

Women's Workload Reduction (WWR) / Gender Equality in a Relationship (GER) Case Study

December 2021

Photos (clockwise from top left): women identify burdensome work at a WWR workshop in Namleng Village, Phongsaly District, PSL (Dec 2021, photo by Ms. Arphone Chanthachone); a couple develop a work sharing plan in Namtalan Village, LNT (Nov 2019, photo by Mr. Bountone Vorlachit); couples participate in a trust game at a GER training in Namtha District, LNT (Feb 2020, photo by Mr. Bountone Vorlachit); a men's group in Kittaloun 2 Village, Xieng Ngeun District, LPB completes a gender activity at a GER training (March 2021, photo by Ms. Somvonechit Duangpasit)



SCALING

Partnership for Improved Nutrition in Lao PDR Pillar 3:
Sustainable Change Achieved through Linking Improved
Nutrition and Governance.



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

THE CONTEXT

The SCALING (Sustainable Change Achieved through Linking Improved Nutrition and Governance) Project is a four-year (December 2017 – June 2022) nutrition project funded by the European Union (EU) with the aim of improving the nutritional status of pregnant and lactating women, adolescent girls, and children under the age of 5 in 14 districts in four provinces of northern Laos: Luang Prabang (LPB), Luang Namtha (LNT), Phongsaly (PSL), and Huaphanh (HUA). The project is implemented by a consortium of four iNGOs each implementing project activities in their respective target provinces: Save the Children International (SCI), CARE International in Laos, Comité de Coopération avec le Laos (CCL), and ChildFund in Laos (CFL).

The target villages of the SCALING project are primarily rural communities with agriculture-based livelihoods, but also include peri-urban villages with mixed agricultural and market-based economies. The communities are ethnically diverse and face a number of barriers to achieving quality maternal and child health and nutrition. These include lack of access to health information, inadequate quality of health services, gendered social norms and traditions that limit women’s rights, freedoms, opportunities and ability to care for their health, inadequate access to clean water and WASH infrastructure, and the need for strengthened multi-sector nutrition governance.

THE CHALLENGE

Empowering women to care for their own health and nutrition and that of their families on an equal basis with men requires them to have various resources and capacities, including knowledge, confidence, decision-making rights, access to financial and nutritional resources, and access to public spaces. In many SCALING target communities, there are various existing barriers that can make achieving these goals difficult, such as low levels of women’s literacy and Lao language ability for ethnic women, limited women’s mobility, early marriage, high rates of drug and alcohol use, and violence against women. The gender equality training package targeted two key gaps, as follows.

Women’s empowerment challenges addressed by the gender equality trainings:

Overburden of women’s workload – Rural women are traditionally responsible for a wide range of economic and care-based work tasks, including housework, childcare, fetching water, and agricultural labour. This heavy burden of daily tasks, unequally shared by men, leaves women with little time to rest or take care of themselves or their children. This is particularly harmful to women’s well-being during pregnancy and after birth, as it impacts women’s ability to seek healthcare, rest sufficiently, and breastfeed their infants. Heavy work burdens also prevent women and girls from equally accessing public services (health, education, governance), and limit their ability to participate in public decision-making.

Unequal family relationships and decision-making power – Men’s traditional status as “head of household” creates unequal power dynamics in the family. The right to make decisions for the household rests unequally with men, with women often allowed the chance to provide input or comments, but not the right to decide. Communication and problem-solving between husbands and wives on family matters is often inadequate. Conflict and lack of understanding often result, leading to a lack of peace in the family.



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

YOUR FIRST IDEA/SOLUTION

Prior to the start of SCALING, consortium partner CARE had been conducting various gender trainings in its target areas, including Women's Workload Reduction (WWR) and Gender Negotiation, which had previously been used with success in changing social norms around women's heavy burden of work and lack of power in the family, respectively.

The WWR training is conducted in two main phases: an initial workshop with women in a large group setting, followed by a series of two follow-up monitoring visits. The first follow-up visit takes place with couples, also in a large group setting, while the second consists of meetings and conversations with individual couples in an informal setting. During the workshop phase, women identify the types of work that are most burdensome for them, and create 24-hour clocks to visualize their daily work burden. Then women create plans for how to reduce their work burden, and who in the family can support them. During monitoring visits, women and their husbands reflect on the implementation of the workload reduction plans, resulting benefits for their families, and any challenges or areas for improvement.

Gender Negotiation trainings, which focus on relationships between husbands and wives, are also rolled out in two phases. The first phase focuses on understanding sex and gender roles, and then analyzing a gender problem in the community and creating an action plan to solve that problem. The second phase covers changing gender norms, healthy relationships, and shared decision-making. Both phases include monitoring visits with participants.

Based on the original model, the WWR training would be rolled out first to initiate conversations among women and their husbands around gender roles, and would later be built upon through the rollout of the Gender Negotiation curriculum to deepen conversations on gender with a focus on understanding and resolving gender problems in the family and community. The Gender Technical Advisor from CARE led the roll-out of Training of Trainer (ToT) trainings on the WWR model to the SCALING project teams and partners from the Lao Women's Union (LWU) in November 2018.

LEARNING AND ADAPTING

There were two concerns that emerged during the rollout of the WWR trainings. Firstly, it was clear that the burden of rolling out two separate gender trainings, each with multiple follow-up monitoring visits, to all 422 SCALING target villages would be unrealistic for the project team in terms of time and workload. Secondly, issues began to arise in some project areas, particularly in conservative villages in Luang Namtha (LNT) and Phongsaly (PSL), when conducting workshops only with women and not men. There were various cases reported in which women developed action plans to reduce their workloads, but when they brought their plans back to share with their husbands, there would be arguments in the family. The husband often did not understand gender equality or why he should have to do work that he never did in the past. In some cases, it was also difficult to engage men in gender activities, particularly as the facilitators from LWU were primarily women. As a result, many men did not feel the activities were relevant to them. Some project teams chose to change the terminology from "gender" to "helping each other in the family" to facilitate men's participation.

This dual realization on burden of rollout and lack of men's participation, reinforced by recommendations from the 2019 Gender Power Analysis in LNT on the need for increased men's engagement in gender activities, inspired an adaptation to the existing gender training curriculum. The new model, Gender Equality in a Relationship (GER), was developed in 2020 and combined the content from the two original trainings (WWR and Gender Negotiation) into a single, half-day training for couples. The GER curriculum included five lessons for husbands and wives to train on together: sex and gender, changing social norms, women's workload reduction, healthy relationships, and shared decision-making. The new curriculum required a reduction in participant numbers compared to WWR. Since WWR was



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

held in a workshop-style format, it could accommodate 30 women or more per village, and also reached those women’s husbands. GER, in contrast, was developed as a training for couples with interactive activities that made it difficult to conduct with quality for large groups of over 20, limiting participation to ten couples per village. This reduction in reach was unfortunate but was considered necessary to avoid the risks that came with not including men, and to ensure that even given limited staff time, all target villages could be reached with activities on both workload reduction and family relationships and not just one or the other. After its development, the GER curriculum was rolled out to project teams and government LWU partners in all four provinces at a ToT in August 2020.

Rollout of GER was uneven across provinces based on differing needs and resources. In Huaphanh, where the original WWR had been highly effective and had not met with problems as in other provinces, GER was not rolled out at all. In PSL and LNT, GER was rolled out first in villages that had not yet completed WWR, and afterwards was also rolled out in villages that had previously trained in WWR. In Luang Prabang, the WWR model, including all monitoring visits, had been fully rolled out in all target villages, and the new GER curriculum was also rolled out in all villages, with the workload reduction session being used as a review.

In total, GER and/or WWR was rolled out in 419 of 422 total target villages across all 14 districts. In the remaining three villages, the training was not rolled out due to significant implementation barriers. A 2021 Gender Change Assessment showed promising results from the gender equality trainings, particularly on reduced women’s workloads and improved family relationships, and these positive outcomes were further reinforced by informal observations from project staff and LWU partners in all four provinces. Regardless, although changes in participating families were nearly universal, the resulting changes did not necessarily reach other, non-participating families in the village. Furthermore, as previously discussed, GER had a narrower reach than WWR. In smaller villages, lessons learnt from the GER training might be passed along mouth to mouth, but in larger villages, the trained population was typically not significant enough to represent the critical mass needed to promote village-wide change. A final shortcoming of the GER system was that in contrast to the WWR and Gender Negotiation models, it did not integrate formal monitoring visits. For future interventions, it is recommended to plan formal monitoring visits for GER to follow up with couples who completed the training.

