



EMPOWERMENT AND SECURITY OF LOW-INCOME WOMEN IN MYANMAR

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 detail 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 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. These are a few of the many findings.

KEY MESSAGES

- For the most vulnerable, empowerment and security need to be strengthened together.
 - Security is paramount and empowerment needs to be tied to security and pursued with long-term goals in mind.
- Recognition from self and others can be as or more important than visible benefits.
 - Invisible factors, such as recognition regarding contributions based on new knowledge and capabilities, may be of greatest importance to vulnerable women.
- Empowerment, to be sustainable, will require flexible knowledge and capabilities.
 - Capacity building that allows for the flexible use of new knowledge should be part of empowerment efforts to increase sustainability, rather than focusing on too-specific and non-adaptable skills.
- In the case of the most vulnerable, women's concerns are often overlooked.
 - Participation in groups and networks and inclusion in key decision-making bodies can help correct this.
- Health and economic concerns are top priorities, and are interconnected.
 - A multi-layered and coordinated approach to social protection will be needed.

For the most vulnerable, empowerment and security need to be strengthened together

- Whether due to poverty (Dry Zone study), IDP status (Rakhine and Kachin studies), HIV status (Mon State study), or other causes, for the most vulnerable security is paramount and empowerment needs to be tied to security and pursued with long-term goals in mind.

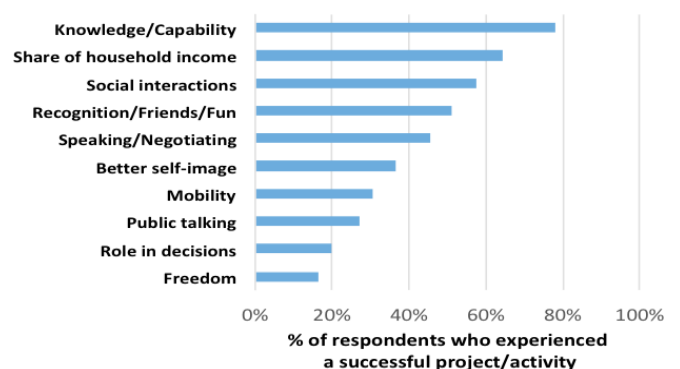
We find that in a very insecure environment, especially with stigma, inter-community or intra-household conflict, the empowerment achieved may be limited and not sustainable. The focus therefore needs to be both on the creation of a more *secure* environment and on interventions that are carefully designed with long-term empowerment in mind. Case studies also show that interventions are needed to help create a *supportive* environment – including support from husbands, family members and others – to ensure that gains will not be lost.

Recognition from self and others can be as or more important than visible benefits

- Measures that assess empowerment and security must look at invisible factors such as recognition from self and others regarding contributions based on new knowledge and capabilities, rather than just visible factors such as income, assets or autonomy gained.

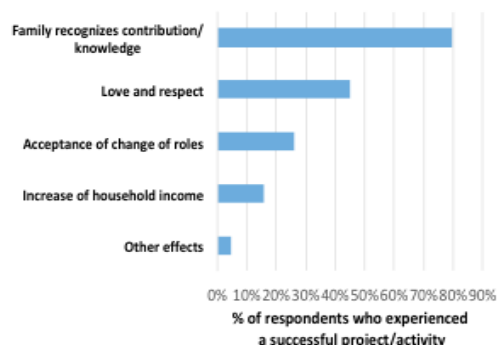
For very vulnerable women, *psychological and social concerns* are often as or more important than economic concerns alone, particularly if they are isolated within the house or face conflicts in the local community. New knowledge and capabilities are central to the women's own self-assessment and to the recognition they are given by their families and communities. The following, based on interviews with women in case study areas, illustrate the importance of new knowledge and capabilities:

Figure 1. Individual Level: Positive Effects (n=379)



On the community as well as family level, the women said that the most important positive effect from participating in successful projects was the recognition they received for their new contributions and knowledge, ranking far above the income generated:

Figure 2. Family Level: Positive Effects (n=379)



A woman's new income can also help overcome social and cultural barriers, as noted by a male respondent in an IDP camp:

The main concern was what the community will think of me for letting my wife work outside the home. There were some criticisms and gossip for sure, but everything turned out all right. Our family needs regular income, which is the most fundamental for me.

Empowerment, to be sustainable, will require flexible knowledge and capabilities

- Capacity building that allows for the flexible use of new knowledge should be part of empowerment efforts to increase sustainability, rather than too-specific skills.

In the case of women interviewed who were living with HIV, the new health knowledge gained through the project was not only able to address their own health concerns, it was also very significant in raising their standing in their communities. They had earlier been stigmatized and found it difficult to obtain employment or housing; however, they could now serve their communities as local health 'experts' by providing health-related information to community members – which they try to update regularly – raising their status and working against social barriers. Other case studies also showed that education (e.g., peer education) and knowledge that can be adapted to changing conditions (such as changing demand and new sources of competition) help the women remain economically and socially empowered. In contrast, too-specific and non-adaptable skills were generally not sustainable.

In the case of the most vulnerable, women's concerns are often overlooked

- Participation in groups and networks and inclusion in important decision-making bodies can help correct this.

Case studies highlighted that gender-based violence within and outside the home (including domestic violence and children's security) was a key concern of women that is often overlooked. In IDP as well as other contexts, women's sexual and reproductive health and

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 to help increase the gender expertise in their own countries.

psychological/psychosocial services are seen as critically needed but as not being adequately addressed. Researchers found that participation in groups (e.g., self-help groups) and networks was important for vulnerable women and contributed to their sense of belonging and empowerment ('I feel confident having and being part of a group'). The formation of women's groups was found as well to lead to greater participation in public activities. In spite of this, women are generally not included in decision-making bodies, resulting in their views and priorities being under-recognized. Political empowerment was seen as vitally important, and should continue as a focus of future efforts.

Health and economic concerns are top priorities, and are interconnected

- A multi-layered and coordinated approach to social protection will be needed.

Regarding their greatest concerns, respondents taken as a whole cited health risks (80%) for self and family, employment loss (78%), asset loss (72%), ageing (70%) and cost of accidents or other sudden reversals (66%) as sources of their greatest worries. The interdependence of economic activities and security in the case of vulnerable women again underscores the need to address both sides at the same time. When asked to whom they can turn when faced with these problems, the women cited their families first, followed by NGOs, self-help groups, friends and then neighbours. A multi-layered approach to social protection will be needed in the future: informal sources of support, non-governmental, and local and national governmental providers will need to work together in *complementary* and coordinated ways to address the most pressing needs of the women, their families and communities.

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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