

# Challenges to Empowerment of Women through Value Chains: The Need to Move from Individual to Relational Empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the prevailing assumption by donors that connecting smallholder women to value chains will close the gender gap and empower women. Based on a case study of a programme that seeks to empower women through their integration into value chains in Vietnam, the article assesses women's empowerment across four dimensions: economic, psychological, social and political. The authors argue that women's engagement in value chains does not always financially benefit and empower women because patriarchal power structures within families, communities and businesses make it challenging for women to gain authority over production decisions in higher-value crops. Women in the study gained more autonomy over 'women's crops' which yielded small incomes, while men had control over production that was seen as 'men's work', and in large-scale and more lucrative production. Gendered power relations affect women's access to economic opportunities: in this context, development agencies should reconsider their approaches to women's economic empowerment by focusing on relational rather than individual empowerment. This means that women's economic empowerment programmes should involve both men and women, with targeted interventions ensuring women are empowered within the household and in their connections with the community, local authorities and businesses.

## INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment, which first entered development discourse in the 1980s (Moser, 1989), has continued to be a common goal in development

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programmes. In 2015, one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) set specific targets addressing women's empowerment. However, women's empowerment (hereafter, WE) has shifted from early feminist views, which took a holistic approach to empowering women through redistributing power (Kabeer, 2012), towards an instrumentalist approach, which narrows WE down to women's economic empowerment (WEE) (Batiwala, 2007; Eyben and Napier-Moore, 2009). A common instrumentalist approach to WEE amongst development agencies centres around the idea that investing in women for economic growth is 'smart economics' (Esplen and Brody, 2007; Kabeer, 2012). This approach has been criticized for considering WE within the economic sphere only in terms of engaging women with market forces, and not in terms of addressing barriers that prevent them from benefiting (Buvinić and Furst-Nichols, 2014; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Fox and Romero, 2017). Cornwall (2018) calls this approach 'empowerment lite'.

Definitions of WEE commonly share two components: access to skills and resources to compete in markets, and power and agency to make decisions over resources and profits, time use and physical mobility (Golla et al., 2018; Markel, 2014). In development programmes, WEE is often used to refer to interventions that provide women with access to economic resources, productive assets, goods and services, jobs and skills to increase productivity and incomes (Cornwall, 2016; Kidder et al., 2014; OECD, 2012). Thus, connecting smallholder women to value chains is perceived by development agencies as a way to close the gender equity gap and empower women (DFAT, 2015; European Commission, 2019; Morioka and Nicholas, 2014).

This article explores whether development agencies achieve their objectives to empower women by engaging them in commercialized production value chains. We examine a case study of a development programme that explicitly seeks to empower women through engagement in agricultural value chains — specifically, tea, benzoin and medicinal herbs — in highland Vietnam. Previous studies have found that women's engagement in commercialized production value chains may empower or disempower women, depending on the context, culture and gender norms (Forsythe et al., 2016; Ntakyio and Van Den Berg, 2022; Tavenner et al., 2019). However, the assessment of WE in much of the research focuses on the economic aspect of empowerment (Grover, 2022; Pavlović et al., 2022); that is, women's control over production and income, while there is less focus on non-economic elements of empowerment, such as psychological, social and political aspects.

We adopt a conceptualization of women's empowerment as the process of changing power relations in order to activate women's self-confidence and capabilities so that they can exert greater control over their lives, have better access to and control over resources, and raise their voices about their needs and concerns in ways that challenge inequitable structures, rules and norms (Rao and Kelleher, 2005; Scheyvens, 2020). We draw from Scheyvens's (2020) framework, which examines four dimensions of empowerment:

economic, psychological, social and political (see Table 1, below), thus identifying non-economic factors that empower or disempower women. We acknowledge that it is possible to include other dimensions; for example, van de Watt (2022) considers cultural empowerment and Mendoza-Ramos and Prideaux (2017) add environmental empowerment. For the purposes of this study, however, we found that the four dimensions taken from Scheyvens were most relevant, especially as the social dimension has sufficient scope to embrace cultural components as well.

The article discusses literature on WEE in commercialized production programmes. It also examines the importance of the relational aspect of empowerment, that is, how power relations within the household, the community, local authorities and businesses affect WE in all four dimensions. We do not assume that economic benefits translate into broader social, psychological and political empowerment for women (Ferguson, 2011; Scheyvens, 2000). While this can gradually happen (Movono and Dahles, 2017), in most cases it will need to be facilitated by development agencies (Scheyvens, 2000). We propose that development agencies should rethink their WEE approach by focusing on relational rather than individual empowerment. This means understanding WE in terms of women's relation to men and their connections with the community, local authorities and businesses.

## **WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN COMMERCIALIZED PRODUCTION PROGRAMMES**

Increasing development of commercial agricultural value chains producing high-value products for domestic and export markets has had mixed impacts on women (FAO, 2011). While Dolan (2001) asserts largely negative impacts, Maertens and Swinnen (2009) argue that there can be direct benefits and reduced gender inequalities, and Limuwa and Synnevåg (2018) and Loconto (2015) find no correlation between women's participation and their control over generated incomes. According to Doss et al. (2021: 308), commercialization of smallholders' agricultural products 'opens up new opportunities for women, but without access to markets and control over the income earned, the changes may worsen gender equality' (see also Ntaky and Van Den Berg, 2022).

Many development interventions for WEE rely on the theory of change assumption that engaging women in commercial value chains will benefit them through increased income and, in turn, increase their influence in the family (Golla et al., 2018; Markel, 2014). However, worldwide, empirical evidence demonstrates that increasing access to markets does not necessarily benefit women. This is because men tend to dominate, appropriate and control production decisions and income earned when the family engages in high-value and commercialized products, especially when these become

Table 1. *Signs of Women's Empowerment and Disempowerment in Relation to Men*

Empowerment dimensions	Signs of empowerment	Signs of disempowerment
<b>Psychological empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women experience enhanced self-esteem and confidence to undertake business-related activities. They are more active in participating and becoming agents of change.</li> <li>● They gain respect from their husbands and enhance their sense of dignity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women are not confident and do not believe in their capacity to join a business and participate in social and community activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Economic empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women increase their income and access to training, information and productive resources. They also increase bargaining power and influence household decisions.</li> <li>● Men make joint decisions with women and enable them to control their income or have joint control of income.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women face increased financial dependence and barriers to access to training and productive resources.</li> <li>● Women have limited influence on the intra-household decision-making process and do not control their own income.</li> </ul>
<b>Social empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women receive recognition and respect in their society. They have enhanced access to education and healthcare services.</li> <li>● Community social norms support women's involvement in business.</li> <li>● Men adopt new gender roles and share housework in terms of traditionally women's chores, like taking care of children and the elderly, cooking and cleaning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Discriminatory norms and practices against women prevent them from participating in and benefiting from social and economic activities.</li> <li>● Violence against women arises from women earning income or taking on new roles.</li> </ul>
<b>Political empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women do not face the risk of violence and are not overburdened as a result of their involvement in economic activities.</li> <li>● Women have access to and raise their voices in public discussions.</li> <li>● Women are present in decision-making bodies.</li> <li>● Men support and respect women making decisions and taking roles in the wider community and beyond.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Women are overburdened as a result of their involvement in economic activities.</li> <li>● Men dominate community meetings and hold important leadership positions.</li> </ul>

Source: Authors (based on Bayissa et al., 2018; Chavarro et al., 2020; Cherayi and Jose, 2016; Malhotra et al., 2002; Scheyvens, 2020).

embedded in global value chains and generate more lucrative incomes (Curry et al., 2019; Kent, 2018; Mayanja et al., 2022). Development programmes focused on increasing incomes through improving women's access to resources or services do not help expand women's agency unless women's empowerment and the enhancement of agency are 'front and centre' of their work (Guerrero et al., 2022: 49). Blattman et al. (2013) found limited evidence of the connection between increasing household incomes and enhancing women's bargaining power within the household, due to gender norms. This is because these programmes do not address long-term strategic needs, which include challenging unequal structures and creating transformative agency outcomes for women (Kabeer, 2012; O'Hara and Clement, 2018). WE thus requires change at both the individual and systemic levels (Kabeer, 2018; O'Hara and Clement, 2018; Rao and Kelleher, 2005).

The materiality of particular crops and local gender norms associated with them also affect how women benefit from value chains. This includes the biophysical attributes of the crop — how it is grown, harvested and processed — and whether crops are grown as food, for local markets or export, which all shape how specific crops come to be understood as the domain of men or women (Carr, 2008; Fischer and Qaim, 2012). Women face barriers to benefiting from high-value cash crops. Handschuch and Wollni (2016) and Curry et al. (2019) assert that women benefit more when working together in farmer groups for traditional food crops and have more control over the income earned from sales of fresh food production in local markets, rather than the much higher incomes from export markets. These restricted abilities to benefit are due to established norms in society and the inequality in power relations within households, implying that WE requires specific interventions focusing on gendered power relations (Pyburn et al., 2021).

## RELATIONAL ASPECT OF EMPOWERMENT

There is broad recognition that empowerment is relational and is developed and experienced in relationships with others (Huis et al., 2017; Lombardini et al., 2017; Rowlands, 1997). Galiè and Farnworth (2019: 16) offer the new concept of 'power through' to reflect the 'involuntary aspect of empowerment and disempowerment' because it is beyond personal control. They argue that 'empowerment of an individual is not bound to that individual only but resides in others around her and is mediated by communities and their values' (ibid.). Therefore, women can be empowered or disempowered by the power relations they are involved in within the household, in the community environment, and in interactions with businesses and local authorities (Adam et al., 2022; Lombardini et al., 2017; McKinnon et al., 2016).

Spark et al. (2021) posit that men play a critical role in enabling or undermining women's access to economic opportunities. Rubin and Manfre

(2014) confirm that women often have fewer opportunities than men to participate in higher or more competitive value chains. Family members and the community can also affect WE as women's participation in economic activities is constrained by the social norms in the domestic sphere that restrict them to staying home and taking care of the family (Ahmed et al., 2018; Galiè and Farnworth, 2019; Singhania et al., 2021). Women can even be judged as being 'unfaithful or promiscuous' for selling agricultural products outside their homes (Ragasa et al., 2021).

