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A view of ethnic minority households along with VAC farming

Gender Roles in Aquaculture: some findings from the Aquaculture Development in the Northern Uplands of Viet Nam Project

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, an important pilot project **"Aquaculture Development in Northern Uplands"** (VIE/98/009/01/NEX) was completed. This project was an example of efficient cooperation between the Ministry of Fisheries of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, provincial authorities of Son La, Lai Chau and Hoa Binh provinces, the Research Institute for Aquaculture No. 1 (RIA 1), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). It aimed at alleviating poverty in the three provinces by diversifying rural development through: (a) the promotion of sustainable aquaculture activities; (b) building capacity of the local population and project staff in addressing household food security issues; and (c) reducing malnutrition of disadvantaged ethnic minorities and especially women. The project gave high concern towards the empowerment of women – their families, the communities and the whole society – mainly through prioritizing gender education and women's involvement in all activities of the project. The specific approach of the project included resource assessments, participatory planning and implementation of an action plan for the development of aquaculture activities. Based on the findings of the project, extension network was strengthened and the delivery of the extension services improved. In addition,



The project woman Result Demonstration Farmer (RDF) is feeding in her fishpond in Hao Ly commune under the Hoa Binh province

GENDER ROLES

Fish farming in the uplands was traditionally viewed as a male activity. Women were only slightly involved, had no say in what techniques to be used, nor investments to be made nor ideas on how benefits could be increased. Project intervention, through a training course on "Aquaculture Techniques" for ethnic women at commune level, increased their awareness on pond, cage and rice-fish culture techniques. These women learned how to identify the pros and cons of aquaculture, including issues

such as household nutritional status and income, division of labour between man and women, potential use of by-products, and time available for social/community activities.

a micro-credit and savings scheme were established to provide direct support, to the upland ethnic minority farmers living in remote and isolated areas, for aquaculture activities. A total of 50 communes from 3 pilot provinces were covered under the project. One hundred and fifty one Result Demonstration Farmers (RDFs) and more than 5 900 poor ethnic fellow farmers (FFs) were involved in the extension of the aquaculture models produced by the project. These RDFs and FFs included people involved in various aquaculture activities such as grow-out, hatching, nursing and integrated farming methodologies (e.g. VAC (integrated agriculture-aquaculture-livestock), rice-fish, and cage culture farming).

A gender evaluation study among the project beneficiaries at the project area showed (Table 1) that women play a vital role in aquaculture activities, although they are not involved in any activity without the support from the men. Nevertheless, in areas such as marketing, feeding and fertilization, women are significantly more involved than men. Aside from household work, many women are involved in aquaculture activities and other on-farm activities (such as arable farming and animal husbandry). The total time spent by women in aquaculture production were found to be generally comparable to the time spent by men. Nevertheless, the power of women in decision making was much lower.

Table 1. Aquaculture division of labour within a family in the project areas

Tasks	Men	Women	Children
Pond dyke construction	√		
Feeding	√	√	√
Water draining	√		
Drying pond bottom	√		
Liming	√	√	
Stocking	√		
Fertilization	√	√	
Fish health check & disease control	√		
Harvesting	√	√	√
Marketing	√	√	

Source: Authors' field survey, 2000-2002

Figure 1. Ratio of men and women participation in the project training course on aquaculture techniques

