

EMPOWER



INCREASING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH THE MSI LADIES MODEL



Background

The **Mekong Women's Empowerment Project (Empower)** aimed to **advance women's economic empowerment** by increasing the clinical capacity, business skills and financial independence of entrepreneurial health providers, known as **MSI Ladies**. MSI Ladies are qualified midwives, nurses and doctors who had a desire to generate supplementary income but faced barriers, such as training needs or lack of quality supplies. The project empowered them with the necessary skills to develop their businesses and enhance their ability to deliver **sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and family planning (FP) services** within their communities.

The four-year project (2018–2022) was funded by the **Australia Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)** through the Gender Equality Fund. The project was managed by **MSI Reproductive Choices (MSI)** and implemented through country program offices in **Cambodia (MSIC), Myanmar (MSIM) and Vietnam (MSIV)**.

Results at a glance

MSI strengthened the capacity of **451 MSI Ladies** to provide high quality, comprehensive, equitable and affordable SRH/FP services to target populations in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. These front-line healthcare providers reached **1,407,515 community members** with SRH/FP information and services, and delivered SRH/FP services and products to **322,132 clients**, generating **158,560 Couple Years of Protection (CYP)**. The Empower program has had an enormous health impact on local populations in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, and has resulted in:

Unsafe abortions averted:

27,530

Maternal deaths prevented:

30

Unintended pregnancies averted:

75,492

"Before being an MSI Lady, I did not have enough knowledge and skills on SRH/FP because I lacked training. I had learned only from senior midwives at the public health centre. I rarely provided counselling or consultation to clients prior to delivering services.

After receiving training from MSIC, I can better serve clients, and provide more counselling and advice to allow them to make decisions and choose the SRH/FP methods that suit their situation."

- MSI Lady, Phnom Penh, Cambodia





Impact

Impact of Empower on MSI Ladies' ability to provide high quality SRH/FP services

To expand the provision of high-quality, affordable, and comprehensive SRH/FP information, services and products at the community level, MSI focused on strengthening the **technical capacity** and **competencies** of MSI Ladies through clinical training and monitoring of quality service provision. Over the duration of the Empower project, MSI Ladies increased their **confidence** to provide quality SRH/FP services, and the **quality of services** and **client satisfaction** improved over time.

Across the region, MSI's training (a mix of theory and practicum) and clinical supervision was rated as 'quite good' or 'very good' by 99% of MSI Ladies. In addition, it generated highly confident providers, with 98% of MSI Ladies feeling 'quite confident' or 'very confident' in their FP clinical skills.

Through MSI's high-quality, practical training, and supportive supervision, MSI Ladies paid more attention to the needs of each individual client and cited a major area for growth in understanding the value and quality of comprehensive counselling. 75% of clients reported being very likely to recommend MSI Lady services at endline (from a baseline of 67%). **This improvement was significantly higher in Cambodia in particular, with a result of 61% at endline from a baseline of 36%.** Furthermore, while in 2019, 67% of FP clients reported receiving comprehensive counselling (according to the FP2020 Method Information Index Criteria), which increased to 85% in 2022 (see Table 1).

	Baseline	Endline
Overall	67%	85%
Cambodia	57%	93%
Myanmar	95%	92%
Vietnam	48%	71%

Table 1: Percentage of clients who reported receiving comprehensive counselling



"MSI Ladies are now very skilled in counselling and health education, and they can communicate and coordinate well with local groups and leaders. These are the strengths of the program. I once heard someone from another NGO talk highly of the MSI program, saying that all the service providers are well trained by MSI so they can provide quality services in the community."

- Myanmar Nurses and Midwife Association Representative, Myanmar

Increasing the availability and range of SRH/FP services

Through tailored advocacy, Empower supported MSI Ladies to increase the **availability and range of SRH/FP services** available to clients. For example, in **Cambodia**, MSIC enhanced women's access to safe abortion services by training MSI Ladies on comprehensive abortion care, ensuring that safe points of access were available in communities.

In **Vietnam**, MSI advocated to pilot a **task-shifting initiative**, in order to increase access to long-acting contraceptive methods. Task-shifting involves the redistribution of tasks among health workforce teams to make **more efficient use of available human resources**. In Vietnam, where only doctors are permitted to provide implants, MSIV advocated with the Lao Cai and Son La provincial health departments (PHD) to enable midwives to provide this long-term method. This resulted in agreement from the PHD to train 21 MSI Ladies (who were midwives) to provide implant services. Under this task-shifting pilot, the midwives provided 857 implants, and this was an important first step to increasing the range of services that MSI Ladies could provide and offering clients greater access and choice.

Impact

Increasing access to SRH/FP services for key target groups

Empower country program teams used a range of strategies to address barriers to access for key target groups. This included:

- Training the MSI Ladies to strengthen their ability to provide **inclusive, non-judgmental, and stigma-free** services. This included **adolescent-focused training** and **values clarification and attitudes transformation training**, which explored traditional and cultural values focused on the provision of SRH/FP services.
- Empower country programs **collaborated with organisations that represented marginalised groups**. This included specialist disability organisations to support MSI Ladies to reach people with disabilities and build their capacity to provide disability-inclusive services.
- MSI Ladies were **intentionally recruited** from groups that were harder to access and were provided with health education materials that were translated into **local ethnic languages**.

