



Why do aspirations matter for empowerment?: Discrepancies between the A-WEAI domains and aspirations of ethnic minority women in Vietnam



Joan DeJaeghere^{a,*}, Nancy Pellowski Wiger^a, Hue Le^b, Phuong Luong^c, Nga Thi Hang Ngo^d, Thanh Thi Vu^e, Jongwook Lee^f

^a University of Minnesota, United States

^b VNU-Central Institute for National Resources and Environmental Studies, Vietnam National University, Viet Nam

^c Hanoi University, Viet Nam

^d Tay Bac University, Viet Nam

^e Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Institute of Human Studies, Viet Nam

^f Seoul National University, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Development, South Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Accepted 28 July 2022

Available online 4 August 2022

Keywords:

Women's empowerment
Aspirations
Capabilitarian approach
Ethnic minorities
Vietnam

ABSTRACT

Empowerment programs for women have been key development initiatives toward achieving gender equality. Projects, models, and measurement tend to focus on resources and agency as core to empowerment. Missing from most models and research is women's own aspirations, or what they value for their futures, that affect how women use their resources and agency to achieve wellbeing. Aspirations are central to a sense of a good life and are necessary to strengthen among poor communities, but they are often overlooked among women, particularly those who are not pursuing formal schooling and who work in informal labor. This paper examines how aspirations matter for women in poverty who are working in informal sectors (agriculture and tourism) in Vietnam. It argues that without examining women's aspirations for themselves, their family, and community, development projects may miss achieving their outcomes because they are not valued by women. Using data from the abbreviated version of the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI), and qualitative interview data from women and men from minority ethnic groups in Vietnam, we show that women and men achieve similar rates of adequacy in their access to resources and decision-making as measured by the A-WEAI, and that women's aspirations for themselves and their community emphasized other valued outcomes from projects aimed at economic empowerment.

© 2022 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Women's empowerment has been a key aim of development initiatives for decades. It is a desired outcome from economic, education, and health projects targeting women of various ages. But empowerment is also a process, where various pathways can lead to positive change in women's lives (Kabeer, 1999; Kabeer, 2011). Many models and measures of women's empowerment include resources and agency (see Kabeer, 1999; Alkire et al., 2013). But these frameworks are overly fixed in asserting particular domains

of empowerment. In addition, these frameworks provide linear pathways to empowerment and do not adequately account for how the empowerment process is affected by the social, cultural, political, and economic contexts in which women live. Research has found a bi-directional relationship between economic projects that provide resources and foster empowerment (Duflo, 2012) and between education and empowerment (Eger et al., 2018; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016). This means that resources and opportunities, such as education, may support the empowerment process, and at the same time, agency contributes to greater engagement with these resources and opportunities, thus enhancing empowerment. In a review of research of different pathways to economic empowerment for women, Anderson et al. (2021) found certain common measures of empowerment, such as increased access to productive resources or increased labor participation, but access and participation didn't necessarily result in greater income or economic ben-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Deja0003@umn.edu (J. DeJaeghere), pell0097@umn.edu (N. Pellowski Wiger), lehue@vnu.edu.vn (H. Le), phuonglm@hanu.edu.vn (P. Luong), ngango@utb.edu.vn (N.T.H. Ngo), vuthanh0807@gmail.com (T.T. Vu), jongwook-lee@snu.ac.kr (J. Lee).

efits for women. Missing from most models and research is how women's own aspirations affect how they use their resources and agency to achieve what they value for their futures. Recent research, particularly of educational practices that affect empowerment processes, has given more attention to women's recognition of her own situation (Murphy-Graham, 2012) and the capacity to aspire (Eger et al, 2018).

Aspirations are central to a sense of a good life, and it is necessary to strengthen aspirations and their achievement among poor communities (Appadurai, 2004). However, women's own aspirations are not often considered in empowerment projects. This oversight may be related to assumptions that the field of development has about women's empowerment. First, women's empowerment initiatives are designed to achieve specific desired outcomes, such as increasing women's economic independence or improving household income. To achieve these outcomes, projects provide resources, such as inputs for agricultural production (See Anderson et al., 2021). But empowerment projects do not usually account for alternative aspirations that women may want to achieve through their participation in such projects. Second, aspirations are most often associated with younger girls and women and what they want to be and do with regard to their education and work futures. When development projects target women in poverty, particularly married women, they are no longer in formal education and may perform work that goes unrecognized in the formal sector. Women's empowerment projects emphasize providing resources and making alternative choices within their current situation, without considering women's aspirations for alternative futures. Finally, the scholarship on aspirations, particularly that related to women in poverty, shows how women's aspirations are constrained by structures, such as patriarchal norms. These constraints are captured in the research on blighted hope (Bourdieu, 1984), adapted preferences (Sen, 1999), and aspiration failures (Dalton et al., 2016) that examine the structures that limit women's agency in their present circumstances. But research foregrounding these ideas does not conceptually afford possibilities for alternative futures.

