



DO WE UNDERSTAND THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES AFFECTING LOW-INCOME WOMEN IN VIETNAM?

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

- **Joint activities between women and men increase a project's chances of success.**
 - Involving or informing men in gender components can help meet project goals
- **Group activities improve both empowerment and security.**
 - Independence is important but social forms of empowerment and security must be nurtured
- **Trainings work if they are sustained and address real needs.**
 - Trainings should accompany income generation and security activities to improve long term success while gender trainings improve support from men
- **There is no empowerment or security without sustainability.**
 - Skill development is crucial but should be matched to market requirements
- **Addressing health or a healthy environment is fundamental.**
 - Interventions must address basic concerns regarding health to really impact insecurity

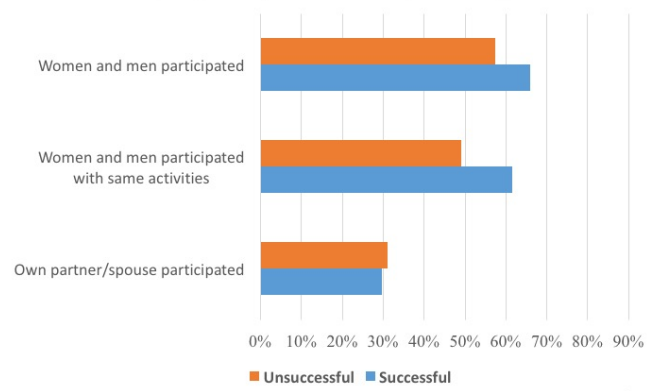
Joint participation between women and men leads to greater benefits

In Vietnam, when men and women participated in the same project or in the same activities, they reported greater success than when they participated separately or alone.

This finding was consistent across the Mekong region but particularly clear in Vietnam (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Characteristics of successful and unsuccessful projects/activities (n=452)



Thus when men are informed, involved in some ways, or participate directly in interventions, they are more likely to support empowerment measures targeting their wife.

Group activities is key to empowerment and security

Group formation in development activities were strongly related to project success. Of all 452 responses on activities/projects, 84% of those who had a group activity as a component were deemed successful by the participants versus 47% of those who did not include group activities.

A group serves many purposes. It increases market access, it creates social networks, it provides a form of social protection in times of need, it leads to cross-learning and teaching, and improves self-confidence.

One participant said:

- *Before I was very shy, dared not to talk to other people. Now I'm different. I can confidently talk and share about my lives to other women in the group. I can confidently speak in front of the crowd and not shake as before.*

Another one stressed both utilitarian and social aspects:

- *Our club [money saving group] often meet twice per month so we could discuss about loan taking and shared how they use loan at their family and support each other.” (IDI with female respondent, 2016)*

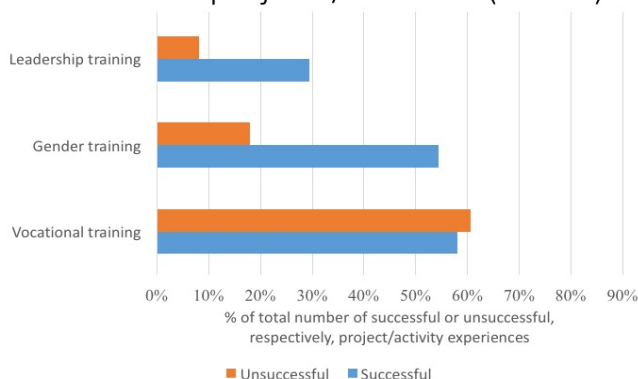
Therefore, income generation and empowerment activities must involve group strategies and encourage social networking. The social context is key to empowerment.

Trainings work if sustained

Gender trainings are seen as particularly successful, and that is especially true if they target men. This goes against criticisms that see gender trainings as merely donor driven. Leadership trainings, although not as common, are also seen as leading to project success (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Trainings based on successful and unsuccessful projects/activities (n=452)



Talking about a participant, a Key Informant said:

- *Thanks to the [gender awareness trainings for men] he [her husband] has completely changed. They included him in their trainings. They invited him to join activities that supported gender equality. Now, he supports her work.*

Skill development can be key, as one respondent noted:

- *...now I know better about raising chickens. Before, I lost a lot of chickens because they got sick and died because of diseases or bad weather. Now, I can even raise organic chickens which can be sold for a much higher price...*

However, vocational trainings had mixed success because they were normally not accompanied with capacity building for market related skills or knowledge, leaving participants, for instance, dependent on few buyers. Trainings should therefore be done, not on an ad hoc basis, but should become regular and address market concerns.

Importance of designing sustainable activities

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.

Addressing or meeting beneficiaries' actual needs is important, and that includes activities that are suitable and relevant to the local context.

One Key Informant said:

- *The saving groups will be sustainable because it ties in with economic benefit, and its positive outcomes are obvious and tangible...They [local people] care about income, they will commit with activities that give them benefit that they can touch”. (KII with a government officer, 2016)*

Increasing capacity is important, but so is addressing market supply and demand concerns, as this quote shows:

- *We have to depend totally on the [one] source of providing raw materials. If there is no source and if the company does not purchase our products, our income will reduce.*

Sustainability is therefore very much linked to knowledge and skill development, but also for these skills to be accompanied by a supportive environment.

Security means living in a safe and healthy environment

Living in a polluted environment or being concerned for one's health seriously undermines a sense of empowerment and security.

Many respondents were concerned about the costs of health care for them and their family members. This not only affects income but also their sense of security, which is also tied to feelings of empowerment.

Empowerment and security measures must address these basic fears for empowerment and security efforts to have their full effect, and that means that an income generation program created to empower participants should include a component to address health concerns.

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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