OUTCOMES

“After the project started, there have been many improvements. Now men consult with their wives about work, and men also understand how to help with women’s work. We have time to earn money, which has improved our family economy, and it’s decreased women’s work. Now when there are meetings, I dare to voice my opinions.”

Ms. Lamfai, 30, Xamneua District, HUA

Workload reduction: Workload reduction activities were highly successful across all target areas. In general, there was less resistance than expected to changing household roles. In many cases, women and men had not fully realized the imbalance in workloads until comparing their daily tasks during the project activities. Typically, after seeing the imbalance, men were willing to increase their support to their wives, and sometimes even felt embarrassed that they had not helped with more of the burden of family work in the past. Even in conservative villages where men may not be willing to take on traditional women’s roles, there was still evidence that men increasingly supported agricultural work that had previously been done by women to lighten their burdens, and many men also reported taking on additional tasks during the period while their wife was pregnant and after giving birth that they would not normally be responsible for, such as cooking and washing clothes. As a result of these changes, women reported they had more time to



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

rest, socialize, and take care of themselves, and also had more time to join other activities, such as VSLA meetings. Men, especially those who had joined SBCC activities, were particularly convinced of the importance of supporting their wives with additional household work while they were pregnant and after birth.

“Before the project, I didn’t help my wife very much because I didn’t understand about sharing work with women. I thought that most work was women’s work, like washing clothes, steaming rice, sweeping, and many other tasks. After the project started, we had a training about gender and lightening women’s workloads. If we lighten women’s workloads, women will have more time to earn money, it will reduce their work, and we will have better communication and planning in the family.”

Mr. Maikham, 31, Xamneua District, HUA

Family impacts: After the rollout of the gender equality trainings, both men and women reported an increase in peace and happiness in the family, as well as increased agreement and understanding between husbands and wives. This was partly the result of the activities on family relationships, but was also an impact of workload reduction activities, which resulted in increased communication and mutual support in the family, and decreased stress. Many women and men described increasing agreement between husbands and wives, as well as women increasingly daring to bring up issues with their husbands, and husbands being more willing to listen to their wives’ opinions. Increases in women’s decision-making were reported less frequently than changes in workload, but most women did say that they were involved or consulted during the household decision-making process, and many said their involvement in decisions had increased since the start of the project.

Economic impacts: In addition to changes in gender roles and social norms, the gender equality training package was found to produce positive economic results. Participants across target areas noted that after the trainings, husbands and wives started to help each other more than in the past, allowing for increased productivity and output. This was reportedly a result of men’s increasing support with both fieldwork and housework, which was said to increase average work hours per family. Furthermore, reducing women’s workloads left women with more time to engage in supplementary economic activities such as weaving or embroidery.

Women’s participation: Communities widely reported that women increased their role in the public sphere as a result of joining SCALING activities, particularly regarding increased participation in village meetings and public decision-making processes. Men and women said that women had become more daring after participating in project activities, daring to speak out, to think for themselves, to express their opinions, to make decisions, and to claim their rights in both the household setting and the wider community, such as at village meetings. Women were described as more confident, active, and responsible than in the past, and had gained new knowledge and skills that allowed them to increase their economic capacities and role in the communities. There was only one target province, PSL, where existing social, geographic, infrastructure and other factors resulted in continued barriers to women’s participation in public life, including lack of men’s support, continued high work burdens, and their own lack of confidence, knowledge, and skills.

Next Steps

- **Continue roll-out of gender messages** – Although it will not be possible to continue gender training activities after the end of the project, a list of key gender equality messages from the



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

training package have been prepared for integration across all SCALING field work during the remaining implementation period and for sharing with government partners for integration into future work and continued dissemination to communities. These messages can be found in the Annex of this case study.

- **Strengthen M&E of GER model for future interventions** – There is a need for further strengthening of monitoring and evaluation of gender change resulting from GER trainings. Unlike the original WWR and Gender Negotiation models, GER does not yet have an integrated monitoring system or follow up, and assessment of change was completed only once during the project.
- **Continue to rollout GER in future work** – The preliminary results on changes in gendered social norms, especially on women’s workload and family relationships, are quite promising, and demonstrate the importance of continuing to integrate gender equality interventions in future programming.

