



**PROMOTING WOMEN'S**

**ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**

**WITH ETHNIC GROUPS**

**IN THE MEKONG**

**EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS**



© Josh Estey/CARE

This factsheet shares learnings from CARE Australia’s strategic evaluation into our Women’s Economic Empowerment programming in the Mekong. Through analysis of CARE programming, the evaluation demonstrates how women from ethnic groups are gaining access to, and control over, economic resources, and how this in turn has led to socio-cultural changes at the individual, family, and community levels. The evaluation was jointly funded by CARE and the Australian Government through the Australia NGO Cooperation Program.

## Why women’s economic empowerment?

The single greatest determinant of vulnerability in the face of economic change in the Mekong region (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) is ethnicity. Ethnic groups in the Mekong are the most acutely affected by changes in the natural resource base; an inability to compete in new agriculture and new commerce; and rapid cultural change. Whilst both men and women from ethnic groups are among the poorest and most marginalised segments of society, women from ethnic groups nearly always face multiple challenges in lifting themselves out of poverty due to their lower levels of literacy; lower levels of access to and control over resources; lower levels of access to networks and restrictive socio-cultural norms. These challenges require us to take account of the specific needs of women from ethnic groups in the design and implementation of programs.

Women’s economic participation and empowerment – their capacity to bring about economic change for themselves – is increasingly viewed as a contributing factor to reducing poverty and achieving equality between women and men. When women are economically empowered, entire communities benefit. Documented benefits of increasing women’s earnings include, boosting their confidence and self-esteem; increasing their bargaining power within the home, and delaying early marriage and pregnancy. When women earn, society as a whole benefits, through increased investments in schooling and health; and with women more likely to play a leadership role in their

communities, aspirations for the next generation of girls and women are enhanced. While the many benefits of women’s economic empowerment are well understood, much less is known regarding the most effective program approaches and models to empower them economically. By undertaking an evaluation of our women’s economic empowerment programming across the Mekong, we are closing this gap by gathering the best available evidence to help guide smart programs and investments.

## What methods did the evaluation use?

The evaluation was conducted in two phases. Firstly, a literature review examined relevant completed project interventions (14 projects across the four countries, valued at over USD 25 million) that used a range of approaches and models to promote women’s economic empowerment. During Phase I the evaluation identified program outcomes and impact and developed an overall conceptual women’s economic empowerment framework for analysing and presenting results.

Phase II of the evaluation involved in-country qualitative data collection over four weeks, focusing on projects in Laos and Vietnam. The field work was designed to be complementary to the literature review and focussed on issues of impact and sustainability from the perspective of women from ethnic groups involved in the programs being reviewed.



## What were the evaluation findings?

### Program Impact

The experiences of projects reviewed consistently demonstrate that as women begin to take on a more active role in economic activities and begin to earn an income and contribute more to household finances, so they are also able to begin to play a more active role in decision-making processes of their households and communities. As men (and other women) begin to see women as skilled and capable income earners, so they tend to respect and value women's views and contributions more, in what has the potential to become a mutually-reinforcing "virtuous circle" process of social change.

The evaluation found that programming has collectively achieved positive and lasting impact by increasing ethnic minority women's: household-level incomes; access to financial services; access and control over productive assets; knowledge and skills; confidence and self-esteem; influence and decision-making at household and community levels; and equitable workloads at the household-level. Improvements were reported across all four countries – and although impact has been experienced to varying degrees within each project and country it is nonetheless significant that there has been consistent and positive change at a regional level.





©Josh Estey/CARE

## Promising Practices

The projects evaluated implemented different combinations of approaches to promote women's economic empowerment. Most projects combined activities to promote women's increased engagement in economic or income-generating activities with strategies to build women's power, agency and solidarity. The evidence indicates that this combined approach is key to facilitating changes in women's agency (i.e. skills, knowledge, confidence), together with the changes in relations (e.g. with their husbands, with other women, with their communities) and structures (including social norms and formal institutions) that are really needed to sustain women's empowerment over the long-term so that they are able to achieve increased economic participation and empowerment.

Several approaches in combination were found to be particularly successful, including:

- **Village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) and literacy, numeracy, leadership skills development:** the VSLA approach was found to consistently lead to improvements in ethnic women's economic participation through increased income and access to credit and empowerment through positive changes in terms of shared workloads and joint decision-making within their households. However when combined with literacy, numeracy and leadership skills development, ethnic women demonstrated greater confidence and entrepreneurship in their income-generating activities and their influence extended beyond the household into public life where they participated in community meetings and local government planning processes.
- **Promoting enhanced agricultural production through cooperatives with linkages with markets and value chains:** the widely implemented combination of promoting enhanced agricultural production (including forestry and horticulture) with the establishment of group-based enterprises and market linkages has led to the development of successful women-owned and managed enterprises and cooperatives. These participate in all stages of the value chain, from production to processing and marketing. Interventions either supported women to produce and sell products that were they already producing but often at a greater yield and quality, or to introduce new activities such as coffee nurseries or plantations. Those interventions which used a group-based model to do this were more successful than those targeted individual households. Formal groups which operated as enterprises were able to make collective plans and investments, agree on formal arrangements for profit-sharing and manage risk across the group.
- **Associations as a foundation for women's collective action and inclusive local government planning:** Women's groups appear to have been successful as they enhance both economic advancement and power and agency, often addressing some of the more pressing barriers that women face when trying to earn an income. Where the group is based around a formal collective such as a cooperative or an established VSLA, it is likely to become an important village institution that both represents ethnic women's needs and perspectives in local planning. It also helps redefine community perceptions of what women are capable of achieving in small business. Three types of groups were observed to achieve this: i) VSLAs in combination with training

– building skills, knowing rights, accessing credit and building savings; (ii) cooperatives or formal group based businesses – which have potential for enhancing efficiencies, creating bulk and access to markets for small producers; and (iii) informal women’s groups, which are solidarity groups that use participative problem solving techniques to address barriers and to build women’s capabilities.