Businesses and local authorities can disempower women through exclusionary practices such as requirements that women must own assets and must have the permission of their husbands, as well as undergoing gender-biased reference-checking processes, in order to join a cooperative. Due to these requirements, men tend to represent the family as official members of cooperatives (Munir, 2022). Other studies find that similar requirements for land ownership, as a key criterion for participation in value chains, exclude women (Quisumbing et al., 2015; Rubin and Manfre, 2014). In addition, the assumption of male household headship, often adopted by businesses, communities, village leaders and extension officers, can disadvantage women: it is men who sign contracts with businesses because they are considered the household heads and because they have access to land titles (Dolan, 2001; Rubin and Manfre, 2014). This practice also affects women's participation in training and community meetings and strengthens existing unequal power relations (Mudege et al., 2015).

Cornwall and Rivas (2015) highlight the lack of consideration of relational dimensions in many development programmes or, as MacArthur et al. (2022: 5) describe it, 'placing the burden of change solely on women, rather than viewing empowerment as an integrated individual and collective transformation'. In other words, the donor approach to empowering women by connecting them to commercialized production value chains will not work if there are no changes in power relations between women and men within the household and in women's connections with the community, local authorities and businesses.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

This research examined WE through a case study in Vietnam of an Australian aid programme<sup>1</sup> which aimed to empower ethnic minority women by improving their access to production inputs and training, and enabling them to engage with agricultural value chains. The programme is expected to help women, mostly ethnic minorities, to improve their incomes, become more confident, and increase decision-making power through

1. See: [www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-responsive-equitable-agriculture-and-tourism-program-vietnam-design.pdf](http://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/gender-responsive-equitable-agriculture-and-tourism-program-vietnam-design.pdf)

participation in agricultural value chains. The focus of the programme was to build a supplier network and facilitate linkages between smallholder farmers and businesses. It did not work on the vertical interconnections between processors, distributors and consumers in agriculture value chains. Thus, our research focuses on the horizontal linkages between farmers, farmers' groups and cooperatives.

Vietnam has achieved remarkable economic growth and made significant progress in alleviating poverty over the last four decades (World Bank, 2018). Its economy has become integrated into regional and global markets through bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements. This integration has created opportunities to amalgamate Vietnam's products into global value chains and access high-end markets. Improving access to the market for local products and involving smallholder farmers in value chains for both domestic and export markets is considered the best approach to generating income and enhancing rural livelihoods (IFAD, 2019; MARD, 2018).

Since the Doi Moi reforms, the Vietnamese government has aggressively pursued a market-based economy while maintaining a one-party state, or what some term a 'socialist-oriented market economy' (Duc et al., 2023). Vietnam has a high rate of involvement in global value chains compared to other middle-income countries (Białowąs and Budzyńska, 2022), and the Vietnam context is somewhat unique because the government has a strong hand in the design and implementation of value chain interventions (Even and Donovan, 2017). Even and Donovan state that the government's focus is on ensuring economic development through integration in global value chains, rather than poverty alleviation per se, providing opportunities for state and private sector partners to work with farmers who are most able to produce quality products for export, rather than working with the poorest farmers. There is a risk that donor programmes will reproduce this exclusion of the most marginalized farmers unless they are clearly designed to enable poorer farmers to participate, and work closely with actors throughout the value chain to ensure that poverty alleviation remains a core focus.

The research was conducted in Lao Cai province, a mountainous area of northern Vietnam. This region has the highest poverty rate in Vietnam (UNDP et al., 2018; World Bank, 2018). We examined three businesses in which the development agency connected smallholder farmers with value chains: a tea company, a benzoin company, and a herbal cooperative (see Table 2 below). The tea value chain involves women collecting and selling shan tea from their family farms to a tea company for high-value domestic and premium European markets. The second value chain, benzoin, is dominated by men. Women are involved only in planting small trees and removing substances from benzoin. Benzoin is a fragrant resin extracted from bodhi trees (*styrax tonkinensis*) and used in medicines, perfumes and incense. Lastly, the herbal value chain involves growing herbal plants and selling them to a cooperative to produce traditional Red Dao ethnic

Table 2. Summary of the Three Value Chains

Value chains	Commodity involved	Business scale <sup>1</sup>	Main ethnic minority groups involved	Domination <sup>2</sup>	Level of income
Tea company	Traditional Shan tea	Small enterprise	Tay, Hmong, Dao	Women	VND 200,000–480,000 (US\$ 8.6-21) per person of amount harvested once per month. Annual revenue per family VND 3–4 million (US\$ 130–174).
Benzoin company	Benzoin	Small enterprise	Tay, Hmong, Dao	Men	When the trees are seven years old, the annual income from benzoin extraction could reach VND 4.2–21 million (US\$ 183–913) over five to six years, before the trees are logged for wood.
Herbal cooperative	Traditional herbal bath products and medicinal essential oils	Micro-enterprise	Dao Hmong	Women dominate when production and income are small, and men dominate when these are high.	For small farms: annual income is VND 250,000–700,000 (US\$ 10–30). For larger farms: annual income is VND 9–20 million (US\$ 391–870).

