In addition, to supplement data to the analysis, the research team conducted 18 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 20 commune officials (of which 60% was female) and 90 women in 12 villages in the survey area.

² Please refer to: [AWEEV Project](#)

³ Vietnam’s official poverty line is multidimensional. For the period 2016-2020, the multidimensional poverty line was stated in the Decision 59/2016/QĐ-TTg. Accordingly, a rural household is classified as “poor” if either (i) per capita monthly income of less than 700.000 VND; or (ii) pc. monthly income between 700.000 to 1.000.000 VND and lack of at least 3 (out of 10) indicators of access to basic services. A rural household is classified as “near poor” if per capital monthly income between 700.000 to 1.000.000 VND and lack of max 3 (out of 10) indicators of access to basic services.





2. GENDER RESPONSIVENESS OF INFRASTRUCTURE WORK

Characteristics of infrastructure work in the survey area:

Infrastructure investment was one of the most important priorities of the NTPs. In 2016-2020, there were 44 infrastructure actions per commune in the survey communes, with an average capital resource size of VND 806 million/action. 74% of the work was built with funds from the NTPs; and 11% from the Central budget other than the NTPs. Local budgets could only cover 13% of the infrastructure work at commune and village levels (see Table 1). Notably, infrastructure work funded by international organizations only accounted for 1%. In implementation, communes and villages serving as investment owners accounted for nearly 80% of all infrastructure work. Regarding the types of jobs, the invested infrastructure work mainly was related to traffic (64.7%), domestic water and electricity (10.9%), irrigation (8.3%) and other public work (16.2%). Notably, up to 73% of infrastructure work was upgrade. The structure of the types of work in the survey sample is pretty similar to the structure of the work in the NTP-SPR and NTP-NRD (MOLISA, 2020; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) (2020)).

Table 1. Some characteristics of commune and village infrastructure work

Classification	Characteristics	Quantity	Percentage %
Resources	Total number of infrastructure actions	266	100
	NTP-NRD, NTP-SPR	196	74
	Other programs funded by the Central budget	29	11
	Local budget and socialized amount	34	13
	Funds from international organizations	3	1
	Unidentified sources	4	1
Investment owner	Commune level	212	79.7
	District/provincial level	54	20.3
Types of work	Transportation (roads, bridges, etc.)	172	64.7
	Irrigation work	22	8.3
	Public services (community house, market, schools, health stations, etc.)	43	16.2
	Domestic water, electric work	29	10.9
New construction/ upgrade	Newly built	194	72.9
	Upgraded	72	27.1

Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

Measuring gender responsiveness of infrastructure work:

This study measured the gender responsiveness level of infrastructure work using the criteria of women's participation in and benefit from different stages of work selection, design, construction, maintenance and repair and use (see Table 2). The score range for these criteria is from 0 to 100 (maximum 10 points/ criterion), where 100 represents the highest level of gender responsiveness.

Table 2. Criteria for assessment of gender responsiveness of infrastructure work

Work planning and construction
1. Were village meetings organized to propose work to be prioritized?
2. How were women active in making proposals in the village meetings (if meetings were organized)?
3. Were women's priorities taken into consideration when selecting the work?
4. Did the work design meet women's priorities?
5. Did women participate in the construction work process?
6. Did women participate in the approval and monitoring of the work?
Post-construction
7. Is the infrastructure still in use now?
8. The level of use and benefit of the infrastructure by women compared to men?
9. Does the infrastructure help women reduce time spent on UCW?
10. Does the infrastructure help women increase their opportunities to get a job (do local jobs, migrate to work)?

The gender responsiveness of infrastructure work in the surveyed communes was below the low level.

According to the household survey results, the total score of the gender responsiveness of infrastructure work was only 34.4/100 points (see Table 3). Thus, if 100 was considered the maximum score for gender responsiveness of infrastructure work, then, in reality, commune and village level infrastructure works in the survey area only met about 1/3 of the requirements. There was a big difference in the perception of women respondents in household interviews and the assessment of commune officials on the gender responsiveness level of infrastructure work. While the average score perceived by women in the commune was 34.4, the commune officials assessed it at 55.7. There is a possibility that the commune officials gave too high scores for the gender responsiveness of the infrastructure work because they directly supervised/monitored and managed the investments of such works; therefore, they would have the sense that “everything should be all good.” Besides, this result was synthesized from 14 observations of commune officials (each male respondent in charge of infrastructure in a commune). The assessment of women respondents of the household survey is more accurate as it was the actual feeling, based on their experience, of the extent to which local people were involved in and benefited from different stages of the infrastructure investment process. The household survey results were also based on a larger number of observations (236 observations), making its statistical confidence level also higher.