MSI Ladies used different strategies to reach underserved clients and address barriers to access, including:

- Facilitating access to services by going into **workplaces** such as garment factories or to clients' **households**.
- Some MSI Ladies provided services or products for **free or highly subsidised** or have put in place **payment plans** if a client could not afford to pay for a service.
- The MSI Ladies in Cambodia had a **clear client-targeting plan** focusing on women with potential unmet need and a steady income (professional women, homemakers, and manual/agricultural workers). Their strategy ensured that 60% of their clients were high impact, including poor people and adolescents.

“There are people with disabilities who cannot go to the health community centre. When I come to the village they also cannot come and see me, so I go to see them in their home instead.”

- MSI Lady, Son La, Vietnam



Navigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict in Myanmar

The **COVID-19 pandemic** and the **conflict in Myanmar** presented MSI Ladies with an array of challenges, including fewer clients seeking SRH/FP services, travel restrictions, fewer clients with the ability to pay, discomfort being in close contact with others and being asked to support the government pandemic response work in public health facilities. During this period, MSI made a range of transitions in training and technical support for MSI Ladies to online and were also able to provide additional personal protection equipment supplies to further enhance safe service delivery practices.

The crises also highlighted the **importance of MSI's engagement with private sector providers** under Empower. Travel restrictions, as well as the governments' focus on managing COVID-19, often at the cost of other health services, made access to SRH/FP services in public health facilities challenging. This meant that MSI Ladies services were more appealing for some women during the crises due to their ease of access, and were often the only safe points of access.

Overall, the recent crises highlighted the **resilience of MSI Ladies** and their ability to continue to expand SRH/FP access in these regions during this period.

“The fact that they continued through the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict in Myanmar is an amazing act of bravery, good planning, and leadership.”

- Representative, DFAT, Australia



Strategies for success

Learnings from Empower have highlighted four main strategies for the successful delivery of high-quality, comprehensive SRH/FP services in Southeast Asia through community-based front-line health workers.



Leveraging online platforms for training, support and information

The use of online platforms was pivotal in the delivery of Empower project objectives, and MSI successfully adapted to using technology to ensure continued delivery of training, clinical assessments and internal audits, ensuring the safety and security of staff, whilst restrictions of movement were in place due to COVID-19.

MSI trained MSI Ladies to record their data digitally through the use of a mobile application. In addition, Clinical Audio-Visual Assessments were a **remote monitoring approach** introduced to evaluate the competency levels of MSI Ladies, addressing the need for virtual assessments when in-person assessments could not be conducted.

There was also an increased use of **social media platforms** to raise awareness of SRH/FP, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and political disruptions in Myanmar.

"Just compared to a few years ago, communication is much better now. The midwife can connect with me by social media, so that when I have any related health issues, I can contact her and ask immediately."

- MSI Lady client, Vietnam

Policy dialogue to promote sustainable SRH/FP delivery

Engaging in **policy dialogue** has been crucial to increasing availability and accessibility to a wide range of SRH/FP services, particularly long-term contraceptive methods. This has been enabled through **regular engagement with local health departments** and **sharing learnings from successful evidence-based interventions**. In **Vietnam**, the success of MSIV's task-shifting pilot to enable midwives to provide implants without requiring supervision from a doctor, was achieved through regular engagement with the PHD in each project province.

This continual engagement has ensured that midwives in Vietnam will continue to provide implant services after the Empower program has ended, highlighting an example of **successful policy dialogue to promote sustainable SRH/FP service delivery**.





Strategies for success (cont)

Promoting MSI Ladies networks

Empower country programs reflected on the **value of creating opportunities for MSI Ladies to share their experiences** and ideas, particularly through social media platforms. In Cambodia, MSIC set up an **online group where members could exchange learnings** and support each other when needed. This online group will continue to be facilitated beyond the Empower project.

Annual learning and networking events were also a great opportunity for MSI to get to know each other face-to-face and build connections for future referral purposes and clinical incident management support.



Working in an enabling environment

The MSI Ladies model is most effective in environments with certain **enabling conditions**. This includes having a **supportive contraceptive policy environment** to allow MSI Ladies to deliver a wide range of SRH/FP services. There must be a burgeoning population of rural and peri-urban women and girls, **able and willing to make out-of-pocket payments** for healthcare; and there must be a large and growing population with **high unmet need** for SRH services.

The success of this model also lies in the **high quality and affordability of SRH services** provided by the MS Ladies, the flexibility and discretion of the service delivery model and the targeted and high-quality support provided by MSI. These factors combined create an enabling environment for real change for women and girls.

Under Empower, **Cambodia** had the strongest enabling environment for MSI Ladies to provide a wide range of SRH/FP services, including long acting and reversible methods. For MSIC, their strong focus on **specific target groups with disposable income** and the commitment to **counselling on a broad range of SRH/FP methods** available has proved successful.



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For more information on Empower, please contact MSI Asia Pacific at info@msichoices.org.au or visit our [website](#).