*Notes:*

1. Classification of business scale according to the Government of Vietnam is: Micro-enterprises: revenue  $\leq$  US\$ 0.13 million and labourers  $\leq$  10. Small enterprises: revenue  $\leq$  US\$ 2.16 million and labourers  $\leq$  100. The exchange rate is US\$ 1 = VND 23,175. The cooperatives in the research context are considered micro-enterprises.
2. Domination indicates who does most work and who has control over decision making on production and income.

*Source:* Authors

herbal bath products and medicinal essential oils for tourists and customers in the domestic market.

The three ethnic groups involved in the research were Tay, Hmong and Dao. Hmong and Dao are two of the least developed ethnic groups in Vietnam, each with a high multidimensional poverty index (MPI) in 2015 of 88.2 per cent and 68.5 per cent, respectively (World Bank, 2019), while the Tay are relatively better off (MPI of 46.1 per cent) (*ibid.*). The three ethnic groups are patriarchal cultures in which women hold subordinated positions to men (Bonnin and Turner, 2013; Lohne, 2019; Luong, 2015). Women in these groups therefore face 'double inequality: one is the conventional gender inequality, and the other is inequality of being an ethnic minority' (World Bank, 2019: 90).

## METHODOLOGY

The research used qualitative methodology. The first author is a Vietnamese woman with around 20 years of experience as a development practitioner; however, she conducted this research independently when she left this work and became as a doctoral candidate at a foreign university. Remote fieldwork was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, employing three local female research assistants (RAs) from Tay, Hmong and Dao ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup>

A total of 57 structured in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions were conducted, involving 103 people (65 women and 38 men). This included programme managers, government officers, donor and NGO representatives, business owners, and men and women from the three ethnic minority groups. Interviews lasted between 25 and 90 minutes; in some cases, husbands and wives were interviewed together. This was done to provide a mixed picture of gender relations in the research areas. All interviews were audio-taped with the permission of interviewees. The interviews were transcribed after the field trips by the RAs and by the first author. The research analysis was done using Nvivo and coding based on the four empowerment dimensions developed in Scheyvens's framework, as shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used in coding rather than respondents' real names. The research findings were shared and discussed with the RAs to ensure the correct interpretation of the data, and with people involved in the project management to gather feedback. Research ethics approval was granted by Massey University Human Ethics Committee (Ethics number: 4000023579).

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2. A paper on the lessons learnt from the selection, preparation and support of the RAs with regard to overcoming the challenges of remote fieldwork has been published in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (Nguyen et al., 2022).

## FINDINGS

The research findings below show the status of WE in the three value chains (tea, benzoin and medicinal herbs) in four dimensions: economic, psychological, social and political empowerment.

### Economic Empowerment

Table 2 presents a summary of the three value chains and the level of control that women have over production and income. Tea is the primary source of cash income for women in the researched areas. Tea can be harvested once a month from February to October every year. Income from tea varies within households depending on the size of the production area and the location of the tea fields. According to Hmong farmers, tea grows faster in lower and warmer areas. Tea harvesting is considered women's work because it is manual, detailed and repetitive, and the amount of income each harvest time is insignificant. The estimated income that one person could earn from a day of tea picking was VND 200,000–480,000 (US\$ 8.60–21), and the average annual revenue from tea for the whole family was VND 3–4 million (US\$ 130–174). Some families with large tea plantation areas reported average annual earnings of about VND 10 million (US\$ 435). Since it is seen as relatively insignificant, women have most control over the income from tea; they use it to cover daily expenses, buy rice and maize seedlings and fertilizers, and pay for children's school fees and medical treatment. When asked about the importance of income from tea for the family, a female focus group participant responded: 'It is crucial, as without the tea, we don't know where to earn our income'.<sup>3</sup>

The case of the herbal value chain is different. The level of control that women have over production and income depends on the scale of production. When Hmong women grow herbs in small plots of land near their houses, their income from selling this medicinal plant is considered insignificant to their families. In these cases, men are not interested in planting and expanding production areas; in our interviews, they commented dismissively that women 'can do whatever they want' with this cash crop. Even though the income from the herbal plants is only VND 250,000–700,000 (US\$ 10–30) per year, women choose to grow the plants to have independent incomes, as one Hmong couple discussed in an interview:

Female: It was also because registration to plant *chùa dù* did not cost any money. So, I registered to cultivate and sell to earn some cash.

Male: Besides planting *chùa dù* like this, the Hmong and Dao women have jobs to earn their own income. So they also like it.

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3. Interview, Dao female tea grower, focus group, 26 March 2021.

Female: So they don't have to work as a hired worker (laugh).