Table 3. Average score of the gender responsiveness of infrastructure work

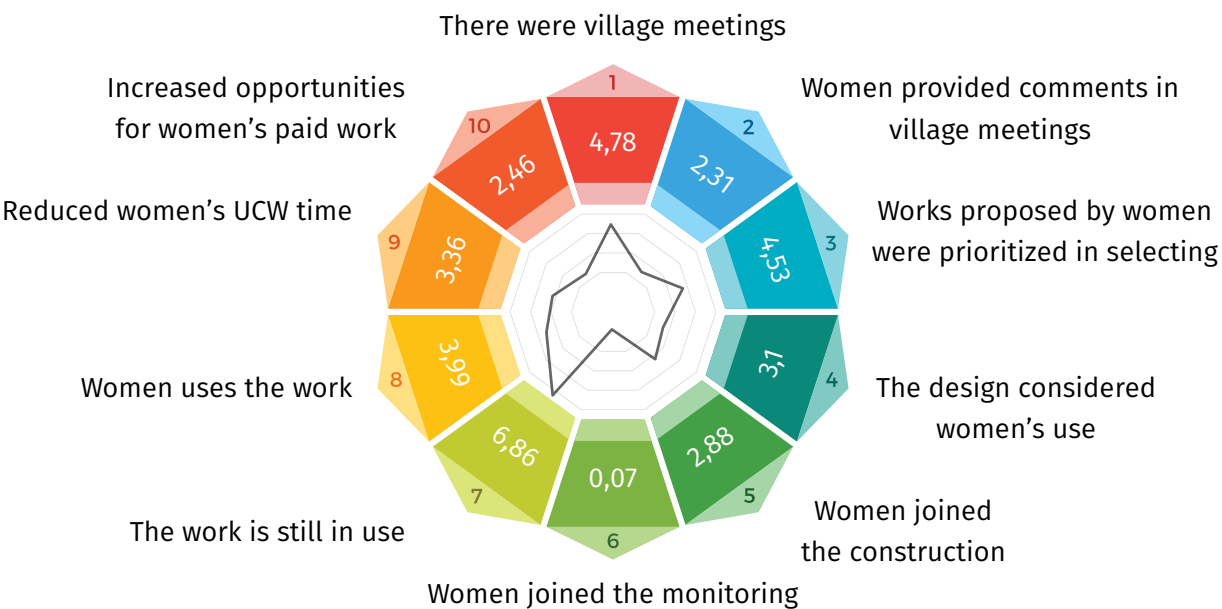
	About the construction process		About use/benefit from the work		Total score of the whole work	
	Villagers	Commune officials	Villagers	Commune officials	Villagers	Commune officials
Gender responsiveness score	17.7	28.8	16.7	26.9	34.3	55.7

Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

There is a big difference in the results on gender responsiveness of infrastructure work with different assessment criteria.

Figure 1 summarizes surveyed women’s assessment results on the gender responsiveness of infrastructure work based on different criteria. The *functionality of the work* (i.e., the work is still in good condition and thus functions to meet the need of users) received the highest score (6.86/10). The second most important criterion for the gender responsiveness of infrastructure work was *the organization of village meetings to select the work* (4.78/10). However, the quality of women’s participation in village meetings organized to select and propose prioritized investment work was assessed below. This was because women did not contribute many comments in such discussions. Therefore, the score for this aspect was only 2.31 (out of 10). Also, according to women’s assessment, the criterion: *whether their proposed work was considered in the selection or not* received an average score (4.53/10). Women also self-assessed their *use of infrastructure work* (compared to men) as average (score is 3.99/10). For the remaining criteria, the gender responsiveness scores were low. In particular, women had almost no *role in the approval and monitoring of work* (average score: 0.7/10 – the lowest score among all gender responsiveness assessment criteria).