So why might aspirations of less educated women living in poverty and working informally matter for women's empowerment? And how can women's empowerment projects include an aspirational component to their work and models? This paper examines how aspirations matter for women living in conditions of poverty, who are working in the informal sector (agriculture or tourism) in Vietnam. Much of the focus to improve the socio-economic outcomes of women in Vietnam has been on women from ethnic minority¹ groups (World Bank, 2019). Large gaps in socio-economic outcomes persist between ethnic minorities and the majority (Baulch et al, 2002; Phung et al., 2016), as well as between women and men (ISDS, 2015), and therefore there is a need to understand specifically what ethnic minority women value for their lives and what outcomes women value from empowerment projects. This paper argues that without examining the dynamic and situated nature of aspirations that women have for themselves, their families and their communities, development projects may miss achieving their outcomes because they are not valued by women.

The paper shows the disjuncture between conceptually defining empowerment as the access and use of resources, such as those for production, and agency, primarily measured as decision-making, without considering women's aspirations for themselves and their families. The analysis in this paper aims to address the following questions related to women's empowerment projects:

Are women from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam disempowered compared to men in the domains measured by the abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI)? What do these women aspire to or value for their lives? How are these women's aspirations related to, or not, the domains of empowerment (resources, decision-making) fostered through economic empowerment projects? The findings from this study have implications for economic empowerment project models and strategies focused on resources and agency to achieve empowerment, especially when these approaches may be misaligned with what women value.

To illustrate the importance of women's aspirations in the empowerment process, and therefore their consideration in projects and research, the paper is organized in the following sections. The next section reviews relevant literature on women's empowerment and asks why aspirations matter. It defines aspirations in relation to one's past and present circumstances and future possibilities (Appadurai, 2004). It also considers aspirations as they are related to agency, which is a concept that is more attended to in empowerment projects. The analysis in this paper draws on a capability approach that considers human development as expanding opportunities to achieve what one has reason to value (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Therefore, to understand what women value, aspirations must be accounted for in relation to resources, opportunities, and agency. The paper then discusses a longitudinal study of women's empowerment in Vietnam that forms the basis for this analysis. The project's economic empowerment model² centers access to various resources and forms of agency, while also attending to gendered social norms that constrain women's agency. Using data from the abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI³), and qualitative interview data from women and men in the same households, we show that most women across all ethnic groups are not necessarily disempowered in the domains of the A-WEAI related to input into productive decisions, ownership of assets, and control over the use of income. Yet, women's disempowerment related to group membership, workload, and access to and decisions on credit varied, and their aspirations for themselves and their community reveal other valued outcomes from the projects. After showing the A-WEAI results, the findings section discusses two themes from the qualitative data to answer how aspirations are important to women's empowerment. In addition, we explore if/how women's aspirations aligned with the development project assumptions and goals. Because the projects and research are ongoing, the focus of this paper is on women's aspirations as connected to their valued wellbeing, and not necessarily their aspiration achievement or the agency to act up on them; these concepts are discussed more below. Finally, the paper concludes with the implications of considering aspirations in women's empowerment models and measures.

2. Background: Women's aspirations, agency and empowerment

Projects, models, and the scholarly literature addressing women's empowerment lack attention to aspirations (with a few exceptions, Conradie, 2013; Ange et al., 2019). Key empowerment frameworks that inform much development work with women, such as that of Kabeer's (1999) do not include aspirations; nor do measures such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index

¹ The Vietnamese government defines people from language and cultural groups other than the Kinh as ethnic minorities. We use this term throughout as it is used by the empowerment project.

² The project had an overall model that guided the organizations implementing strategies for economic empowerment (more details about the model are provided in DFAT, 2015). While there were many variations in specific project strategies, throughout the paper, we refer to the projects in reference to their overall model.

³ We used the A-WEAI with five domains of empowerment; see Table 1 below for the domains and indicators.