Male: It's also not hard to do ... they like it.<sup>4</sup>

However, when the herbal cultivation areas are much larger, 1 hectare and above, revenue can reach VND 9–20 million, equivalent to US\$ 391–870. We found that in these larger production systems, women did not have autonomy. Men dominated in signing contracts and selling the produce to the herbal cooperative. Women accounted for less than 5 per cent of the people who signed production contracts with the local authority to sell their products to the cooperative. Dao men we spoke to did not feel the need to consult with their wives when signing the contract:

Interviewer: Who decided to join the [business]?

Male respondent: It was my decision.

Interviewer: Did you talk to your wife or discuss it with her before deciding?

Male respondent: No, I did not say anything.

Interviewer: Then, after you signed the [contract], did you tell your wife?

Male respondent: After signing, [I] went back to discuss it with my wife. The wife must follow her husband. She had no choice as I had already signed it.<sup>5</sup>

Male domination is more obvious in the case of benzoin because benzoin extraction is considered 'men's work'. Benzoin products provide a one-off higher income each year for five to six years before the trees are logged for wood. The amount of benzoin a family in the region can produce ranges from 12 to 60 kg per year. With a price of VND 350,000 per kg, each family in the area could earn between VND 4.2 million (US\$ 183) and VND 21 million (US\$ 913). Men signed most of the contracts and dominated participation in training sessions. Benzoin extraction requires two labour-intensive periods per year. From February to March, workers climb trees to tap them from the top for resin extraction. In December, workers climb up again to collect the dried benzoin. Women are involved in weeding when the trees are small, preparing food for men who work in extraction and collection, and cleaning the benzoin products.

It is not clear how women benefit from the income of benzoin. Four out of five interviewed Dao women reported that they were not involved in the production and sale of the product, so they did not have much information about it. While women in Dao culture are usually money-holders and keep money earned from selling benzoin, men in the community make final decisions on spending large amounts of cash income:

Interviewer: Is the income from the bodhi tree important to your family? Did you sell a lot?

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4. Interview, Hmong couple, herbal growers, 6 April 2021.

5. Interview, Dao male, herbal grower, 7 April 2021.

Female: [We] sold some last year

Interviewer: How much [did you earn]?

Female: He did it, so I did not know. I had never done it, so I did not know.

Interviewer: So didn't he tell you?

Female: No, he didn't tell me.<sup>6</sup>

## Psychological Empowerment

Psychological empowerment relates to the extent to which women experience enhanced self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of dignity as they become involved in business-related activities, and the camaraderie and training that may be involved when being part of a value chain. In this study, psychological empowerment was only observed in the families cultivating tea and small-scale herbal plants. Women in these families reported more respect and appreciation from men, which enhanced their sense of dignity, and they were proud that they were able to contribute more to household finances. Evidence from interviews also made it clear that there was growing respect from some men for their wives, as extracts from two individuals show:

I think my wife is good — knowing how to make money. [She] did not ask me for my support. Almost anything my wife could do, she does it.<sup>7</sup>

I admit that my wife is excellent and hardworking because I did not go [to the field], but my wife went by herself ... and carried the children along.<sup>8</sup>

Women who produced for the tea company and the herbal cooperative reported that they were more financially independent; they earned more and therefore did not have to worry so much about their daily expenses. This meant they did not need to ask their husbands for cash for daily expenses, nor borrow money from others to cover their shortages, as evidenced by these interviews:

We can cover the daily expenses ourselves and do not need to ask our husbands. When we do not have money, we pick tea for a day or two to sell and earn a million dong to use. We do not have to worry about running out of money; no need to borrow everywhere. [We] have enough money to buy fertilizers and cover medical treatment. We have enough money for children to go to school.<sup>9</sup>

Like in the past when I worked as a street vendor, if I couldn't sell anything on that day, then at night, I would have to think, what to eat tonight. For example, if I had 100,000 dongs left in my pocket and [I] bought meat for 50,000–60,000 dongs, what would I eat tomorrow? So

6. Interview, Dao female in the benzoin study, 30 March 2021

7. Interview, Hmong male tea grower, 17 April 2021.

8. Interview, Hmong male tea grower, 17 April 2021.

9. Interview, Hmong female tea grower, focus group, 18 April 2021.

I had to think about what to eat each meal. But now that I have more income from here [the cooperative], I don't have to think about it anymore. After selling medicinal plants [to the cooperative], I just buy food for my family if I want to eat anything. Next time, when they need more medicinal plants, I will buy food again. I don't need to worry much as the money from [selling] the medicinal plants will be enough for my [family] meals for a few days.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, they reported that their lives were much better, and they felt happier. This shows a strong link between economic and psychological empowerment:

Interviewer: Has your life changed since you linked with the tea company?

Female: I feel happier as the tea has a higher price.<sup>11</sup>

Interviewer: How do you feel since selling tea?