Figure 1. Criteria for Gender responsiveness of infrastructure work

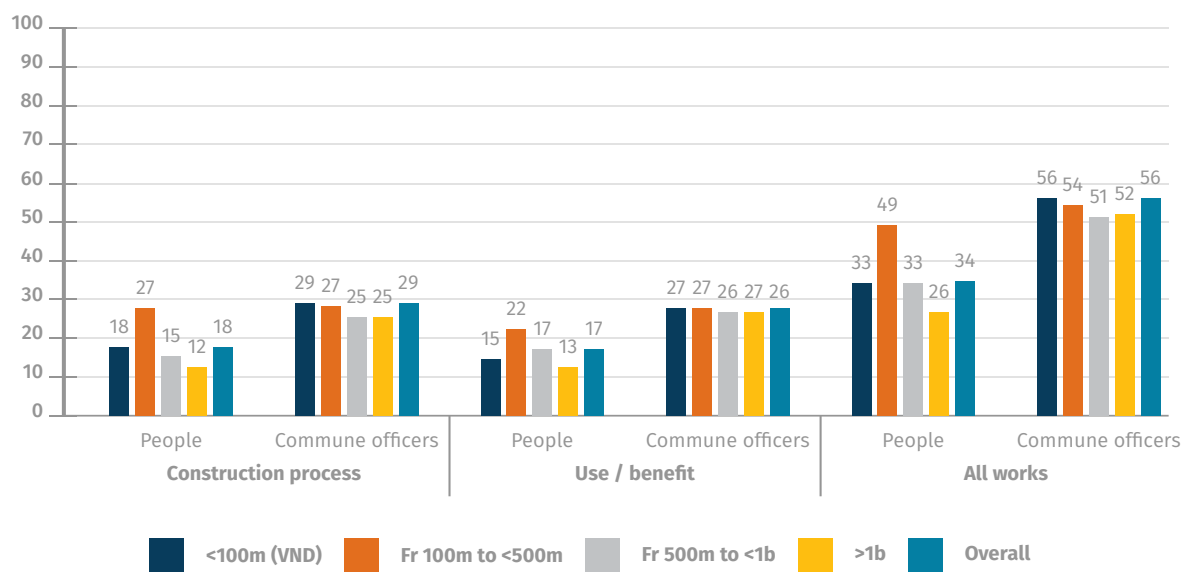


Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

The level of gender responsiveness is inversely proportional to the size of the work.

The survey results show that the smaller the work was, the more gender-responsive it was (Figure 2). The findings of many FGDs also reflect the same trend. The reason is that small and simple infrastructure work is usually implemented in a village, so the community has a greater say in the selection and design. These are also often simple construction work projects; therefore, they often use more local labourers. It is easy to apply specific investment mechanisms for self-implementation by community-based groups. Meanwhile, larger-scale works are usually constructed by contractors who rarely use local labourers, or if they hire local people, they usually only hire men due to the prejudice against women: “women are weak.”

Figure 2. Gender responsiveness of infrastructure work by the size of capital resources

