



Women and liveability – Best practices of empowerment from Vietnam

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Abstract

How to survive and make ends meet and how to improve the quality of life are daily and persistent livelihood issues and liveability challenges preoccupying disadvantaged communities in underdeveloped and developing countries. In politically volatile and environmentally hazardous Vietnam life struggles could be complex and challenging for womenfolk who more often than not are left on their own to cope with daily liveability problems. Through examining the findings from secondary information sources this paper illustrates three cases of how women helped make the best of empowerment projects geared to make the livelihood and liveability of themselves, their family and community better and more meaningful. It also highlights the institutional and organizational traits that were the success factors of the empowerment projects.

Keywords: empowerment projects, liveability, livelihood, success factors, Vietnam, womenfolk

Introduction

Archaeological excavations have revealed the existence of humans in what is now Vietnam as early as the Paleolithic age (Yahoo.com, 2009). By about 1000 BC, the development of wet-rice cultivation and bronze casting in the Ma River and Red River floodplains led to the flourishing of the Đông Sơn culture and the ancient kingdoms of Văn Lang and Âu Lạc.

Vietnam was part of Imperial China for over a millennium, from 111 BC to AD 939. The Vietnamese became independent in 939, following the Vietnamese victory in the Battle of Bạch Đằng River. Successive Vietnamese royal dynasties flourished as the nation expanded geographically and politically into Southeast Asia, until the Indochina Peninsula was colonized by the French in the mid-19th century aided by large Catholic militias in a series of military conquests between 1859 and 1885. It became part of French Indochina in 1887. Following a Japanese occupation in the 1940s, the Vietnamese fought French rule in the First Indochina War. Vietnam declared independence after World War II, but France continued to rule until its 1954 defeat by communist forces under Ho Chi Minh. Under the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into the communist North and anti-communist South (Karnow, 1997; Taylor, 2013).

Conflict between the two sides intensified, with heavy intervention from the United States, in what is known as the Vietnam War. US economic and military aid to South Vietnam grew through the 1960s in an attempt to bolster the government, but US armed forces were withdrawn following a cease-fire agreement in 1973. Two years later, North Vietnamese forces overran the South reuniting the country under

communist rule. The war ended with a North Vietnamese victory in 1975. Vietnam was then unified under a communist government but remained impoverished and politically isolated. Despite the return of peace, for over a decade the country experienced little economic growth because of conservative leadership policies, the persecution and mass exodus of individuals - many of them successful South Vietnamese merchants - and growing international isolation (McMahon, 1995; Tucker, 1998).

In 1986, the government initiated a series of economic and political reforms which began Vietnam's path towards integration into the world economy known as "doi moi" (renovation) policy. The communist leaders maintain tight control on political expression but have demonstrated some modest steps toward better protection of human rights. The country continues to experience small-scale protests, the vast majority connected to either land-use issues, calls for increased political space, or the lack of equitable mechanisms for resolving disputes. The small-scale protests in the urban areas are often organized by human rights activists, but many occur in rural areas and involve various ethnic minorities such as the Montagnards of the Central Highlands, H'mong in the Northwest Highlands, and the Khmer Krom in the southern delta region.

Vietnamese authorities have committed to increased economic liberalization and enacted structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive, export-driven industries. By 2000, it had established diplomatic relations with all nations. Since 2000, Vietnam's economic growth rate has been among the highest in the world (BBC News, 2004) and, in 2011, it had the highest Global Growth Generators Index among 11 major economies (Weisenthal, 2011).

Today, Vietnam (Fig. 1) is a one-party Communist state which has one of south-east Asia's fastest-growing economies and determined to emerge as a developed nation by 2020 (BBC, 2015). Its successful economic reforms resulted in its joining the World Trade Organization in 2007 (Vandemoortele & Bird, 2010).



Fig. 1. Location of study

Economic profile

After unification Vietnam struggled to find its feet by organising the agricultural economy along strict collectivist lines. It had to recover in the last 30 years has from the ravages of war, the loss of financial

support from the old Soviet Bloc, and the rigidities of a centrally-planned economy. It had chosen to do this by joining global capitalism. Since 2001, Vietnam has committed itself to economic liberalization and international integration by moving to implement the structural reforms needed to modernize the economy and to produce more competitive export-driven industries. Vietnam became member of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) which have led to even more rapid changes in Vietnam's trade and economic regime . It has also entered into the US-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement in December 2001 which from 2001 to 2007 resulted in a 900% increase in Vietnam's exports to the US.

