



# EMPOWERMENT AND SECURITY OF LOW-INCOME WOMEN IN CAMBODIA

## Policy Brief

### How is empowerment understood by low-income women in Cambodia and do measures to generate it work? How do insecurities affect one's sense of empowerment?

Questioning the relevance of common empowerment and security assessment methods, this project seeks to understand in more concrete terms what it means to be empowered and secure by exploring those aiming to encourage empowerment and security and those who are the target of empowerment and security measures.

Understanding the link between economic and social empowerment (under what conditions one leads to the other) and the link between empowerment and level of security are central concerns of this research. We have analysed a wide range of case studies in both low-income urban and rural contexts. These are a few of the many findings.

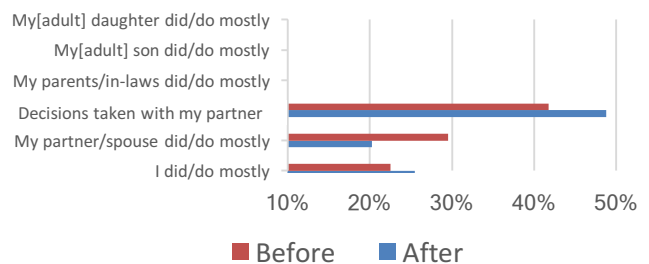
### KEY MESSAGES

- Joining project activities has increased women's and joint decision-making
  - Empowerment and security measures work in terms of increasing women's decision-making.
- Group formation and importance of organizing
  - Group formation and organizing lead to improved production and sales, particularly in urban and rural informal (home-based, farm and neighbourhood-based) production.
- Level of worries and concerns for loved ones is very high in Cambodia, affecting one's sense of empowerment
  - Empowerment measures on their own will likely fail in Cambodia if worries about safety and health are not addressed.
- Acquiring skills decreases losses in farming while improving production
  - Farming skills decrease losses and improve both income and sustainability.
- Being involved in projects increases leadership skills and self-confidence, while ensuring greater social recognition
  - Participating in empowerment and security activities increases both self-confidence and recognition from family and community.

### Project activities aimed at empowerment and security increase women's decision-making ability in the household

In Cambodia, the overall impact of projects was to decrease decisions taken mostly by the male partner by almost 50%, while increasing decisions taken by women and decisions taken jointly with their partners (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Before and after participating in projects/activities, who typically made/makes final decisions in HHS? (n=400)**



This is particularly true of income-generation projects as women reported no longer having to get approval from their partner as they were generating income on their own.

### Groups and the importance of organizing

Group formation in Cambodia was particularly linked to the success of income-generation activities. Respondents mentioned how such groups can improve production methods and the sale of products in farming, craftwork, and other home-based, farm and neighbourhood-based production, especially if they are part of larger networks.

One participant said:

*We can expand our market; besides buying machines and fertilizer, we can expand our farming by selling agricultural supplies and seeds while buying vegetables from our group members to sell to outsiders.*

Being members of groups also ensured that activities that were set up by a development agency remain in place after the organization stops operating. By making people less isolated in their income-generating activities, these groups act as a form of security beyond a project timeframe because, as one respondent put it: '[I] believe in the idea of forming groups, because we can rely on one another.'

This effect is even stronger with saving groups as they tend to support community saving and support members in

times of crises or acute needs. In a few cases, problems arose in groups in which members thought that leaders were not sharing information sufficiently and benefits were going mostly to group leaders. In most cases, however, groups were found to provide substantial social, economic and psychological (security-related) benefits.

## High percentages of respondents are worried about their safety and health

When comparing with the other three countries of the umbrella project (Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam), Cambodians report very high levels of anxiety or worries about their safety and those close to them (see Figure 2). During interviews, these worries were linked to security/safety (including violence in the community, domestic abuse, drug use, and related concerns); livelihood and assets (income, land); health (due to such problems as water and other forms of pollution, and not having access to low-cost health care in spite of qualifying for it); and growing old (no pension scheme or people to care for them).

**Figure 2: Persons worried about most (% of respondents)**

	Cambodia	Laos	Myanmar	Vietnam
Partner's safety	87.5	17.1	32.1	46.3
Own safety	80.5	21.8	52.6	49.4
Daughter's safety	78.0	17.1	48.1	38.0
Son's safety	79.0	19.6	47.9	44.6
Safety of other family members	55.8	46.0	31.4	44.1
Safety of others in neighbourhood	38.3	7.3	15.8	28.0
Safety is not a problem	0.8	26.9	1.0	28.5

As empowered as women would report to be, they were also worried about their loved ones, and a lack of control over these factors meant that empowerment was rarely fully realised. A great deal of these worries concern their children and their children's future, as a 37-year-old respondent argues regarding sons and daughters:

*I'm afraid they will have contact with bad boys, that they leave home and get involved in drugs as this is a common problem with children these day...I also worry that they travel at night and meet with drug users, they may even get raped in that case.*

Learning about legal procedures, trainings, and contacts that can be used to respond to violence in the community and in the home were considered both empowering and effective, including measures opposing domestic violence.

## Acquiring skills means lowering loss of crops or animals and improving farming

In agricultural activities, providing knowledge and skills does not only provide more income, but actually decreases loss of crops or animals. One respondent said:

*Since I joined the project, my savings have been increasing...I have changed since joining because I gained knowledge and I can grow vegetables for my own consumption. Before joining, I could not grow vegetables well...after participating in the project, I started using compost fertilizer mixed with water. I dug a hole to make*

## METHODOLOGY

- This project used both qualitative and quantitative methods, with above 100 in-depth interviews per country, and 400 survey respondents in each of the four countries involved (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam).
- Each country was composed of local researchers trained on data collection methods by team leaders who were gender specialists and trained at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok.
- In each country we worked with Women's Unions, government agencies, NGOs and local groups that have economic development initiatives.
- AIT alumni are a real strength for the institution to work in the region and help contribute to increasing the gender expertise in their own countries.

*compost fertilizer and they gave me some seeds to plant.*

Respondents also told of being able to raise piglets and do injections in ways that decrease the loss of animals and ensure their health over time, giving the women confidence in their own abilities and contributing to the sustainability of their income-generation activities.

## Taking part in projects contributes to leadership, self-confidence and social recognition

Many respondents mentioned feeling more comfortable with doing tasks that required public exposure as compared to the past. They mentioned representing their groups or being involved in the community, improving their sense of self-worth and confidence. That in turn seems to have a positive effect on how others view them, being more willing to listen to them, 'noticing them for the first time', or appreciating their input. One woman said:

*They [other people in the community] admire me, and the fact that my children can get more education and a job. They can see that I can get out of poverty and have better living conditions. I am 100% better off compared to before.*

To some extent respondents mentioned being respected by others for doing tasks traditionally done by men, such as bringing in a household income, providing for family members or having a greater ability to make decisions, which is important as more flexible gender roles expand opportunities without undermining a community's sense of tradition or cultural integrity. This social recognition is particularly important for more marginalised populations. One blind respondent reported:

*My neighbour said that even though I am handicapped I can travel to every province and district. They think that 'because she has a job and an organization that takes care of her, she is able to travel, she has value'... they admired me because I am more capable.*

## Further reading

Doane, D. L. and Doneys, P. 2015, 'Lost in Translation? Gender and Economic Empowerment in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region' in Ragnhild Lund, Philippe Doneys and Bernadette Resurreccion (eds.), *Gender Entanglements: Revisiting Gender in a Rapidly Changing Asia*, Copenhagen: NIAS press.

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