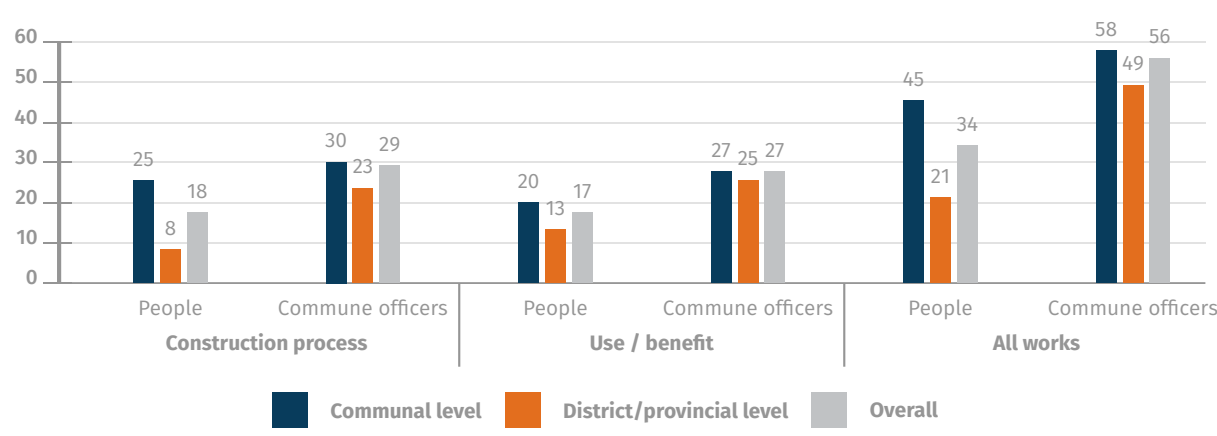


Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

The infrastructure projects where communes are investment owners were more gender-responsive than those owned by the senior level.

Figure 3 indicates that both commune officials and villagers considered that the average total scores of gender-responsiveness of the work were higher when the level of investment owner was the commune level, especially in the stages related to the construction work process. This is similar to the results of FGDs with commune officials and villagers, i.e., the projects in that communes where the investment owners were more responsive than the projects whose investment owners were district or provincial level.

Figure 3. Level of gender responsiveness of infrastructure work by type of investment owner

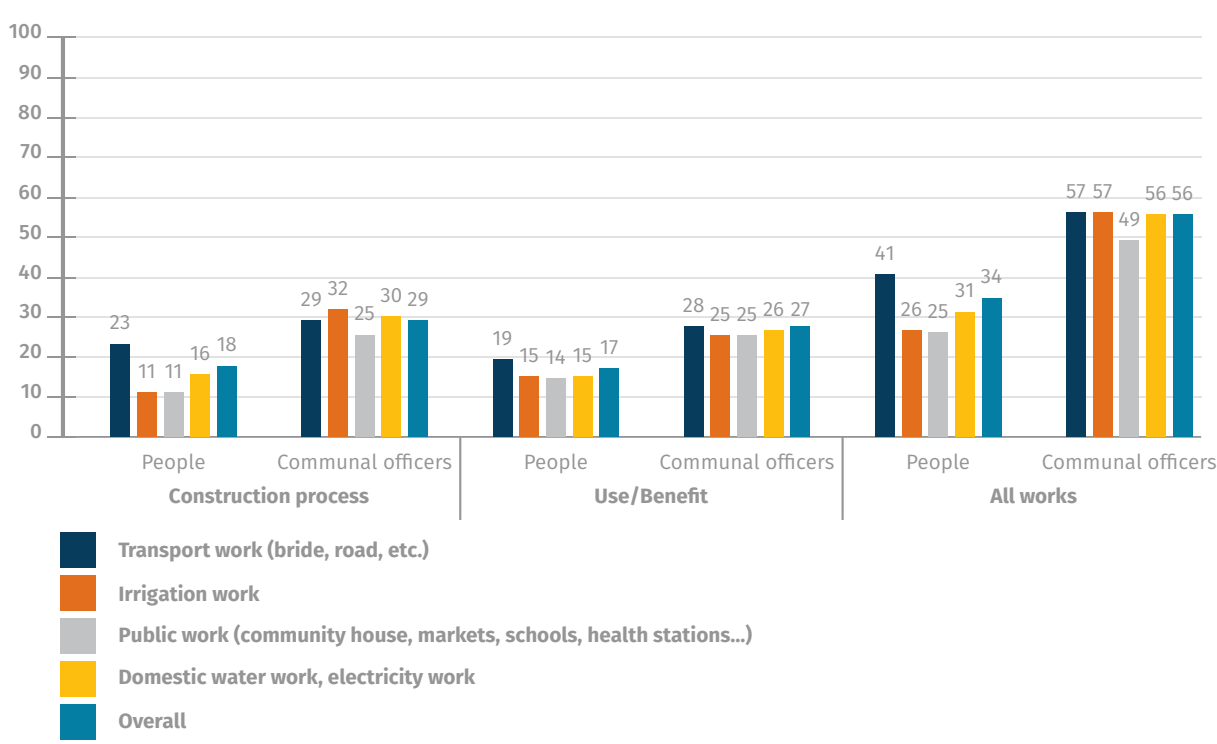


Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

Rural transportation work was perceived to have the highest level of gender responsiveness.

In Figure 4, the average score of gender responsiveness of transportation work assessed by local people was 41.4/100, the highest score among all the work. Women participating in the FGDs also said that the transportation work (roads) was more gender-responsive than other types of work. The main reason was that women participated more in the construction process. The popular mechanism of road construction under the NTP-NRD was: “the State and local people work together,” with simple technical requirements. Therefore, women in the FGDs said they participated more actively in different stages of the investment work process.

Figure 4. Level of gender responsiveness by types of infrastructure work



Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021







3. IMPACTS OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND WOMEN'S UCW TIME

3.1 Allocation of women's UCW time

The survey results show that the average time spent on UCW in a woman's day was 4.9 hours (292 minutes)/day. Table 4 shows the survey results on women's time allocation to different workgroups in a day. This result is similar to the 4.5 hours/day indicated in the baseline survey conducted by AWEEV using the 24h Clock method. This result is higher than the amount of 4.06 hours/day publicized by the Action Aid and MOLISA (2017) survey. This was due to different samples as the study of ActionAid and MOLISA was conducted in big cities and areas with complex conditions. This survey collected data from communes with difficult socio-economic conditions with many ethnic minorities.

Women spent about 6.6 hours (398 minutes)/day on income-generating activities and paid work, resulting in 1.8 hours higher than the time spent on UCW. The total "active work time," including UCW and women's paid work, was 11.5 hours/day. The results in Table 4 show no significant difference in the amount of UCW time spent by women in poor and near-poor households and by those in non-poor households in the survey area.



Table 4. Average time allocation in a day by women

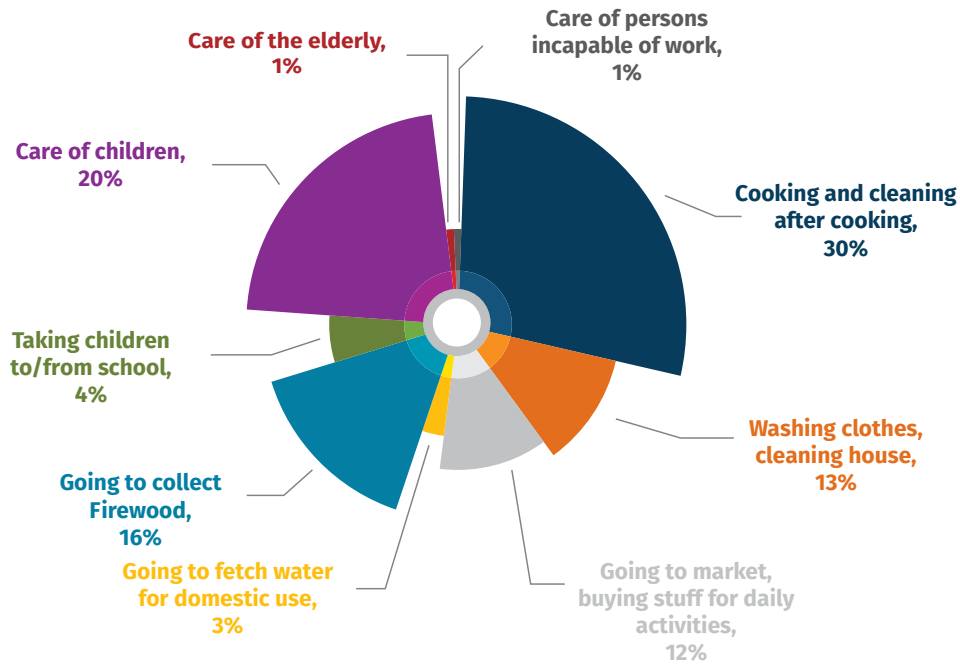
	On average	Poor, near-poor hrs	Non-poor hrs
Total UCW time (minutes)	292	295	288
Cooking and cleaning after cooking	86.6	80.6	95.4
Washing clothes, cleaning house	38.3	39.9	35.9
Going to market, buying stuff for daily activities	35.5	35.3	35.8
Going to fetch water for domestic use	8.2	9.7	5.9
Going to collect firewood	48.0	51.6	42.7
Taking children to/from school	11.6	11.9	11.1
Care of children	57.5	59.6	54.3
Care of the elderly	2.5	2.8	2.2
Care of persons (family members) incapable of work	4.1	3.5	4.8
Paid work (minutes)	398	391	408
Paid work	38.4	37.0	40.4
Self-employment in agriculture	321.9	322.8	320.7
Self-employment in non-agriculture	37.8	31.5	47.1

Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

Allocation of time for UCW:

If classified into direct and indirect UCWs, Figure 5 shows that the indirect UCWs, including going to the market, fetching water, collecting firewood, taking children to/from school, cooking, cleaning, and washing, took up nearly 228 minutes (i.e., 3.8 hours) in a day, or 78% of a woman’s total UCW time. Direct UCW, such as taking care of young children, the elderly, and persons with a disability, accounts for 22% of the total UCW time. Looking closer at the tasks, cooking and cleaning after meals took the most time (over 86 minutes/day, or 30% of all UCW time). Childcare time ranked second (nearly an hour/day, or 20% of total UCW time). Activities such as collecting firewood, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and going to the market accounted for 16%, 13%, and 12% of women’s UCW time, respectively. The remaining UCW (taking children to/from school, fetching water, taking care of the elderly and family members incapable of work) accounted for 9% of women’s UCW time.

Figure 5. Types of UCW by %



Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

3.2 Impacts of infrastructure on UCW

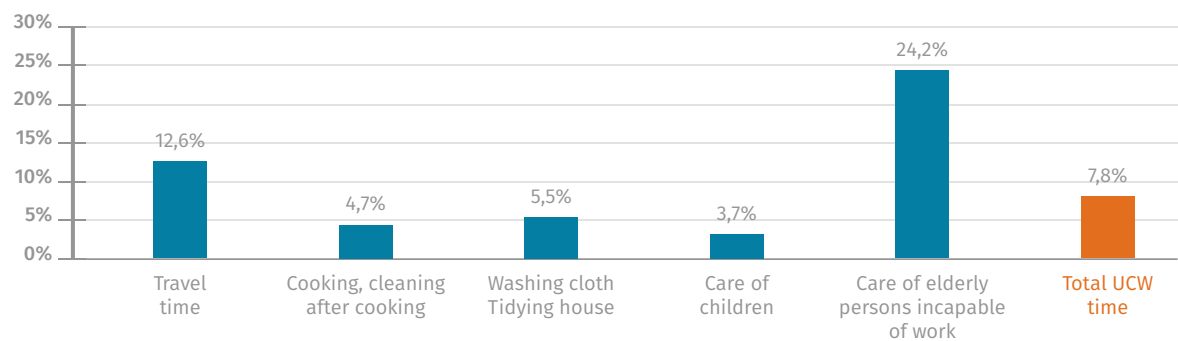
Infrastructure work is estimated to lead to a 7.8% reduction in women's total UCW time.

The survey results show that after the commune and village-level infrastructure work in 2016-2020 were put in use, women's UCW time decreased by an average of 23 minutes/day or 7.8% of their total UCW time, as shown in Table 4. It was estimated that the infrastructure work helped increase income-generating work by 5 minutes/day (equivalent to 1.2% of the total time for income-generating work) on average. Combining these, infrastructure projects invested in 2016-2020 have resulted in a reduction of 18 minutes a day in women's work time (including UCW and income-generating work). It implies that the impact of infrastructure work on women's burden on UCW and income-generating work was quite low. One important reason could be that most infrastructure work in the survey area in 2016-2020 was upgraded to previously existing infrastructure (accounting for 73%, as shown in Table 1). This means that local people already had access to those infrastructures, and additional investments in the period under consideration mainly upgraded the existing access rather than making new ones. Therefore, the upgraded infrastructure work on women's UCW time was not as high as the impact of the newly built ones.

The impacts of infrastructure on travel time and time to take care of the elderly and people with disabilities were most significant.

Figure 6 shows that after the infrastructure work was put into operation, the estimated travel time (going to the market, fetching water, collecting firewood, and taking the children to/from school) was reduced by 12.6%. The time to take care of the elderly and people incapable of work was reduced by 24.2% after the infrastructure work was put into use. The infrastructure work also led to a reduction of 3.7%-5.5% in women's time spent on other UCW (cooking, cleaning up after meals; cleaning, tidying, washing clothes, taking care of children).