Moving further, following over a decade long negotiation process Vietnam joined the WTO in January 2007 which provided it an anchor to the global market and reinforced the domestic economic reform process. The WTO membership allows Vietnam to take of the eliminated quotas on textiles and clothing following the phasing out of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing on 1 January 2005.

On the surface Vietnam seems to have moved in the right direction by pursuing capitalism. Its agriculture's share of economic output has continued to shrink from about 25% in 2000 to less than 20% in 2008. Deep poverty has declined significantly and is now smaller than that of China, India, and the Philippines. But the disparity in wealth between urban and rural Vietnam is wide and some Communist Party leaders worry that too much economic liberalisation not only will weaken their power base but also the economic ability to create more jobs.

Vietnam has to create jobs to meet the challenge of a labor force that is growing by more than one-and-a-half million people every year. Yet the global financial crisis will constrain Vietnam's ability to create jobs and further reduce poverty. Exports made up 68% of Vietnam's GDP in 2007. This may spell trouble for as global growth sharply drops , as it did in 2009, Vietnam's export-oriented economy will suffer from lower exports, higher unemployment and corporate bankruptcies, and decreased foreign investment.

- GDP (purchasing power parity): \$242.3 billion (2008 est.); \$510.7 billion (2014 est)
- GDP - per capita (PPP): \$2,800 (2008 est.); \$5,600 (2014 est.)
- Labor force - by occupation: agriculture: 48%; industry: 21%; services: 31% (2012 est.)
- Population below poverty line: 14.8% (2007); 11.3% (2012 est.)

Social profile

Vietnam is inhabited by Kinh (Viet) 85.7%, Tay 1.9%, Thai 1.8%, Muong 1.5%, Khmer 1.5%, Mong 1.2%, Nung 1.1%, others 5.3% (1999 census). Religious wise, the majority of the people are Buddhist 9.3%, Catholic 6.7%, Hoa Hao 1.5%, Cao Dai 1.1%, Protestant 0.5%, Muslim 0.1%, none 80.8% (1999 census).

Vietnam's population has increased from 86,967,524 in 2009 to 94,348,835 in 2015 making it the 15th most populous nation in the world with the rate of population growth stagnating at 0.97% respectively (CIA, 2015). The national sex ratio is one male for every female in 2015 with both sexes experiencing some lengthening of life expectancy at birth : male from 68.78 years in 2009 to 70.69 years in 2015 and female from 74.57 years to 75.9 years respectively. The national life expectancy was moderately high at 73.16 years placing Vietnam at 130 in world comparison (2015). Infant mortality stood at 18.39 deaths per 100,000 live births (2015), the 95th highest in the world.

With an improved health expenditure at 6% of GDP (2013) there is 1.19 physician (2013) and 2beds (2010) for every 1,000 population. Drinking water source has improved for 97.1 of the urban population and only for 99.1% of the rural population (2015). By contrast, improved sanitation facility access only benefits less than 78 per cent of urban and rural population. For 5.6% of urban and 33.3 % of rural population their sanitation facility remains unimproved (2015). Thus, the degree of risk of major infectious diseases is still very high ranging from food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, hepatitis A and E, and typhoid fever, vector borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, and water contact disease of leptospirosis. Highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza has been

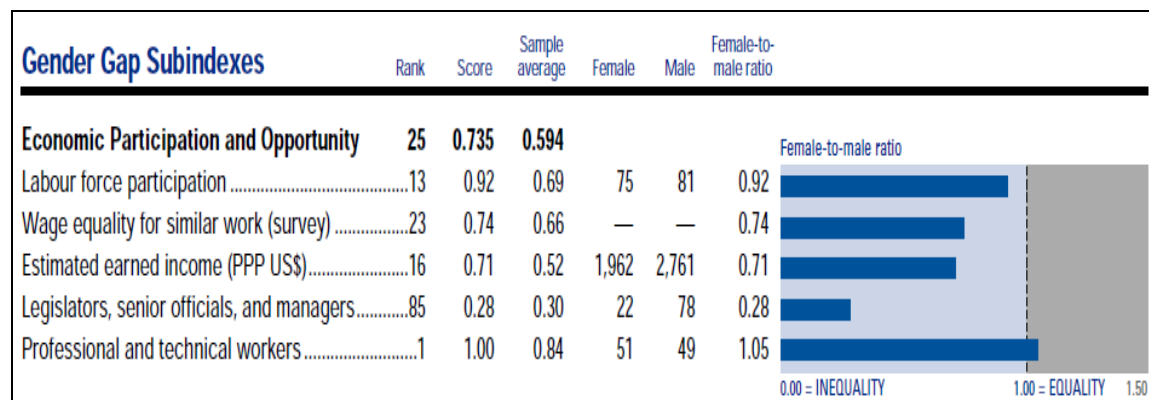
identified in 2013. Undernourishment has seen 12% (2011) of Vietnamese children under the age of 5 years underweight, the 60th highest in the world. One bright aspect is that the adult prevalence rate of HIV/AIDS in Vietnam was only 0.47 % (2014) the 73rd highest in the world. A total of 250,200 (2014) lived with this disease, the 22nd highest in the world, and 10, 600 deaths in the country were due to HIV/AIDS in 2014 in contrast to Nigeria’s 239,700 deaths, the highest in the world in 2012.

Urbanization increases from 28% of total population in 2008 to 33.6% in 2015. Education expenditure which comprised 6.3% of GDP (2012) only managed to produce a not very impressive national literacy rate of 94.5% (2015) for the population aged 15 and over with females lagging behind males at 92.8% and 96.3% respectively in 2015. Nevertheless, the females’ 92.8% is a significant improvement of the 86.98% achieved in 2002. Given the state of the economy, child labour – the employment of children ages 5-14 – is still significant totaling 2,545,616 or 16% (2006) of the total number of children in the age group (CIA, 2015).

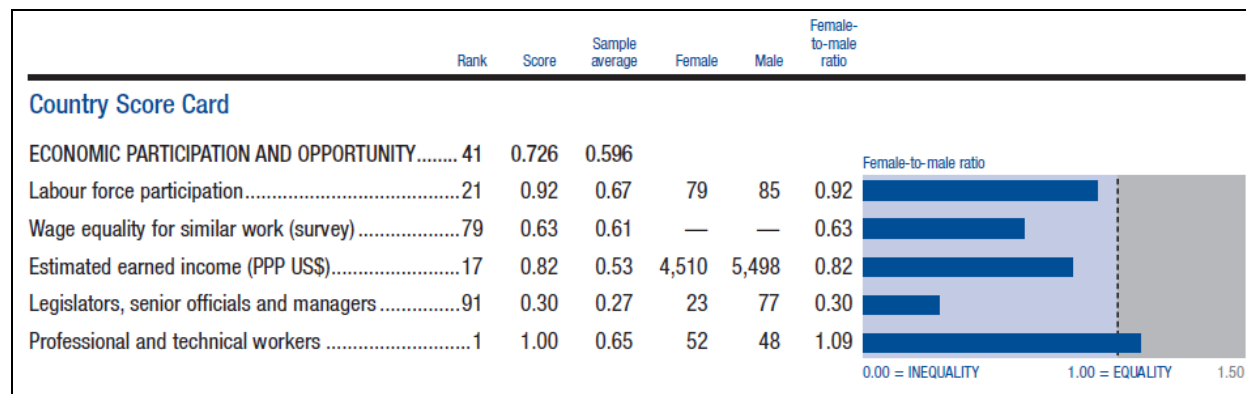
State of socio- economic participation of women in the country

Despite improvement in literacy, Vietnamese women have achieved much improvement in the way of consistent empowerment. The overall score for economic participation and opportunity for women in the labour force dipped a little from 0.735 in 2009 to 0.726 which pushed Vietnam’s global ranking down from 25 in 2009 to 41 in 2014 . Nevertheless and remarkably the women’s estimated earned income has more than quadrupled from USD 1,062 to USD 4,510 respectively (Table 1).

Table 1. Gender inequality in economic activity



Source: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap2009/Vietnam.pdf>



Source: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR14/GGGR_CountryProfiles.pdf (p.370)

Best practice project 1: HRPC economic empowerment projects

Project initiators: The Vietnam Handicraft Research and Promotion Center (HRPC) - a leading non-profit, non-government organization committed to the sustainable development of artisan crafts and creation of rural economic opportunities in Vietnam. The Vietnam Handicraft Research and Promotion Center (HRPC), as a member of Vietnam Ethnology Association, is a non-profit organization founded in 1997 to promote, preserve craft villages as well as to support disadvantage people through handicraft development in Vietnam.

Project design: Vietnam Handicraft Research and Promotion Center (HRPC) offers practical assistance to disadvantaged artisans and marginalized groups in Vietnam, working in partnership to foster artistic traditions, cultural vitality, improved livelihoods and community well-being. Through collaboration in product development, business and skills training, and development of new markets, HRPC provides sustainable economic independence and opportunities for craftswomen and men in an environmentally sensitive and culturally respectful manner.

HRPC encourage professionalism among crafts people, and to raise the standard of excellence in craftsmanship and design, through workshops, and training programs. Increase public understanding and appreciation of crafts, human rights, environment.

HRPC create marketing opportunities for crafts people, help disadvantage people to find market for their trained craft provide a forum for HRPC members to encourage mutual support, through the activities of member mentor lists, bimonthly newsletters and annual report.

HRPC always co-operates with the Vietnamese and International organizations to study and implement various initiatives based on the development of handicrafts and other community development activities in rural and impoverished communities of Vietnam.

Project impact

(i) Collaboration with WIN

WIN (Women in Need of Support, Opportunity and Community) was established to assist victims of human trafficking & individuals at high risk. WIN was established and supported by Oxfam Quebec and received vocational training by HRPC.

This project was started as a way to provide skills training to victims of human trafficking and provide viable economic opportunities to high risk young women at. The training they received was in handicraft production of traditional and innovative crafts for the Fair Trade market. The WIN has three groups specialized crafts utilizing bamboo, hemp, silk flower and natural spices.

The primary focus of WIN is to provide economic opportunities to victims of human trafficking and young women at high risk, but there is much more WIN is designed to accomplish. By providing skill training and establishing this women's group on Fair Trade principles and standards, WIN aimed at empowering socially-marginalized women by providing viable economic opportunities free from the cycle of exploitation, and addressing the effects of psychologically traumatic experiences and rebuilding shattered lives.

Beautiful hemp-based textile products, green bamboo handicrafts and natural spice decorative objects (Fig. 2) were made by members of WIN. Buying these products means contributing to the fight against women trafficking.

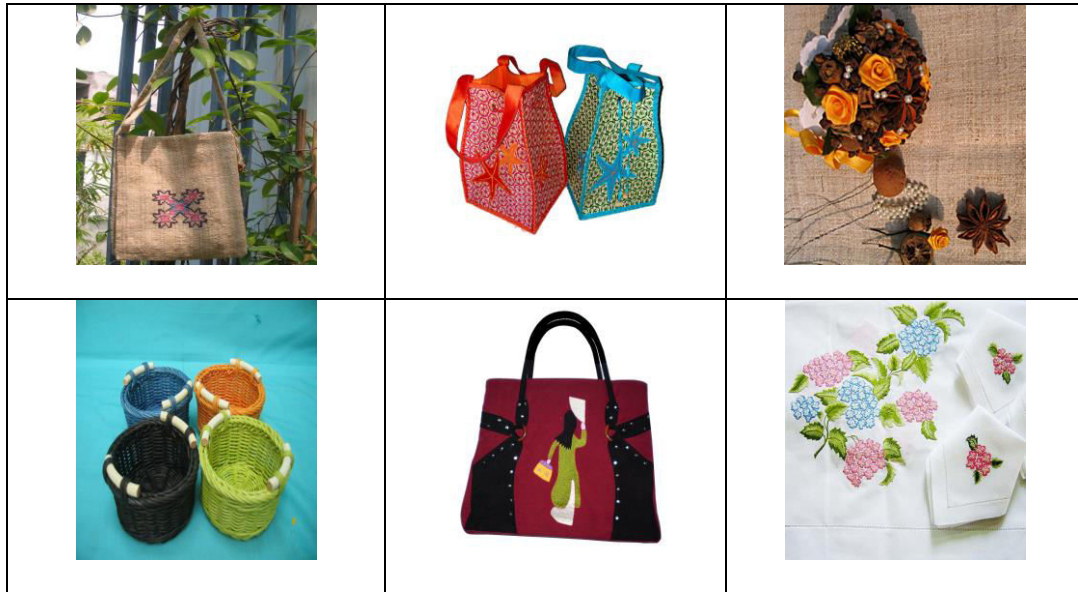


Fig. 2. Hemp-based handicraft products by WIN members

(ii) Collaboration with Sun Flower

Sun Flower is a bamboo and rattan production group in Cam Khe district, Phu Tho province which consists of 152 members who are very skillful at weaving bamboo, rattan and seagrass products.

Cam Khe is one of the poorest districts in Phu Tho, one of the poor provinces in Vietnam. Cam Khe district is 120 km from Hanoi, a mountainous district where 29% of local people is under poverty line. Yen Tap, Hung Lung and Ta Xa are communes known locally as poorest with 41% people living below the national poverty line of less than USD 20 per month. The group started with the financial support of the Ford Foundation and technical support of HRPC. Thanks to its traditional track of making bamboo and rattan wares and sea-grass the project support in training, design, production process, and capacity building the group can now make a wide range of products for local and international markets.

(iii) Collaboration with Green Handmade Paper

Vietnam has 500 years history of handmade paper. Handmade paper in Vietnam is famous worldwide with the use of Do fiber (*Rhamnoneuron balansae* Gilg) in production. Today, the Muong ethnic people in Hoa Binh province uses their local available material to produce high-quality and environmental friendly handmade paper to export to Japan. Not only income is being generated but the traditional craft of the ancestors is being maintained.

Suoi Co is a very poor village in the mountainous Hoa Binh province where 100% of Muong ethnic people live from hands to mouth and their main source of income is nothing but a meager output of upland rice often affected by natural calamity. The researchers of Vietnam Handicraft Research and Promotion Center (HRPC) decided to develop special handmade paper in Suoi Co which it accomplished in 18 months. Suoi Co are very proud of their paper products which are always environmental-friendly with 100% chemicals free and interesting natural dyeing techniques (www.hrpc.com.vn/haiduong).

(iii) Collaboration with Hai Duong Group

Currently HRPC and GTV of Trento, Italy are in the process of creating a cooperative of twenty-five poor and disadvantaged women of Hai Duong, some of whom are survivors of human trafficking. With the

assistance of the local Women's Union, these women were selected to undergo extensive embroidery training with HRPC to provide them with a viable livelihood opportunity. The group is also going through a training program to form themselves into a Fair Trade Cooperative and other empowerment courses on gender and human rights, domestic violence, child sexual abuse prevention, team building and leadership training.

Best practice project 2: Vietnamese – Belgian Credit Project (VBCP)

Project initiators: Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC) is the Belgian agency for development cooperation. On behalf of the Belgian government, BTC supports developing countries in their fight against poverty. BTC partner Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) (<http://web.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~thiesmey/vwu.htm>).

Project design: The objectives were to strengthen and consolidate the institutional capacity of Vietnam Women's Union in managing microfinance programs, to establish an effective and viable microfinance programme with financial and non-financial services. The microfinance model targets poor women with low incomes providing non - collateral loans through simple and convenient procedures in Hanoi and 17 other provinces. The credit model is based on the Grameen model which uses group solidarity. Groups are composed of 10 women in a similar socio-economic position, who know each other and who are willing to support each other in borrowing loans and following the project regulations. Each group selects a group leader who receives training to manage the group. The position of group leaders rotates on a yearly basis. The microfinance products include general loans for production activities and husbandry, seasonal loans to assist in crop production, and emergency loans in case of heavy natural disasters.

A Centre is established and comprises three groups with 10 members each. Each month a Centre meeting takes place chaired by an elected centre chief. The monthly Centre meeting plays a decisive role in the growth and development of the Centre and in instilling credit discipline among members. The meeting schedule is fixed and includes disbursement of loans, collection of loan repayments, interest and savings. It also provides an opportunity for members to discuss activities, create close social contacts, discuss needs which can be communicated to VBCP officers and share information on topics that are not linked to micro finance (e.g. health, woman emancipation, family planning).

The financial management has been computerized using the Micro Banker system, i.e. banking software developed by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The system was entirely translated into Vietnamese by the project and adapted to the chosen credit model. Computers were installed at the provincial offices of the VWU and connected to the central level of the project. In the head office the data of the 7 provinces are consolidated. The Crystal software programme for the Management Information System (MIS) has been installed, using data provided by the Micro Banker system and allowing the generation of comprehensive monthly financial reports including ratios so that appropriate measures can be taken immediately.

Project impact

Through training, group dynamics and group activity, poor rural women have proven their capacity and creativity. As a result of that process of self-discovery, they have achieved a new identity as human beings that are able to make their own decisions and achieve self-reliance (Table 2).

Table 2. Performance of the micro-finance project

Total loans disbursed:	2.6 million US\$
Total number of borrowers so far:	39 500
Active borrowers:	11 921
Repayment rate:	99.7%

Source: <http://web.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~thiesmey/vwu.htm>.

The majority of the clients find homogeneous groups of 10 members an excellent means of forging relationships and solidarity with other women. For most of the clients of the VBCP who are living in extreme poverty, micro-credit can break the 'culture of hopelessness' and the family income earned by the mothers generally has a greater impact on the well-being of the family unit (nutrition, children's education and family planning):

Mrs. Le Thi Ba, client of the project in Tien Giang province explains:

"In my group and even in our commune there is now a certain level of solidarity amongst the poor. It was intimidating for me to go to the first meetings of the project. With the help of the project, I started a small business of duck raising and fruit growing. I am now more skilled and feel better about myself. My husband died eleven years ago and life used to be always difficult for me. I am now no longer oppressed and my situation is no longer insurmountable."

A group leader in Tien Giang Branch said:

"The participation in income-generating activities supported by VBCP loans has indeed enhanced our economic independence, social status and position within the household and this change has been accompanied by much less intra-household tension than one might have believed".

Apparently the husbands and other male members in the household have accepted the new situation willingly and in some cases, even enthusiastically. The women reported that husbands were more likely to treat them as equals, and that there was a decrease in physical violence and other verbal abuse. There were not only changes in men's attitudes toward women but also women's attitudes about themselves. Poor women, particularly in the mountainous and remote areas, have few chances of getting involved in social activities and have little voice in their family and in the society. Joining the project through its smallest units i.e. women groups with monthly collective activities (loan utilization, organizing family life and health care, sharing experiences, and helping each other in production) have opened up new opportunities for poor women to improve their economical and social status.

Most of the respondents also mentioned an improvement in the attitude of the neighbours and of other women in the neighbourhood. Changes in the status of women because of VBCP membership can be seen in the women's participation in the work force and their increased income and assets. Through access to the program, many poor women - who have never received a loan from any official resource - have for the first time received credit in their own name with full responsibility for managing and utilizing it for the development of their household's economy and improvement of their living standard. Women's participation in the programme gives them the confidence and support that enables them to assert their rights to economic assets.

Best practice project 3: United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Vietnam

Project initiators

UNIFEM works to promote gender equality between women and men and to advance the status of women. In particular, we focus on implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and other UN global commitments through political and economic empowerment of women, and through the full realization of women's human rights.

UNIFEM works with governments, NGOs, community and other organizations, as well as individuals. The East and Southeast Asia Regional Office covers 13 countries (Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Korea, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, People's Republic of China, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and East Timor).

To empower women economically:

- UNIFEM supports innovative and catalytic economic activities that will increase women's autonomy and family income.
- UNIFEM supports innovative and strategic activities to develop women's businesses through skills and management training, and more efficient methods of production. We also promote gender-responsive programmes that address the practical and strategic needs of women in business.
- UNIFEM works with government and industry groups, especially women's business associations, to support women's businesses, particularly at the micro and cottage levels.
- Through the Gender, Globalization and Markets Regional Programme, UNIFEM seeks support for women's enterprises that is both gender-responsive and capable of leading to sustainable, non-poverty-level incomes. In particular, UNIFEM develops the capacity of women's businesses to (respond to market change <http://www.unifem-eseasia.org/projects/Vietnam/Haiphong.htm>).

Project design: Vietnamese women in fish processing

Since 1993, UNIFEM has been helping to improve the lives of women fish processors in Do Son, Vietnam. Do Son, 125km northeast of Hanoi in Haiphong Province, is a typical fishing community. The men go to sea in boats to catch fish which the women salt or ferment at home to make the pungent fish sauce that flavours most Vietnamese dishes, as well as fish paste and fish cakes.

However, due to the low level of technology used in fish handling, processing and marketing, the women's earnings are small and their families remain poor.

UNIFEM is helping the women to improve the quality of their products, increase their earnings and raise their status.

In Do Son, wastage is high due to poor hygiene and spoilage caused by a lack of chilling and preservation facilities.

The project established a Production Centre managed by the local branch of the Vietnam Women's Union to improve processing and enable the women to operate more profitably.

Equipped with modern grinding machines and a chilling facility, the Production Centre offers the women training and access to improved technologies.

It also produces ice to reduce spoilage and enable fish to be preserved for processing during the off season, thus providing the women with an income throughout the year.

Mme Truong Thi Phuong Dung, the project Fish Technologist from the Haiphong Research Institute for Marine Products, has trained 50 women from the two sub-districts in improved fish processing techniques and quality control. Mme Dung taught the women to make fish cakes, shrimp paste and fish

sauce to commercial standards using simple techniques that can be applied in household production. She also taught them to calculate their costs of production and thus the minimum price at which they can afford to sell. New recipes enable the women to diversify their products, thus increasing their market.

Project impact

The women trained by Mme Dung reported that their sales had increased because their customers liked the new products.

They undertook to pass on the knowledge they had gained to other women in the community. To facilitate this exchange, five of the women fish processors participated in a four-week long Training of Trainers (TOT) course at a local training institute, COHASIPH. The TOT, covering training, production and business methods, was conducted jointly by COHASIPH, UNIFEM and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization UNIDO. Although other course participants were experienced trainers, one of the five village women emerged as one of the most successful trainees.

Many of the women fish processors did not understand basic business principles: they could not determine their capacity to repay loans or whether their enterprise was profitable.

Thus, the village women trained by COHASIPH and the project marketing consultant conducted a second training programme in basic business principles, including simple market research, production planning and costing.

Successful local business women joined the training to share their secrets to success, and local bank officers also explained how to apply for a loan.

Armed with their newly acquired skills and supported by the Production Centre, the women of Do Son are now improving their own businesses and sharing their knowledge with neighbours.

In this way, UNIFEM is contributing to the economic empowerment of women in a poor fishing community in Vietnam (<http://www.unifem-eseasia.org/projects/Vietnam/Haiphong.htm>, Dated: 16 May 1998).

Conclusion

Socio-economic empowerment projects have enabled disadvantaged, in particular, Vietnam's vulnerable women to cope better with their livelihood and liveability challenges. Physical and mental health is prerequisite of economic empowerment and health education enhances personal, family and community wellbeing.

Women are particularly instrumental in the empowerment projects not only because they are the inheritors of the issues and challenges but also because they have proven to be capable of making the projects doable. The Vietnamese cases point to the fact that respect for the women's existential right makes the difference, and that faith in women as effective leaders for change in their families and communities secures success of projects. A special emphasis on marginalised and neglected women adds value to the projects.

The Vietnamese experience also underlines the vital role of enlightened policy makers, prudent management and organization of liveability empowerment initiatives. Here, when a collectively felt need justifies the efforts ready funds pave the way for their implementation, often with the help of a global-local network. Then an efficient on the ground mechanism guarantees implementation by inventing and utilizing creative but pragmatic techniques to ensure women's accessibility to the empowerment projects, and by training them to make the projects work.

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