(WEAI), a commonly used index to measure relational and multi-dimensional domains of empowerment (Alkire et al., 2013a, 2013b; Malapit et al., 2017). This oversight is in part because of assumptions detailed above about women and the projects designed for their empowerment. There is also a conceptual problem: empowerment, capacity, and agency are often conflated (Eger et al., 2018), and aspirations and agency are often regarded as synonymous (DeJaeghere, 2018), meaning that what a woman is able to do (capacity) or does (agency) is what she would like to achieve for her life (aspirations), and therefore she is empowered. Models and measures of empowerment often refer to women's voices or their choices as indicative of a women's agency (Kabeer, 1999; Alkire et al., 2013a; Gammage et al., 2016), but these choices are mediated by individual and collective aspirations (Fletcher, 2017; Eger et al., 2018).

When aspirations are referred to in research on women's empowerment, such as aspiration traps (Dalton et al., 2016) or adapted aspirations (Hart, 2016), these ideas indicate that women lack opportunity or agency to realize their aspirations. While these concepts have helped reveal the constraints women face, they do not show the dynamic nature of aspirations and how they can be achieved. Rather than assessing aspirations and fostering their achievement (Callard, 2018), empowerment projects focus on providing material resources or enhancing psychological aspects, such as decision-making and developing resilience. Common empowerment measures (such as the WEAI) assess achievement to a certain threshold in the domains of accessing resources and participating in decision-making, but we do not know if these achievements, such as having more land or making decisions about production, necessarily relate to what women value for their lives.

Aspirations and agency are different but related. Women can have specific aspirations and at the same time they may not feel agentic to achieve them; they can also do things and make decisions related to their lives, but their actions may not align with the aspirations they have for themselves or others. Aspirations are shaped by the past and they are future oriented. They frame our lives around possibilities (Appadurai, 2004). Considerable research and development interventions, particularly educational ones, focus on increasing low aspirations among targeted groups (Sellar et al., 2011). But aspirations that might be considered low by another person are not necessarily detrimental to one's wellbeing (Fletcher, 2017). In her analysis of how aspirations matter in considering policies to improve wellbeing, Fletcher illustrates that having people reconsider their aspirations is insufficient, and material resources must accompany aspiration-enhancing initiatives. Importantly, she also argues that policies should not push people toward specific choices and end goals, as this may not account for one's own aspirations nor ultimately enhance her welfare. This means that empowerment projects with pre-defined end goals may not account for the dynamic relationship between resources, aspirations, and agency. In this paper, we frame aspirations in dynamic relation to agency (see DeJaeghere, 2018), as having an "agency-unlocking role" (Conradie & Robeyns, 2013, p. 565) instead of using a typology of aspirations as high or low, achieved or constrained (e.g., Hart, 2016).

Aspiration achievement requires agency, or the freedom to reason and act (or not act) upon what one values (Sen, 1999). In this sense, aspirations and agency are dialectically related (Author, XXXX) where agency is inspired and guided by one's own and collective aspirations, and aspirations are achieved through one's own and collective agency. However, development projects and measures of agency, such as the A-WEAI, often focus on taking action, setting goals, or making decisions without connecting these actions with what women value and imagine for their futures. Alternatively, some scholars define agency as also including power within, or intrinsic empowerment through measures of one's self-

worth and autonomy, which may be related to one's capacity to aspire (Rowlands, 1997; Ange et al., 2019). The pro-WEAI now includes measures aligned with intrinsic agency, including self-efficacy and autonomy (Malapit et al., 2019). Relatedly, agency involves the expansion of critical consciousness about one's individual and collective past and current circumstances and it includes imagining and pursuing alternative possibilities for one's futures (O'Hara & Clement, 2018). Therefore, aspirations as a capacity to assess one's past and present related to one's future is dynamically related with one's agency to think critically about (power within) and act upon aspirations (power with and through).

2.1. A capability approach model of aspirations and agency in the empowerment process

A capability approach to examine development initiatives focuses on what people have reason to value for their wellbeing, and it examines aspirations and agency as means and ends of such initiatives (Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017). Fletcher (2017) argues in her analysis of aspirations from a capability approach that "[it] analyses the role of aspirations without losing sight of the overall welfare achieved by a person" (p. 527.) In this sense, achieving wellbeing must be considered in relation to what a woman values for her life, and how she can act upon the real opportunities she has. Such an approach requires a dynamic and temporal conceptualization of aspirations and agency as they relate to wellbeing, or the multi-dimensional outcomes of development projects and policies. Figure 1 presents a diagram of the dynamic relationship of aspirations and agency through time and on a continuum between the individual and the collective. Such a conceptualization allows us to examine how a woman's aspirations and agency are shaped by and shape the social-spatial environment, including her family and community through time. Within her community, certain social norms and regulations affect the resources and real opportunities she has. At the individual level, her aspirations and agency are also affected by her physical, cognitive, and psychological capabilities. These resources, norms and a woman's personal capabilities do not remain static; they change through time, in dynamic relationship with her aspirations and agency.

With this framing of aspirations and agency as dynamic in the empowerment process, we aim to answer the following research questions:

- Are women from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam disempowered compared to men in the domains measured by the abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI)?
- What do these women aspire to or value for their lives?
- How are these women's aspirations related to, or not, the domains of empowerment (resources, decision-making) fostered through economic empowerment projects?

3. Study methodology

This study is a mixed-methods longitudinal design, with the quantitative data including the A-WEAI, an index of income and expenditures and other demographic household characteristics. A qualitative component of the study included interviews with a sub-sample of women and their husbands. This paper draws on the baseline quantitative data collected before the women's economic empowerment project activities began, and qualitative data collected at baseline and again one year later. From these data, we analyze women's disempowerment compared to men across the A-WEAI domains. We also examine what they value for their lives from participation in this project.

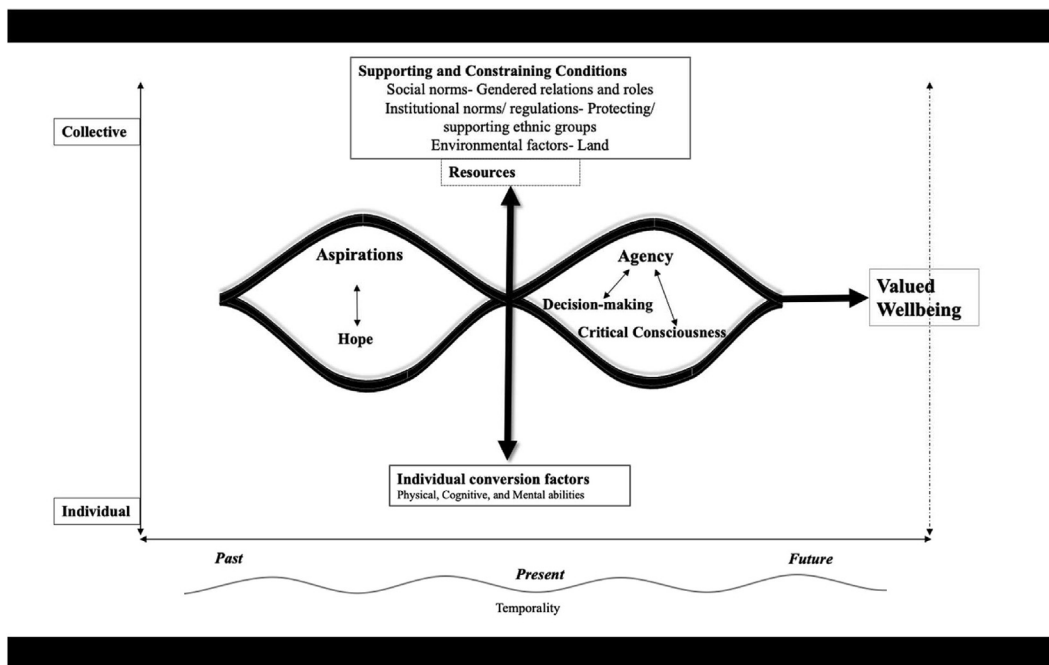


Figure 1. A relational and temporal capability approach focusing on aspirations and agency.

3.1. Women’s empowerment projects and community contexts

This study includes women and their households from six marginalized ethnic groups and the Kinh majority group in two mountainous provinces in Vietnam. These households participated in a development initiative aimed at improving households’ involvement in the agriculture and tourism sectors by empowering women. The model that guides the projects defines empowerment through six different domains: 1) access to resources, 2) access to assets, such as loans, 3) improved income and its use, 4) addressing constraining social norms, 5) changing unequal workloads, and 6) fostering women’s decision-making. The project refers to the first three domains as ‘access to resources’; the latter three are regarded as contributing to or constraining ‘agency’ (for more details about the model, see, DFAT, 2015). The project model resembles the domains of the A-WEAL except for its addition of addressing constraining social norms. Projects are implemented by private sector businesses, NGOs and government/community organizations, who provide training and resources that involve women in producing different agricultural products and tourism. The overarching goals include improving women’s access to productive resources and control over their income and improving their decision-making in the use of income and in household and community decisions.

