

Sre Tasok village, Takeo Province, Cambodia: Most people call it women's work. Sin Sok Ly says it's his job. Maybe because he's only been at it for a couple years rather than a lifetime, but the village chief rushes home early from his social functions and other chiefly duties to get the cows in from the field and the family dinner on the fire (literally).

He is Mr Mom of the Cambodian countryside, and he couldn't be more enthralled with his role as househusband.

"I think I'm very successful at it," he grins, cuddling his two grandsons. "I feel we [men] can do everything, share everything – except giving birth and breastfeeding."

On a recent May evening the 59-year-old bathed the boys after lighting sticks of wood to fry up some pork and a green papaya he just chopped from a nearby tree. His wife, Sok Sokhom, sat on the ground weaving long, brightly dyed palm leaves into unique boxes exported to Japan and Western countries as well as sold in Phnom Penh's swankiest handicraft shop, Artisans d'Angkor.

To make what she considers a good income of US\$25 a week – more than her husband ever earned selling animals – Sok Sokhom works from morning till night in the family compound in Takeo province where she can chat with others as she loops the leaves.

Sok Sokhom's increased earnings have already allowed the family to repay their debts and replace their thatched, stilted house for a sturdier wooden one with a tin roof. But "it would be impossible" to earn this much if she had to do the housework, too, she says.

The catalyst for the crucial role reversal was an unusual global initiative that confronts both poverty and the practices that perpetuate it. The Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE) programme, run by the International Labour Organization (ILO), not only teaches women about business and couples about budgeting, saving and making better financial decisions, it also gets families to rethink traditional roles.

"Tips" include the sometimes-radical idea of husbands sharing the housework.

This link between poverty alleviation, female entrepreneurship and family support is among the ideas being promoted by a year-long Global Gender Campaign as preparation for a debate on gender equality among 3,000-plus international delegates at the ILO's annual Labour Conference in Geneva in June.

"Giving Cambodian women a fighting chance to work their way out of poverty by becoming entrepreneurs means not only giving them business and financial skills, but rebalancing their responsibilities," says Anna Engblom, an ILO expert on entrepreneurship and microfinance. "That means getting their husbands to help at home."

The WEDGE programme was piloted in Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Zambia, Kenya and Uganda. In Cambodia, where more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line of US\$1.25 per person per day, one of the organizations it helped was the Khmer Women's Handicraft Association (KWHHA).

Meas Savary, a widow who manages the KWHa, says she learned about gender equality in theory years ago when she ran a small non-government organization for women. It was not until 2006 when the WEDGE programme gave the KWHa's business support practices a professional makeover that she found a way to apply it practically, particularly with men.

Meas Savary learned make-or-buy tips such as ordering handicrafts from women like Sok Sokhom with contracts that require them to deliver on time. Of necessity, she adapted the WEDGE approach to include, well, occasional threats.

She went around to the village homes of her women members and spoke about quality control and respecting order deadlines. She explained to each family how they could help.

Although forced to marry 31 years ago during the Khmer Rouge period when men and women worked and suffered equally, Sin Sok Ly hasn't always been helpful at home. But he thought over what Meas Savary had outlined and woke up the next morning ready to make life easier for his wife. He thinks he could benefit from cooking lessons, but he hasn't stopped cleaning, washing, cooking and tending the children and the garden since.

As village chief, Sin Sok Ly makes himself a role model and encourages other men in the village of 144 families to follow his example. Meas Savary says not all have embraced the broom and dishcloth as he has. "I had to threaten them," she says. "I told them if they didn't help, their wife wouldn't be getting any more orders." Between 2006 and 2008, KWHa's total earnings – divided among members – jumped from around \$9,000 to \$20,000.

Meas Savary claims domestic violence has disappeared from the homes of her members as income has increased.

Further south, in areas blighted by family indebtedness and child labour, 31-year-old Mend Mony also talked about men and housework in the village WEDGE trainings he conducted in Kampot and Kep provinces.

In financial education, for example, couples are shown how to budget, cut expenses, build savings and why it makes sense to make decisions together. The enterprise development for women handbook talks about the typical challenges confronting micro and small businesses in Cambodia, how they can get over them and expand. Both training modules, now used by other organizations also, are designed to include husbands and both explain the value of men doing housework.

Mend Mony, who washes clothes before going off to his job as manager of a local NGO each morning, says there has been considerable change in the families who joined the self-help groups he trained.

"Family debt has reduced by 50 to 70 per cent. Children are in school," he lists, adding that families seem happier because they have more income, and there are fewer reports of domestic violence.

One of the men he trained, Set Sarin, 49, says cooking meals and helping at home gives his wife more time to sell crabs in the market. He has upgraded his rice crop and set up a small rice-milling operation. Last year the couple earned US\$75 in interest on their \$500 savings in the self-help group's savings and loan fund.

The training, he adds, taught him to see his wife as an “equal”.

His wife says their marriage has improved. “I was a little bit upset when my husband made decisions by himself,” she recalls of life before the WEDGE trainings. Now, all household decisions are taken together, often with their three children. Ouch Sing, their 15-year-old daughter, also feels the benefits. “I’m happy my parents get on well with each other. My father stopped going out, and we’re together all the time now,” she says.

While it may be too early to talk of a gender revolution, there are promising signs. In Takeo province, Sin Sok Ly’s youngest son hints at a generational change in attitude. “My father works very, very hard helping my mother,” says 10-year-old Sin Vanith. “When I grow up, I will follow him. I’ll be a househusband”.