

# EMPOWER



## IMPROVING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY 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 these providers 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).



"I have more power to make decisions on household affairs. It is obvious that the increase in my income has influenced such a change."

-MSI Lady, Ratanakiri, Cambodia

### Results at a glance

Empower contributed to **gender equality** by supporting **451 female entrepreneurs** to build their private businesses that deliver a range of high quality, affordable SRH/FP services and products in communities with high unmet need. During the end-of-project evaluation, MSI Ladies and community partners repeatedly referenced the **high quality clinical and business training** provided by MSI and the impact that had on their **confidence levels** and **income**.

MSI Ladies reported that Empower had a **positive impact on their lives**, citing increased confidence in their lives overall, with the main benefit of the project being reported as an **improved standing in the community and their primary workplace**. Empower enabled MSI Ladies to **increase their income**, with MSI Ladies observing a **clear link between their increased income and improved self-confidence**, autonomy, and relationship with their partner.

Empower reached over **1.4 million community members with improved knowledge of SRH/FP choices** and understanding about the positive effects of modern methods of contraception on their economic opportunities. MSI Lady clients also acknowledged the **potential economic benefits of using modern FP methods**.

# Impact



## Increasing MSI Ladies' economic potential

Empower succeeded in nurturing the entrepreneurial aspirations and earning potential of female clinical providers across the program's locations. According to the majority (87%) of MSI Ladies across the region, **Empower has strengthened their confidence in their business management skills and over half (55%) reported an overall increase in their income** since working as an MSI Lady. The majority of MSI Ladies (68%) reported that their income had increased up to 25%, and nearly **one quarter had experienced an increase in income of up to 50%.**

“My business revenue increased by 20 per cent because I improved my skills in attracting new customers and adding new services into my business.”

- MSI Lady, Kandal, Cambodia



## Strengthening MSI Ladies' decision-making power in their household

MSI Ladies recognised the positive impact that improved income had on their lives. They reported a **growth in confidence** which enabled many of them to increase their participation in (and/or take control of) decision-making **over their income** and household expenditure. They not only valued the **increased independence and financial freedom from their partner/husband as a result of increased income**, but also the impact their income had on their **improved decision-making powers, both in their private businesses and at home.**

## Enhancing MSI Ladies' standing in their community and workplace

**Empower has made a positive impact on MSI Ladies' lives according to 90% of those interviewed** in the end-of-project evaluation. As a result of being involved with the project, MSI Ladies felt that they had **improved their standing in their community (83%) and workplace (75%).**



# Impact (continued)



“Most of the retired people who don’t work are perceived as useless and are forgotten or neglected by the people in the community. Now that I am working as an MSI Lady and contributing to the community, people still give me respect.”

- MSI Lady, Magway, Myanmar



## Empowering clients

MSI delivered **Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI)** and **Gender Based Violence** training to MSI Ladies, which helped them feel more confident to discuss the rights of women to make decisions about their SRH/FP needs with clients and their partners. This in turn **empowered clients to make decisions based on their reproductive rights**.

MSI Lady clients also acknowledged the **potential economic benefits of using modern FP methods**, reflecting on the extent to which it has or will support them to complete their education, remain in paid employment, or support their children’s education.

	Complete education?	Remain in paid employment or work?	Support your children’s education
Overall	81%	92%	91%
Cambodia	90%	100%	100%
Myanmar	80%	99%	95%
Vietnam	70%	81%	79%

**Table 1:** Potential economic benefits of using modern FP methods



“I met with an MSI Lady who came to our village once a week to visit clients. I learned more about my sexual and reproductive health and my rights. I realised that I could decide whether I would have another child or not.”

- Client, Yangon, Myanmar

## Navigating the impact of COVID-19 and the Myanmar crisis

The impact of crises is never gender-neutral and COVID-19 and the conflict in Myanmar have been no exception. Women face a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission, fatalities, loss of livelihood and **increased violence**. MSI Ladies’ clients were left with **reduced income** to spend on their SRH/FP needs and as a result often chose cheaper (short-term) methods during this period. Despite these challenges, the majority (87%) of **MSI Ladies felt supported** by MSI/Empower throughout the crises.

# Strategies for success

Learnings from Empower have highlighted three main strategies for the successful delivery of women's economic empowerment and gender equality programs in Southeast Asia through the capacity building of community based front-line health workers.



## Engagement of technical experts

In **Cambodia**, MSIC partnered with **SHE Investments**, a gender-focused and culturally tailored business development program, to support the MSI Ladies to develop their **leadership skills and confidence**, and access training, mentoring and financing to accelerate the growth and impact of their businesses.

Following the training, MSI Ladies have seen their **private businesses grow and income increase**. As a result, this business training model was adapted for use in other Empower countries. MSIC also invited inspirational technical experts to an annual learning and networking event to support the MSI Ladies to reflect on the **challenges of managing their business and supporting their families**, as well as providing advice on **sourcing additional funding** to build their businesses.

## Developing GEDSI strategies to inform project delivery

Empower allowed MSI to work with a gender consultant to develop **GEDSI strategies** in partnership with each country program. These strategies were adapted and integrated into routine project management. MSI country programs are now using these strategies to **inform gender equality and social inclusion activities** across all projects. Investment in gender technical expertise to develop these policies during the **design phase** would have provided greater clarity and focus for the country programs to address clear, measurable gender equality outcomes, including gender-based violence.



## Measuring impact

Generating **credible information for management decision-making, learning and accountability purposes** is crucial for gender equality and women's economic empowerment programs. A key challenge in capturing women's economic empowerment data was the **collection of income data** due to variations in translation of income-related questions, discomfort of the data collector and/or the MSI Ladies in discussing personal income. This challenge was addressed by adapting the MSI Lady annual survey to **capture the perceived percentage change in income over time**, in addition to actual income changes. This data showed that Empower and the MSI Lady model enabled these women to increase their income over the course of the project.

Programs should be mindful to **balance the requirements to effectively monitor program activities**, without **over-burdening service providers** in regard to the collection of data.