Female: I feel less miserable. We did not have anything before. [Now] I have tea I have money. If I run out of money, I go to pick tea.<sup>12</sup>

Dao women of the herbal cooperative experienced improvement in their self-esteem. They have money to 'give to a husband when he ran out of money', and because of this, they feel that they are 'as good as their friends and equal to so many others'. This is evidence of the connection between economic and psychological empowerment. They compared their previous lives with their lives after joining the cooperative:

I have a job, and I have money to buy things for my children. It changed a lot. [I have money to] buy salt, MSG, fertilizers for the corn plantation. In the past, [I] did not know how to earn money. Life was very difficult. It has changed a lot now.<sup>13</sup>

In the past, when [I] didn't have any income, the children could not have a regular breakfast. But now they can eat more regularly.<sup>14</sup>

## Social Empowerment

This section looks at signs of women's social empowerment such as recognition and respect in society, access to healthcare and education and changes in social norms to support women's involvement in economic activities. It considers whether or not they are facing social disempowerment associated with discrimination, violence or feeling overburdened.

There was no obvious evidence from the study that income from tea and small-scale herbal production helped women to be more recognized and respected in wider society. This is probably because income from these businesses is usually not significant enough to play a role. The exception is the director of the herbal cooperative; she is respected in society for leading a herbal cooperative and having a higher income. Nevertheless, connecting

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10. Interview, Dao female herbal grower, 8 April 2021.

11. Interview, Dao female tea grower, 22 March 2021.

12. Interview, Tay female tea grower, 22 March 2021.

13. Interview, Dao female herbal grower, 6 April 2021.

14. Interview, Dao female herbal grower, focus group, 8 April 2021.

with business provides opportunities for women to socialize and learn from others at business-related social events or when they bring their products to sell to the business. In addition, the connections between farmers and the cooperative have the potential to bolster community relationships. For example, a Hmong woman mentioned that the opportunity to attend musical performances with other women in the community was one of the reasons for her linkage with the herbal cooperative, even though the income from herbal plants was limited. This suggests that participating in value chains can strengthen community connections for women: ‘From time to time, they have some [music and singing performance] on occasions like Tet [a new year festival]. [I] love it’.<sup>15</sup>

Social norms and practices in these communities do, however, hamper women’s access to assets and resources and their ability to make decisions and participate in training and community activities. These norms disempower women in their households, in the community, and in interactions with businesses and local authorities. For example, the gendered division of labour affects women’s workload. Women are burdened with a lot of housework which limits opportunities to participate in community meetings. While some women reported that whoever had time in the family would participate in training and meetings, in reality it was usually men who had more time to participate. A Tay woman indicated that taking care of children and being overloaded with housework was the reason she participated less:

Interviewer: You said you participated in the meeting [community meetings], right?

Female: Yes, but my husband participated more.

Interviewer: So what meetings did you participate in. Do you remember?

Female: I have a baby, so I didn’t go often.

Interviewer: What about when you didn’t have your baby? Why didn’t you go to the meeting?

Female: I let my husband participate.

Interviewer: Why didn’t you go?

Female: Because no one took care of the housework.<sup>16</sup>

Both men and women noted in interviews that men do not want to do work that is manual, detailed and repetitive. They want to go out, participate in trading and look for business opportunities. This practice reduces women’s social empowerment opportunities as men are the ones dealing with traders while women carry the burden of daily work plus reproductive labour. It also makes women depend on men in other ways, as men go out more often and have greater access to news and information, while women usually stay home. This led one Tay female tea grower to say that men ‘know more than women’,<sup>17</sup> while a male interviewee remarked: ‘In general, to be honest, women of our ethnic group do not go out to interact much. They are not

15. Interview, Hmong female herbal grower, 6 April 2021.

16. Interview, Tay female tea grower, 23 March 2021.

17. Interview, Tay female tea grower, 24 March 2021.

intelligent and afraid of this and that'.<sup>18</sup> A female tea grower told us: 'They [men] even say it [picking] is women's work, so women should go and do it. They still go with us to help clear weed, but they are too lazy when it comes to picking. They say they would rather go trading than pick tea. Moreover, [men say] tea [production] is light work; it should be left to women'.<sup>19</sup>

The three ethnic groups involved in the research are patriarchal, whereby males hold most decision-making power and dominate in signing contracts with businesses. The perception that men were *chủ hộ gia đình* (heads of households) emerged from all the interviews across the three business case studies. It meant that men were *trụ cột* — the pillar of the house and 'responsible for all important and big tasks'.<sup>20</sup> A Dao man used the metaphor of a leader of ants to demonstrate how the family followed his lead. This perception affects women's access to assets and resources, training and information, and their participation in family decision-making processes (economic empowerment). It also affects women's participation in community meetings (political empowerment).

Male: This [comes] from the old days. The wife is the one I brought home [paying money for the marriage] .... She is not allowed to rule in my family. Firstly, this is something from the past that we couldn't give up. Secondly, our people still follow that which cannot be abandoned, respecting men.

Interviewer: Is she allowed to represent your family at meetings and then sign [the contract] with the company?

Male: No. [Even] if I allowed her, she would not go. If she had gone [attended the meeting] and been required to sign a contract, she would have asked if she could sign it or not. She is not allowed to sign it by herself.

Interviewer: Can her name be put on all kinds of real estate and land documents? [Is she] not allowed?

Male: It's not that she's not allowed. But, in general, everything is under my control.