Figure 6. Percentage of UCW time reduction thanks to infrastructure works



Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

With the reduction in UCW time, nearly 77% of women spent more time on themselves. According to the survey results, nearly 77% of women respondents said they used reduced UCW time to rest, entertain and take care of themselves; nearly 12% said they increased time exchanging/meeting with friends (see Table 5). Notably, very few women said they used that time to learn more information and knowledge. Two reasons can explain this. First, the UCW time was not reduced by much, which did not “free up” lots of their time. Second, the surveyed women at the survey time were either close to or in middle age (the average age of women in the survey is 39). Therefore, there was a pretty limited opportunity to learn more knowledge or skills.

Table 5. Reallocation of time after reducing UCW burden

Reallocation of time for activity groups	Percentage
Rest, entertain, take care of yourself	76.9
Learn (self-study) more knowledge skills, grasp more information	1.6
Meet/exchange with friends (including exchanges via online platforms)	11.8
Participate more in income-generating activities	9.7

Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

Only nearly 10% of women said that with the UCW time reduction, they engaged more in income-generating activities. 10% is quite a modest percentage. Two reasons can explain this. First, increased paid work time requires women to be significantly and consistently liberated from their UCW burden, especially concerning paid work opportunities. The survey results show the UCW time reduction was not significant. Second, the survey areas are extremely difficult communes economically due to the predominance of an ethnic minority population and mountainous regions, with minimal opportunities for paid jobs. If they want to participate in the paid job market, they usually have to migrate to urban areas or work in industrial zones.

Women were “too engaged” in UCW responsibilities. The survey results indicate that 40.4% of women believe that UCW is a woman’s responsibility, and 53% believed that “It’s okay for a man to share housework, but if he does not share, it’s also accepted” (Table 6). Those figures show women’s “acceptance” and “tolerant” attitude; they considered the UCW burden their default duty. With this mindset, women in the survey area will be “passive” or at least not “drastic” in promoting the UCW sharing with their husbands or other family male members. According to the survey results, on average, 34.4 women said that no one has helped or shared any UCW with them; 30% said there had been no change in UCW burden-sharing in the past time.

Table 6. Perception of men’s sharing of UCW

	Percentage
Perception of UCW sharing	
UCW is the responsibility of women	40.4
It's okay for a man to share housework, but if he does not share, it's also accepted	53.1
Sharing of UCW burden	
% women having no one to share UCW burden (average)	34.4
Changes in UCW sharing	
No change. Women are still the main people in charge	30.3
Husband and male family members (brother) share/support a bit	32.9

Source: Survey on infrastructure and UCW conducted in November 2021

Changes in the perception of UCW-related gender roles have not been significant. In order to reduce the UCW burden and promote UCW sharing among family members, it is necessary to gradually change the perception of gender stereotypes and gender roles in the family and community. However, the survey results show that 28% of women did not feel any significant change in the role of women in UCW, and 54.5% believed there was a slight change. However, the UCW’s primary responsibility still rested with women (Table 7). The perception of gender roles has not changed significantly, so women tend to be “too engaged” in UCW responsibilities. The infrastructure or other factors would not lead to dramatic changes in household labour division or UCW burdens.

Table 7. Perception of changes in gender roles in UCW

	Percentage
No significant changes at all	28.1
There are some initial changes, but many people still believe that women are the ones mainly responsible for housework	54.4
There have been significant changes, and many people think that housework belongs to both men and women	17.5

Nguồn: Khảo sát CSHT và thời gian CVCSKL tháng 11/2021



4. SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Strongly promote decentralization and empowerment in the NTPs: It is necessary to strengthen the decentralization of capital resources for the commune to act as investment owners. When the communes are investment owners, the opportunity for women to participate and benefit from the work-related activities will be higher than in the cases where the communes are not investment owners. Please note that currently, the percentage of communes that have been decentralized to act as investment owners using the funds from the NTPs is already relatively high. However, it is important to ensure their role as “substantive” investment owners rather than “on paper” investment owners. In order to provide the right to be substantive investment owners at the grassroots level, the experience of some provinces shows that they require a strong direction from the province to ensure that the district level will decentralize or has a roadmap to decentralize the communal level.