Top Advice

Experiences from the SCALING project have reinforced the importance of gender equality interventions to the success of community-level development activities, particularly around maternal and child health and nutrition. Gender activities have strengthened women’s confidence and elevated their voices in both their families and communities, and diminished debilitating workloads that previously limited their ability to engage in economic activities, governance, and self-care. These changes in women’s empowerment have allowed women to demand their rights and gain the support they need from their husbands, and in doing so have enabled them to better care for their own health and that of their children. Finally, it is important to note that gains in women’s empowerment achieved through the SCALING project were not the result of a single activity, but a multi-pronged approach involving not only workload reduction and gender equality trainings, but also women’s Village Savings and Loans Associations, SBCC activities, women’s leadership trainings, and even health systems strengthening and water system construction, all facilitated by continuing shifts in gendered social norms across Lao society.

Other Interesting Information

Cost Effectiveness Breakdown: Average cost of 520 EUR (583 USD) per village for all women’s empowerment trainings, including WWR, GER, and women’s leadership.

In addition to the interventions outlined above, the SCALING project also responded to challenges around community resistance to changing traditional gender norms in certain project areas by piloting an intervention to engage more conservative, older populations with high social influence in the process of social norms change. This pilot intervention, referred to as **Elder Social Norms Workshops**, was trialed in a handful of villages in the more conservative provinces of PSL and LNT.

The initial findings were relatively promising. Although, as expected, it was challenging to work with the elderly, who are usually more conservative and less open to change than youth, these older populations were still able to reflect on gender and social norms through the activities. Participants successfully reflected on how social expectations for men and women were different (which norms could limit women’s rights and opportunities or be detrimental to their well-being), what changes in gender roles they had seen in their lifetimes and the positive results of those changes, and identified areas in which they thought they could create further changes in harmful gender norms in their communities. To facilitate



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

generation of more liberal social ideas and attitudes to change, the training was adapted to include a mix of elderly men and women with some younger men and women.

Although the elderly are not expected to be the drivers of change in the community, conducting further pilots of trainings, workshops, or discussions with elderly populations or respected community elders could be a promising intervention to decrease resistance in communities where older populations discourage youth from changing their behaviours.

Annex: Key Gender Messages

Aim 1: Husbands share household labour

- Women have a higher daily work burden than men, being responsible for both income-generating and household labour
- Women's work burden makes them tired and unable to care for their health
- It is especially important for men to do household work during and after pregnancy, and men should not let their wives work too hard or do heavy work (it is not true that working hard will help women give birth easily—it is dangerous to the mother and child's health)
- If two people share work, they can accomplish more than one person alone, which allows a couple to further develop their family economy
- Sharing the household work burden can decrease stress, decrease arguing in the family, and improve the relationship between husband and wife

Aim 2: Men are involved in maternal health and nutrition

- During pregnancy and after birth, it is a husband's responsibility to take care of his wife to ensure safety and good health of the wife and child.
- Men should support their wives during and after their pregnancy by going with them to ANC/PNC visits
- Men should learn about maternal health from doctors and Village Health Volunteers along with their wives so they can be informed and support their wives and children in staying safe and healthy during and after pregnancy
- Men should join nutrition activities to learn about what foods to cook and eat to keep themselves and their families healthy
- Women and men should discuss together to plan for how their family will find/buy, prepare, and eat more nutritious food

Aim 3: Husbands and wives share decision-making in the household

- Any decisions that affect the family, big or small, should be discussed between husband and wife
- When husbands and wives decide together, they have more information (wives might have access to information their husbands don't and vice versa), and can make better decisions
- When husbands and wives decide together, it increases unity within the household, decreases arguing, and improves relationships between husbands and wives



Save the Children



ສະຫະພາບ ເອີຣົບ
European Union



ChildFund
Laos

Aim 4: Women are seen as leaders in their communities/in the public sphere

- Women can participate and be leaders in the issues that affect their lives such as water management, nutrition committee, education committee, etc., including in roles such as president or vice president
- Even women who did not go to school, are illiterate, and/or don't know Lao language can be leaders
- It is important to give women opportunities to ensure everyone can participate and work together in unity.
- Some women may be shy to speak up, which means it's important to ask them their opinions and give them space to speak out, as well as to take their ideas seriously
- It is important for husbands to support their wives and encourage their participation in village activities and leadership (both with encouragement and helping with household work)