- **Practical peer-to-peer technical training and continuous learning approaches:** two approaches to training and learning were identified. Firstly, a cascading peer-to-peer learning training approach saw ethnic women receive technical training which they then shared through their village. This approach presented women as teachers and thought leaders, which not only brought about whole village learning, but also enhanced women’s status in the community. Secondly, continuous learning saw ethnic women participate in cross-village study visits to observe and learn about new techniques and approaches in production and small enterprise development. This led to an increased confidence within women’s cooperatives to diversify and take on risks as a group.
- **Gender training and specific strategies for engaging men in promoting women’s economic empowerment:** the inclusion of gender awareness and sensitivity training for couples and activities to promote men’s engagement in intervention activities can be seen to have contributed towards changes in social norms that define (and often constrain) opportunities and decisions open to women.
- **Economic empowerment approaches and addressing women’s needs and rights appropriate to context (sexual and reproductive health, water and sanitation):** Women’s ability to take up economic opportunities can be constrained by gender-based violence; limited access to water and sanitation; and limited availability and access to appropriate and quality health services. Where interventions have integrated activities to address these needs alongside economic empowerment programming, there has been significant gains in ethnic women’s well-being and that of their families.

## How will we put our learning into practice?

CARE promotes a culture of learning and continuous program improvement. This evaluation provides a solid foundation of analysis, learning and reflection to inform future women’s economic empowerment practice and programming in the Mekong and beyond. It is encouraging that many lessons arising from this evaluation confirm forward directions that we are already progressing. Key steps include:

**Improving gender and power analyses as part of project designs:** gender and power analyses (GPAs) must ensure a deeper analysis of women’s economic activities,

opportunities and barriers. Going forward, GPAs may include analysis of existing and potential markets and outlets for current produce and new products; access to financial services – including savings and credit; decision making and power in the family with respect to income earning and other aspects of women’s lives; sexual and reproductive health and rights and violence against women and girls; existence of women’s groups or support networks; and institutional, legal and regulatory framework (this might include laws around inheritance and land ownership).

**Develop a more comprehensive approach to promoting women’s inclusion in private sector development:** this would include exploring current opportunities such as:

- New technologies and services – mobile services; solar power, mobile money, mobile based credit ratings.
- Enhancing access to markets through making market connections (e.g. Fairtrade), addressing physical and gender barriers to accessing markets (including innovative approaches to sales models, transport, communications and physical market places).
- Introduce private sector approaches that encourage collaboration and joint ownership such as cooperatives.

**Integrate approaches for engaging men and boys in projects in ways that will challenge and transform social norms:** future interventions should develop a strategy for engaging men and boys that seeks both to mainstream gender equality through activities (e.g. couple-based dialogues on financial management and financial literacy and more equal decision-making and workloads) and to develop specific activities such as male role models or champions and drama groups.

**Develop empowerment approaches that integrate methods to tackle violence against women and children:** this will require further research into gender-based violence in remote ethnic communities, social norms and community support systems.

**Enhance regional exchange and learning to develop good practice for improving women’s economic empowerment:** use programming and donor forums and other relevant regional networks to share lessons and improve practice.

**Strengthen project and programme-level M&E processes based on appropriate mixed methods approaches:** establish a set of standardized impact and outcome-level indicators to be measured across initiatives. These should reflect changes in women’s economic advancement (e.g. income, expenditure and asset ownership), and include attitude and behaviour indicators defined to measure aspects of relations (e.g. household decision-making, incidence of domestic violence) and structures.

## CARE AUSTRALIA

1800 020 046  
info@care.org.au  
care.org.au  
ABN: 46 003 380 890

## CANBERRA OFFICE

Ground floor  
243 Northbourne Avenue  
Lyneham ACT 2602  
Phone: (02) 6279 0200  
Fax: (02) 6257 1938

## MELBOURNE OFFICE

Level 8, 406 Collins Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
Phone: (03) 9421 5572  
Fax: (03) 9421 5593

## ABOUT CARE

CARE works with poor communities in developing countries to end extreme poverty and injustice.

Our long-term aid programs provide food, clean water, basic healthcare and education and create opportunities for people to build a better future for themselves.

We also deliver emergency aid to survivors of natural disasters and conflict, and help people rebuild their lives.

We have 70 years' experience in successfully fighting poverty, and last year we helped change the lives of 72 million people around the world.



©Josh Estey/CARE

This Ex-Post Evaluation Report is part of CARE Australia's Women's Economic Empowerment with Ethnic Groups in the Mekong Region Evaluation. For the Laos Case Study Report and Vietnam Case Study Report, please visit [www.care.org.au/what-we-do/lessons-impact/](http://www.care.org.au/what-we-do/lessons-impact/)

JOIN US ON:

