GENDER, EMPOWERMENT AND IMPLICATIONS FROM RESEARCH

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Presentation Outline

❖ **Introduction**

❖ **Research area/methods**

❖ **Research questions**

❖ **Theoretical background**

❖ **Findings:**
  ❖ **Phase 1 of research: Findings from key informants (policy level)**
  ❖ **Translating 'empowerment' across three levels (policy makers, development practitioners, beneficiaries/participants)**
  ❖ **Phase 2 of research: Findings to date from case studies (local level)**
  ❖ **Positive and negative outcomes common to all four countries**
  ❖ **Differences across countries that influence outcomes**
  ❖ **Involvement of men**

❖ **Implications for policy and practice**

Research area/methods

❖ Research based on a study of **economic empowerment** activities/projects in four countries of the **Greater Mekong Subregion:** Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam

❖ **Qualitative** and **exploratory** research based on a small grant from the Norwegian Research Council (in cooperation with NTNU, a university in Norway)

❖ **First phase** is completed: **key informant interviews** in four countries and different levels (local, national and international actors/institutions)

❖ **Second phase** consists in in-depth interviews with **project beneficiaries/participants** through a number of case studies. We are still in the early stages of this phase.

❖Starts from Andrea **Cornwall**'s inquiry into the usefulness of development terms such as Gender and Empowerment, and whether they have become simple just **buzzwords**

❖We attempt to provide an answer using Sandra Harding's approach of **sciences from below**, by:

  ❖having **different stakeholders define what empowerment means to them**, and

  ❖**finding gaps and similarities between the perspectives** of policy makers, practitioners and beneficiaries of empowerment projects on the meaning and outcome of empowerment.

Research questions

❖ What is the meaning of empowerment? Are there differences in the way (1) policy makers, (2) development practitioners and (3) beneficiaries view the **goals and nature of 'women's empowerment'** that is induced by project activities?

❖ In income generating projects, how does **income translate into empowerment (however defined)**? Do different stakeholders (the 3 types noted above) differ in their views of **what 'works' and 'doesn't work'** in that pathway to empowerment?

❖ Where do **men** fit in? Does their **participation** make a difference for women's empowerment? Under what **conditions** are they **supportive**, or under what conditions do they **hinder** these activities?

❖ These include organizations such as
  - ❖ **UN Women**
  - ❖ **UNDP**
  - ❖ **Ministries or Departments of Women's Affairs, or units responsible for women affairs or gender issues** (e.g., Ministry of Women's Affairs in Cambodia; Gender Equality Network – working with Dept. of Social Welfare in Myanmar)
  - ❖ **National Women's Unions** (Lao, Vietnam)
  - ❖ **International and National level NGOs/NPAs** and **networks** (Cambodia, Lao, Myanmar, Vietnam)

❖ Interviews indicate that the **conception of 'empowerment' appears to differ significantly** depending on the level at which the concept is used:

   ❖ *International organizations* focused on a **rights-based approach,** and women gaining personal power, especially decision-making power, voice, and authority (women as individuals)

   ❖ *National level government agencies and women's organizations* are often constrained by the fact that 'power' is seen as **too political and implies taking power away from men**; some agencies also promote women's role but in essentially **traditional terms**

   ❖ *At the provincial or local level*, the concept of empowerment seems to be more 'reflective' of local cultures and values and where people often explain **empowerment as a *household* or *community* process as opposed to an *individual* one**

❖ Also, 'empowerment' in the sense of the English language term is very difficult to **translate** on the local level in most of these countries

❖ How is '**empowerment**' viewed by beneficiaries, and **under what conditions** do <u>**positive**</u> **or** <u>**negative**</u> **outcomes** tend to be generated?

Cambodia: *empowerment of urban poor homebased workers through the creation of **membership-based organizations and networks (MBOs/MBNs:** cooperatives/producer groups, saving groups, others) – mostly women, also marginalized men*

Myanmar: *empowerment of rural and urban poor through **CBOs and SRGs** (Self-Reliance Groups), microcredit, and local production (working with INGOS and UN organizations)*

Lao PDR: *empowerment of villagers through Non-Profit Associations (**NPAs**) and partner organizations*

Vietnam: *empowerment of very poor villages through a series of projects coordinated by the provincial and village-level Vietnam Women's Union (**VWU**), working with international donors*

A few of the many **positive outcomes** found include:

1. Women's status rises when *economic gains are substantial and men appreciate the additional income and do not feel threatened* (Cambodia)

2. Women's increased status may be *sustainable if the new knowledge they gain continues to be valued in the community* even after the project period is over *(Vietnam, Myanmar)*

(cont.)

