

Seang Mom used to spend her days in the fields, trying to grow rice to feed her family in a province south of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. With six children the 50-year-old widow was only able to produce enough rice to feed them all for five or six months of each year.

But five years ago things changed. Ms Mom joined a local group that provides training in small business management, animal husbandry, agricultural techniques, handicraft making, and gender awareness. Now, she not only grows enough food for her family, but raises pigs and makes handicrafts too. Her income has risen by 80 per cent.

"My life has changed so much," Ms Mom said. "I did not know how to make compost. Now I can make it and I use the compost to grow more rice than I could before."

As well as feeding her family, Ms Mom's extra money has allowed her to buy land and build a new house. Perhaps best of all it has also raised her status in her community. "I could not find a daughter-in-law for my son; now many families are interested in marrying off their daughter to my son," she said.

The project that changed the future for Ms Mom was the Expansion of Employment Opportunities for Women (EEOW), run by the International Labour Organization (ILO) with funding from the Government of Japan. EEOW has been operating in Cambodia and Viet Nam since 2002 and specializes in training women on their rights and in techniques for increasing their income – including better agricultural methods, handicraft production, or managing their own businesses

Ms Mom is not alone in seeing an improvement in her life. In Cambodia, 76 per cent of project participants increased their income after applying their newly-learned knowledge and skills. In Viet Nam the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs reported that 133 of 188 participating households in one project site at La Hien commune, Thai Nguyen province had risen out of poverty (locally considered to be around VND200,000/US\$12 per month). Poverty reduction was even greater in households headed by women – 78 per cent of these were lifted out of poverty.

After operating successfully in Nepal, Indonesia and Thailand, EEOW was introduced in Cambodia and Viet Nam in 2002. Pilot projects in both countries are now complete and the work is expanding to include more communities in additional provinces.

In addition to teaching women skills to boost their incomes, the project also addresses other factors that keep women in poverty by promoting gender equality and social justice, both in daily lives and at the level of local and national policy-making and implementation.

This has also brought benefits. One Cambodian woman told ILO project staff that after her husband attended gender awareness training he started helping her with the cooking. "When I arrive home, my husband cooks and I just eat," she said.

In Viet Nam, village leaders noted that women seemed more confident not only in their work, but also in dealing with community affairs. One leader in La Hien commune said: "They contribute actively in our decisions, and some of our decisions were really made by women. We also pay more attention to the leadership role of women in villages as well as mass organizations including the veteran association, which was traditionally only for men".

According to Aya Matsuura, a Gender Expert and Project Coordinator at ILO's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, providing women with access to training programmes is important for women's empowerment and poverty alleviation because they do a lot of agricultural and animal-husbandry work. Despite this, in the past Government vocational training programmes were attended mostly by men, who rarely passed on their new knowledge of agricultural techniques to their wives.

"Usually when they have a meeting, it's the men that come to the meetings because they're the heads of the household, but women actually do the work," Ms Matsuura said. "So, training women is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do."

As in other countries, EEOW in Viet Nam and Cambodia operates in cooperation with national and local government agencies and NGOs. In Viet Nam EEOW has teamed up with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, the Vietnam Women's Union, the Vietnam Farmers' Union, Vietnam Cooperative Alliance, Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour. In Cambodia EEOW works with the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Workers' & Employers' Organizations, Angkor Participatory Development Organization (Siem Reap), Association of Farmers Development (Takeo), People's Association for Development (Kandal), and the Urban Sector's Group (Phnom Penh).