



EMPOWERMENT AND SECURITY OF LOW-INCOME WOMEN IN LAOS

Policy Brief

How are the empowerment and security of low-income women understood by different stakeholders in gender and economic development programmes?

Questioning the relevance of commonly-used empowerment and security assessment methods, this project seeks to understand in more detailed terms what it means to be empowered and secure by focusing both on those aiming to encourage empowerment and security and those who are the beneficiaries of empowerment and security measures. Understanding the link between empowerment and level of security is also a central concern of this research.

KEY MESSAGES

- Empowerment and security are strongly understood as social/relational.
 - Measures of empowerment and security should include social and relational parameters.
- Gender trainings work and have a positive influence on reducing conflict and gender-based violence in the family.
 - Gender trainings should accompany income generation programmes, and should target both women and men.
- Knowledge is key to income generation and thus important for empowerment.
 - Capacity building should be part of empowerment efforts to increase sustainability.
- Health is a fundamental determinant of security, and contributes to being empowered.
 - Social protection and empowerment measures should prioritise low-cost health care.
- Security is often group-based.
 - A multi-layered social protection system should include community and group level functions.
- Income generation can positively affect men's behaviour regarding sharing household responsibilities.
 - Income generation programmes should facilitate men's positive response by informing or including them.

Empowerment and security are socially experienced and enjoyed

- Measures that quantify and assess empowerment and security must look at the social context and at *invisible* factors such as support, respect and ability to contribute, rather than just *visible* factors such as income, assets or the autonomy one may gain.

The evidence we collected show that in Lao PDR and in the Mekong region in general, we need to acknowledge the importance of social dynamics in the family and community – not in terms of duty, but in terms of one's capacity to contribute and be recognized by others. When asked about the meaning of empowerment in Laos, the number one answer women respondents gave was the ability to support their family, before the ability to make more money. At the group level, after improved security and well being, the second positive effect was the group appreciating their contribution.

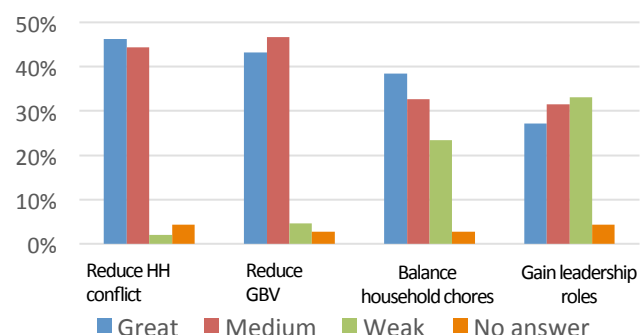
Gender trainings work!

- Gender trainings should accompany economic activities as they create a supportive environment.

In Laos gender trainings were particularly effective in reducing tension in the household and Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Doing so is key to both empowerment and security as well as helping women and men balance household responsibilities. The vast majority of women respondents also said these trainings should involve men. One 38-year-old respondent explained these impacts:

- “People in the community have changed. Before, they were moody and now they are calmer and in a better mood. No more scolding between husband and wife, and no swear words spoken to children. Men also changed, becoming less argumentative.”

Figure 1. Impacts of Gender Trainings (N=390)



Knowledge is a crucial determinant of being empowered in the long term

- Knowledge building and skill development should accompany income generation activities, ensuring a more sustainable form of empowerment.

In Laos knowledge was recognized as being a key factor in one being empowered. The most reported positive effect of projects was knowledge, cited by 75% of the respondents, as compared with increasing the share of household income, cited by 53% of respondents. One respondent put it this way:

- “Strengthening knowledge and skills will help us earn more income, be able to express opinions, and be more diligent in our work.”

This knowledge is also often the outcome of working in groups, as a 27-year-old respondent from Bokeo Province states:

- “It helped to have the knowledge from the others.”

Knowledge is also an important foundation to make development efforts more sustainable. A lack of knowledge and skills may mean that when a project ends, the income generation tied to it may also diminish or end. Respondents often claimed to continue making an income because they learned new approaches to their work, or because they have greater knowledge of the market.

Better health is crucial to a better sense of security

- Targeting better health would come a long way in addressing insecurities and making people feel more empowered. Therefore, this goal should also be included in empowerment initiatives.

Although theft was the most cited risk (81%), it was followed by health problems (80%), and shortly after that appeared costs associated with serious accidents and injuries (79%). In Laos being worried about one's health and the health of loved ones was an overwhelming concern, and family, neighbours and friends are the groups that one can turn to in times of need. This indicates that social protection mechanisms are mostly informal and although having informal help is important, it is not always enough in terms of meeting health needs. Risks and fears tied to meeting those needs have strong implications for empowerment as well since respondents often describe empowerment as the ability to help their family members and others around them.

Group-based social protection can help address insecurities

A “multi-layered” provision of social protection will be important; providers (formal and informal) should work in complementary ways to address the most pressing needs of the women and their families in order to be effective.

METHODOLOGY

- This project used both qualitative and quantitative methods, with more than 100 in-depth interviews per country, and 400 survey respondents in each of the four countries involved (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam).
- Each country was composed of local researchers trained in data collection methods by team leaders who were gender specialists trained at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok.
- In each country we worked with Women's Unions, government agencies, NGOs, international organisations, and local groups that are involved in 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.

The greatest sources of security in Laos were saving groups, the Women's Union, the village development funds, and in some cases the village welfare associations.

The women and their family clearly turn to their families, neighbours and friends first, but they also depend on other traditional sources of security along with newer forms of provision of social protection at various levels of “formality”.

Women's income generation can change men's behaviour if facilitated

- For income generation programs to help bring about more equal gender relations, they should facilitate a change in men's behaviour by keeping the men informed, trained in gender equality, and included in complementary or other activities.

In many cases in Laos, we find that women's income through work leads to positive changes in gender relations, with men contributing more toward taking care of children and helping out with other household responsibilities while the women work.

In the most successful cases of women identifying increased “empowerment” as a positive outcome, the men were also involved in or employed by the project and were satisfied with the outcomes.

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.

Research team: Dr. Philippe Doneys (PI), Dr. Donna L. Doane (PI), Dr. Duangthai Buranajaroenkij, Dr. Marc Voelker, Southanome Keola, Kanokphan Jongjarb, Christine Widjaya, Jhazine Damaso

This document is an output from research funded by DFAT. The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of DFAT or the Australian Government.

www.dfat.gov.au
Project website: <http://espmekong.net>