3. Increased competence in generating income and inclusion in ***membership-based groups and networks*** can often translate into more 'voice' in the community and more of a ***sense of self-worth for women and marginalized men*** *(Cambodia)*

❖ With groups and networks the gains also appear to be more **sustainable**

❖ Groups also provide the **social space** for women to come together in many settings, and gain access to leisure, travel, knowledge of the wider world *(Vietnam)*

4. These displays of competence and confidence may also allow women (although not usually the poorest) to **move up politically** to become community, provincial or national leaders *(Vietnam, Laos)*

5.   **Long-term complementary projects** (e.g., over a 10 year period) may do more good than the usual 2-3 year project – positive changes are more sustainable if the project period is long → *social change takes time (Vietnam)*

*The importance of these positive empowerment outcomes needs to be clearly recognized – income is not the only benefit of these projects. However, we find that **most projects report only positive outcomes**, and policy makers usually only hear reports that fit their preconceptions of 'empowerment'; the reality is more complicated.*

A few of the many **negative outcomes** include:

1. Some empowerment gains are **not sustainable** if the economic gains are not sustained (e.g., markets change – *Lao, Myanmar*)

2. **Women's status tends not to rise** when the economic gains are very small, even in impoverished households (*Myanmar*)

3. **When men feel their role is threatened, or it is implied that they cannot provide for their families, they can react very badly** *(Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Lao)*

4. Economic empowerment projects may result in **increased work for women, without benefit for women themselves** (*Lao, Vietnam, Myanmar*)

Differences across countries affecting the outcomes of empowerment projects

Some of the main differences across countries include:

- ❖ ***Institutional contexts*** *(e.g., influences project's effectiveness, degree of democratic processes involved, sustainability, ability to negotiate social change)*

- ❖ ***Cultural considerations*** *(e.g., affecting the willingness of men to take over some of the housework, support women's paid work)*

- ❖ ***Frequency of domestic violence and tensions within the household*** *(differences within and across countries – may be related to men's self-confidence, ability or inability to provide for the household, views of 'masculinity' and 'men's work', etc.)*

- ❖ ***Aspirations of beneficiaries*** *(urban vs. rural, ethnic majority and different ethnic minorities, other determinants of aspirations)*

- ❖ ***Economic level*** *(affecting local prioritizing of <u>immediate economic</u> vs. <u>non-economic</u> or <u>long-term</u> benefits)*

- ❖ ***Relative remoteness*** *from influence of return or circular migration, and urban/'mainstream' education, media, institutions (these may open up possibilities for change, whether positive or negative)*

❖ **Goals** should be defined and **outcomes** should be assessed from the point of view of **beneficiaries**. These may not always correspond to views of empowerment by IOs and NGOs.

❖ The preliminary findings suggest that empowerment is very contextual in the way it is interpreted, and that **empowerment measures** should first try to establish what people think of empowerment and how they can be empowered, before attempting to measure empowerment.

❖ Getting a **participatory approach to evaluation** is not enough if indicators of empowerment have been **predefined**.

  ❖ We need to involve beneficiaries in defining and designing empowerment indicators before we attempt to measure empowerment.

❖ Depending on the cultural context, there is often a **critical need for including men in these, and/or initiating parallel, economic projects for men (partners) rather than targeting only women**, or other ways to ensure men's engagement and support – particularly if they are seriously underemployed

❖ Across the four countries, it became very clear from KIIs that men should be involved, **if not directly in income generation or supporting activities**, at least in terms of **awareness-raising and sensitization** in order to

  ❖ increase the **effectiveness** of the project outcomes, and

  ❖ **reduce potential conflict and violence** related to men's belief in their breadwinner role, and their view of gender roles

❖ The presence of organizations that can understand **gender dynamics and power relations**, and help negotiate **solutions**, is very important when carrying out 'empowerment' projects, and

❖ The tendency on the part of **government organizations and donors** to want to **see only positive outcomes** needs to be recognized and countered, if we are to be able to design, implement and assess empowerment projects in a way that really meets the needs and priorities of the intended beneficiaries (participants).

Thank you

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