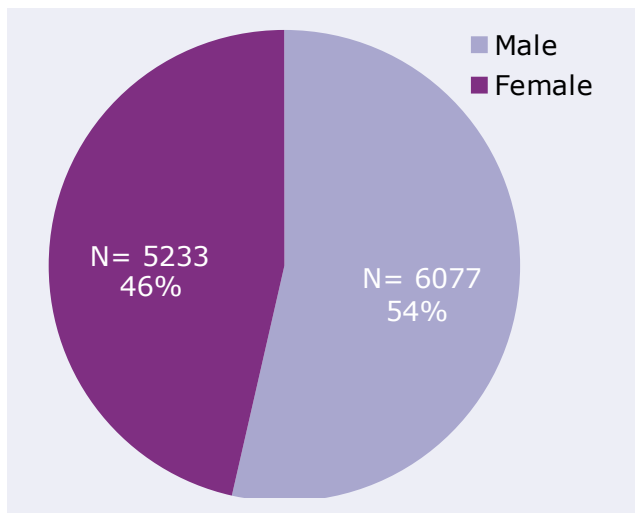
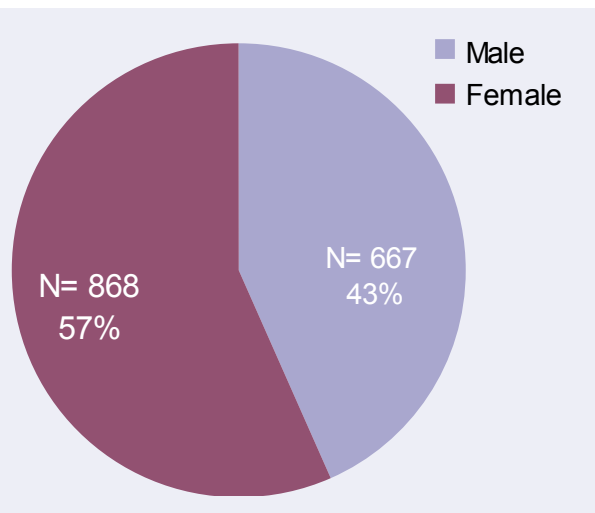


Figure 2. Ratio of men and women participation in the project training course on micro-credit and savings



By emphasizing the need for capacity building of women, for example, in aquaculture techniques (Fig. 1) and micro-credit (Fig. 2), and increasing their access to credit via the Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU), the project empowered these women significantly. Their opinions were taken more seriously within their households and within the community. Participation in meetings, workshops and study-tours supported their self-esteem, decreased their feeling of being dependents, and increased their interest in aquaculture and the opportunities it can provide in terms of income, and access and availability of good quality food for household consumption.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PROJECT

Important lessons learned from this project include:

1. Gender roles are important to aquaculture development and participation of both men and women is essential for sustainable development of the sector.
2. Existing community-based mass organizations, such as the VWU should be used as much as possible, and setting up parallel structures should be avoided. The VWU was an efficient partner who assisted in the management of the micro-credit/savings scheme training course and implemented the credit scheme smoothly and effectively during the project period. Access to the

micro-credit scheme was related to women participation in the training courses on aquaculture techniques micro-credit. Thus, capacity building ensured successful results of the micro-credit scheme. Repayment ratios of 100% were obtained in most of the communes.

3. The application of participatory planning exercises allows local people to become more perceptive and responsible for their own resources. The use of a range of criteria and participatory methods makes it possible to identify different types of poor people, who could be targeted inclusively rather than exclusively, thus, ensuring that the benefits reach them most effectively.
4. Group formation, with support of mass organizations, allows backward communities to get a voice at the national level. The various groups established under the project advocated the importance of aquaculture in rural development, poverty alleviation and women empowerment, and played an important role in mobilizing external support.
5. Partnerships between key institutions active in the field of aquaculture with institutions from other sectors should be promoted as much as possible, to create a base for development and mutual understanding of what specific activities can or cannot contribute to the rural development.



6. On-farm training made aquaculture more accessible for women; brought information and skills to both male and female farmers (especially low-investment, low-risk, small-scale, low-technology, low-input aquaculture practices).
7. In the development of extension and training materials and tools, gender issues should also be taken into consideration.

Apart from all the above, the project confirmed a widely-known Viet Nameese proverb:

*"To be rich – raise fish,
to be poor – play cards"*

Photo top left: A project official demonstrating a rice-fish farming technique among the project farmers where more than 50% are women from the project area.

Photo top right: A view of a newly built house belonging to a woman member of the RDFs.

Photo below: A view of smiling harvesting fish farming group of the project (with minimum participation of women).

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