Interviewer: Is it her who does not want to be named [on these documents]?

Male: It's not that she doesn't want to. It's a practice here.<sup>21</sup>

Women are only heads of households when their husbands die or they divorce. In some families, if a husband dies, the son becomes the head of the household: 'In my village, there are 64 households, none of which are headed by women. Only those whose husbands have passed away have their names [as the heads]. Most of the household heads are men'.<sup>22</sup>

Both women and men accepted the practice of male household headship. Women often perceived their position as second in the family after their husbands (the head) or third if they lived with their parents-in-law.<sup>23</sup> They explained that when they got married, they had to follow their husbands. They quoted a proverb to explain this: *thuyền theo lái, gái theo chồng* —

18. Interview, Dao male benzoin farmer, 29 March 2021.

19. Interview, Hmong female tea grower, focus group, 18 April 2021.

20. Interview, Hmong male tea grower, 23 March 2021.

21. Interview, Dao male benzoin farmer, 29 March 2021.

22. Interview, Tay male benzoin and ginger farmer, 29 March 2021.

23. Interview, Tay female group of the benzoin case study, focus group, 2 April 2021.

‘the boat follows the driver, the woman follows the husband’. According to the women’s focus group discussion: ‘no matter how good you are, husbands are the heads’.<sup>24</sup> A Hmong woman explained that if women were the heads of families, it was perceived that they were *cưỡi lên đầu chồng* — ‘sitting on a husband’s head’.<sup>25</sup> Nobody wanted to do that.

This norm creates pressure on both men and women. Men are expected to be pillars and breadwinners. Their masculinity is challenged when women earn more than them. People in the community might look down on these men and say that they are *bám váy vợ* — clinging to their wives’ skirts — or *đàn ông không bằng đàn bà* — men who are not as good as women. Women are expected to stay at home and take care of the family. If a woman worked far away from home and earned more money than her husband who stayed home to do housework, there were suspicions of unfaithfulness or promiscuity, leading to quarrels or even divorce in some families. The local government, the community and businesses all adopted this norm. As a result, everything was channelled through the household head, including social activities. ‘For neighbourhood work, people also invite the head of the household. It is up to the head of the house to appoint a family member to attend’.<sup>26</sup>

### Political Empowerment

Political empowerment encompasses women’s access to meetings, the confidence to raise their voices about their needs and concerns in public discussion, their participation in decision-making bodies and the possibility of having some influence (Bayissa et al., 2018; Chavarro et al., 2020; Cherayi and Jose, 2016). In our three cases, there was no evidence that accessing commercial production value chains and having access to increased income gave women more confidence to participate and speak in community meetings. Men tended to dominate in important community meetings. Women only participated if there were specific requirements for them to do so, or when the meeting invitation mentioned their names. For example, women participated in the meetings organized by the women’s union. Women’s limited ability to communicate in the Kinh language (the official language of government administration) also affected their confidence in community meetings. Two of our interviews reflect this situation:

If meetings are held in the commune [office], I am the one who attends the most. But if there is an invitation from the commune with a specific name, that person will go.<sup>27</sup>

Interviewer: Does your wife still attend meetings for you sometimes?

24. Ibid.

25. Interview, Hmong female of the benzoin case study, 30 March 2021.

26. Interview, Tay couple, benzoin farmers, 29 March 2021.

27. Interview, Hmong male tea grower, 17 April 2021.

Male: Yes. But only if the meeting is not important .... If it is about important things, it's mostly men who attend.<sup>28</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Our research findings show that women's engagement in value chains does not always entail financial benefit or empowerment for women. They reveal that the benefits women derive from commercialized production depend on the materiality and local gender norms associated with the crop, the scale of production and the level of revenue. Our findings echo those of other studies (Curry et al., 2019; Handschuch and Wollni, 2016; Kawarazuka et al., 2021), indicating that women have more control over the production and income of crops considered in the Vietnamese context to be 'women's crops', such as medicinal herbs and tea, while men have more control over the production and income of products such as benzoin because this crop is physically demanding and is considered to be 'men's work'. However, our study also contributes to work on 'gendered crops' by showing that the gendered norms associated with crops are not static; while herbal plants were considered women's crops at small-scale levels of production, men asserted control over this crop at larger scales. This has implications for WE, as we discuss below.

Incomes from tea and small-scale herbal plants are usually small and spread over several months of the year, making them less attractive to men, who are more interested in higher-profit products, as authors in other contexts have found (Devi and Buechler, 2009). However, these incomes help women cover daily expenses; they value earning independent income and contributing to household finances, which improves their self-esteem. Hmong women engaging with the tea value chain and Dao women members of the herbal cooperative reported that they received respect, appreciation and support from their husbands because they are more financially independent and make greater financial contributions to their families. Nevertheless, when the revenue is larger, in the case of herbal plants, men assert dominance over income and activities, thereby reproducing patriarchal power. This reproduction of patriarchal power is also evident in other contexts where development projects have sought to empower women through value chains (Forsythe et al., 2016; Manzanera-Ruiz et al., 2016).