Promoting the application of community procurement in infrastructure investment: The designated mechanism in infrastructure investment regulated by Decree 161/2016 of the GoVN should be further promoted in the implementation of NTPs in 2021-2025. Accordingly, community procurement should be applied when possible and appropriate. Promoting this community procurement in infrastructure investment would give decision-making to the communities and increase opportunities for women to engage more and have a more active say in all stages of the investment process. To do that, provincial (and district) governments should enforce decentralization and application of the community procurement modality. Assuring a minimum rate of infrastructure projects to be conducted by community procurement modality might be considered. Provinces might consider applying another variant of community procurement of “contractual work assignments” that works as a block grant to the community for the infrastructure work. This would significantly empower the village community to self-implement small-scaled and technically simplified infrastructure projects, thereby increasing the opportunity for gender to benefit better from infrastructure work.

Planning and implementation under the NTPs: It is necessary to develop guidelines on gender integration in the participatory planning and implementation, management and use of infrastructure work in communes and villages. Guidelines should be simple, easy to understand, and easy to apply by grassroots staff and local people, and there should be a brief list of questions to be answered in each step of planning and implementing the work. At the same time, pilot the development of a set of participatory monitoring and evaluation criteria on the gender responsiveness of infrastructure works, which then could be completed, replicated, and institutionalized in local regulations. The assessment criteria for gender responsiveness of infrastructure work used in this study can be used as monitoring criteria.

Infrastructure investment priority under the NTPs: Investment priorities will be determined during participatory planning. In that process, priority should be given to rural transportation work, clean water facilities, electricity grid work, and school sites under challenging villages that have the potential to reduce women’s care work time significantly. Results of this research show that ethnic minority women mainly spent their free time on recreational activities, resting and community activities in the village when their UCW



burden was reduced by infrastructure work; it is, therefore, also necessary to pay attention to investing in cultural and sports structures suitable for the women's use and benefit.

Adding additional regulations on ensuring gender responsiveness in infrastructure investment using funds from NTPs: International experience has shown that conducting a gender impact assessment prior to the investment is necessary. Based on the assessment results, appropriate gender actions in infrastructure work could be taken into consideration (ADB 2019; OECD, 2019). This practice applies to large-scale funded projects and small and very small-scale infrastructure investments in many poverty reduction projects. In order to not further complicate the procedure for public investment in infrastructure sub-projects funded by the NTPs, gender impact assessments and measures to ensure gender equality should be included as content in the economic - technical reports or infrastructure documents (for work following specific mechanisms).

Capacity building in the NTPs: In order to assure women's voice and benefits from infrastructure work, it is important to focus on capacity building for ethnic minority women, especially those from poor and near-poor households, to contribute and participate in the entire infrastructure investment process. It is also useful to enhance the role of 'champion' women who could mobilize the active participation of other women in the infrastructure work. Capacity-building activities for women should be conducted to encourage their participation and sharing with men to ensure that both women and their spouses can participate in and implement infrastructure work. In addition, it is important to enhance the capacity of the GoVN staff (i.e., NTP implementers) in gender mainstreaming and ensuring that infrastructure work could be responsive to the needs of women

Employment development in the NTPs: it is necessary to have specific policies to promote job opportunities, including the allocation of resources to develop models and projects to create on-site off-farm jobs for ethnic minority women (closely linked to tourism development, primary processing and processing of agricultural products, participation in the value chain of specific and typical local products). Only when there are local job opportunities could the change in the UCW time lead to considerations in participating in paid work and a change in the internal household division of labour, and change women's position and power to decision-making on time allocation household chores.

Actions to promote change in gender stereotypes and gender roles: if the above recommendations are more about outside motivators and from the "supply-side," the change in gender stereotypes gender roles in the family and community is about promoting women's time reallocation from "inside," from the "demand-side." This report shows that the perceptions of gender roles and gender stereotypes are essential factors affecting the redistribution of women's UCW burden. External impacts will not lead to the desired changes if gender stereotypes prevent women from redistributing the UCW burden. NTPs should pay attention to the communication activities that promote changes in gender stereotypes. In this regard, Project 8, within the framework of the NTP-SEDEMA 2021-2025, which includes the content on promoting community-based communication and promoting changes, is an appropriate direction to promote gender equality.

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