This finding raises an interesting tension for development agencies to consider if they want to support WEE by connecting women with commercialized value chains: if women begin to increase production and earn greater revenue, the benefits may be captured by men. This tension poses a challenge for development programmes that look at empowering women

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28. Interview, Hmong male tea grower, 17 April 2021.

as individuals and ignore the relational aspect of empowerment (Huis et al., 2017; Lombardini et al., 2017; Rowlands, 1997). While women appear to have more autonomy in ‘women’s crops’, we are not recommending that development programmes should facilitate and encourage women to act only within these perimeters. Instead, we encourage donors to think about how they can support women to overcome the challenge of men asserting power and claiming the main benefits from commercialized value chains. There is a need for development interventions that involve both men and women to bring transformative changes in critical consciousness, attitudes, behaviours and power relations (MacArthur et al., 2022; Ragasa et al., 2021; Singh and Babbar, 2022).

Our research also shows that the community can affect women’s participation in economic activities. The barriers and exclusionary practices discussed above are deeply rooted in the social norms of patriarchal societies, which value men above women. Gender norms shape expectations of women’s roles as ‘secondary earners’ and caregivers, while men conduct business activities. As revealed in the research, men are humiliated and looked down on in the community if they are financially dependent on their wives. When women take over leadership in the family, they face social repercussions for challenging prevailing gender norms. These existing norms create pressure for both men and women (Ahmed et al., 2018; ISDS, 2020), and could potentially disempower women. Masculinity is challenged when women are empowered and have a more independent income, and men do housework (Adam et al., 2022; Boonabaana, 2014; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). The question is whether this can occur in a way which leads to better outcomes for society, rather than a backlash against women.

Moser (1989) and Rao and Kelleher (2005) suggest that informal social norms and formal laws and policy structures are the root causes of women’s status of subordination. WE programmes that solely concentrate on involving women in economic activities to enhance their incomes overlook the significance of non-economic aspects, such as reproductive labour essential for sustaining life and the varying perceptions of gender equity across different cultural contexts (McKinnon, 2021; Shamier et al., 2021). This implies that developmental approaches to empowering women by increasing their households’ participation in commercial value chains will not work if there is no appropriate intervention to address social norms. In many cases in this study, women simply accepted gendered norms and the perception that men are household heads, breadwinners, heirs to the ancestral land, and key decision makers, and that they themselves are in the second or third position in the family.

Furthermore, our research shows that interactions between women and local authorities and businesses also affect women’s access to productive inputs, training, control over production, and incomes. Businesses can provide women with opportunities to socialize and learn from other

women through participating in business activities or social events (social empowerment). However, businesses can also disempower women through exclusionary practices. Businesses often sign contracts with men because they are considered to be household heads and have access to land titles, a practice seen in other studies (Dolan, 2001; Rubin and Manfre, 2014). We see this practice in the tea company, the benzoin value chain, and the contracts of large-scale herbal farms. Dolan argues that the preference for signing contracts with landowners, in a context where men own the majority of land, has excluded women and triggered gender conflict because it enables men to control labour and payment from contracted firms (Dolan, 2001). The practice of male household headship adopted by community and village leaders also affects women's participation in training and community meetings and strengthens existing unequal power relations. Mudege et al. (2015) and Nguyen et al. (2021) suggest that prevailing patriarchal social structures, in which men occupy the roles of household heads and decision makers, impact women's access to training opportunities. With a more gender-sensitive approach, businesses and local authorities can remove these barriers to training by directly targeting the training toward women, and selecting times, locations and languages which are more appropriate and more accessible to women. In addition, they can change the approach to signing contracts to include women or to involve both husbands and wives. The social recognition that women receive when they are able to take on tasks that used to be dominated by men can greatly enhance their self-esteem (da Mota et al., 2020).

## CONCLUSION

There are no 'quick-fix solutions' for women's empowerment (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). WEE development programmes that aim to connect women to commercialized production value chains run the risk that men will seek to dominate and control production and income when the product becomes more lucrative. Our research reinforces the fact that WE is influenced by the power dynamics in women's relationships with men, community members, local authorities and businesses (Adam et al., 2022; Cornwall and Rivas, 2015; Lombardini et al., 2017; McKinnon et al., 2016). It also demonstrates that social norms impact power dynamics between women and men within households and affect women's interactions with the community, local authorities and businesses, impacting in turn on WE. There is a risk that the introduction of economic opportunities might intensify inequalities or introduce new kinds of disparities if the inequalities in power relations within households and wider interactions have not been addressed. We argue, therefore, that development agencies need to rethink their approaches to WEE by focusing on relational, not individual, empowerment. WEE programmes should not be thought of solely as activities to target women

but should also involve men and include activities to address social norms and widespread exclusionary practices against women. This can be done by encouraging both men and women, family members and the community to engage in gender equality and WE programmes, such as preventing gender-based violence and engaging men in sharing housework. WE programmes should involve local government, NGOs and other community partners, such as women's unions, in dismantling the underlying barriers that block women from being empowered in psychological, social and political, as well as economic, dimensions.

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