The projects are aligned with Vietnam’s move to a market-oriented economy (*Doi Moi*) that started in the late 1980s. Home to 54 ethnic groups, of which the Kinh people account for 85.3 % of the population, ethnic minorities constitute up to 58 % of Vietnam’s poor (MOLISA, 2020). Given these economic disparities, Vietnam has made continued efforts to improve the lives of ethnic minorities, including providing subsidies for educational resources to families and schools serving these groups. However, changes in ethnic minorities’ economic outcomes have not reduced the gap with Kinh’s social-economic outcomes (ibid.). The largest and most recent poverty reduction initiative, the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTP SPR) 2016–2020 was designed to give priority to women. The NTP SPR particularly targeted women in poor households and ethnic minority women for participation in program activities (World Bank, 2019). The economic

empowerment projects that are the focus of this study align with this priority.

This study includes households from Dao, H’mong, Kinh, Muong, Nung, Thai, and Tay ethnic groups that reside in mountainous and marginalized regions of northern Vietnam. The Kinh represent the majority group in Vietnam, having both greater economic and political power than most minority groups. The other ethnic groups in this study have considerable diversity in living standards and socio-economic practices, though there are some shared patterns in outcomes. The H’mong, Dao and, to a lesser extent, the Nung tend to live in segregated ethnic communities, especially those in very mountainous regions of Lao Cai province. In Son La province, Muong, Thai and some H’mong and Dao households in this study tend to live closer to each other and may inter-mix in their communities, and with Kinh people more frequently. In a recent report, (World Bank, 2019), the Muong are considered among the top performing socio-economically, while the H’mong are the most socio-economically disadvantaged. Divergent factors affect their socio-economic development. For example, while the Muong households live in communities that are better connected – physically – by roads and socially through networks, the H’mong, as well as Dao and Nung households have more land (Phùng, et al. 2016; World Bank, 2019). H’mong and Dao have less labor market participation and are more affected by market shocks than the Muong. Gender roles and income disparities are reinforced by kinds of productive activities that have been available in the communities, such as wage labor for men (and some women) who migrate out of the communities, or subsistence or small-scale agriculture, handicrafts, and tourism for women (and some men) who remain in the community. These disparities in labor market participation and income are exacerbated by levels of education, where ethnic groups with higher socio-economic levels tend to have more education than those within the lower income quintiles, and women in those groups tend to have lowest levels of education (World Bank, 2019). For example, Tay and Muong women and men have similarly high literacy rates, while the Thai and Dao have a gender gap of nearly 20 % that favors

men, and H'mong have among the lowest literacy rates in general, with the lowest rates for H'mong women (Phùng et al., 2016, p. 31).

3.2. Methods, Participants, and data collection

3.2.1. Quantitative Survey, Sample, and analysis

To gather quantitative data on empowerment, we used the A-WEAI to measure empowerment, agency, and inclusion of women in the agricultural sector; we adapted this version slightly to include questions relevant to the tourism sector (Alkire et al., 2013a). We also gathered data on expenditures, per person and household income, and other demographic characteristics. The A-WEAI has two subindices, which include the five domains of empowerment (5DE) and the gender parity index (GPI). The 5DE measures the percentage of individuals who are empowered and the extent of dis/empowerment in each of the following five domains: decisions about agricultural production, access to and decision-making power about productive resources, control and use of income, leadership in the community, and time allocation. Table 1 refers to the five domains, with six indicators (resources includes two), and their relative weight in the 5DE. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) measures the proportion of dual-adult households that lack gender parity and the average gap in empowerment between women and men in households that lack gender parity. While the WEAI was originally created as a monitoring and evaluation tool for the US government's Feed the Future Initiative, it has been adapted and used as an aggregate index to measure women's empowerment and gender parity in agriculture, and other sectors, across countries and subgroups (Malapit et al., 2017; Ragsdale et al., 2018; Quisumbing et al., 2022).

The A-WEAI reflects a capability approach to empowerment by expanding an individual's abilities to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999, 2001). This includes the ability to exercise life choices over material and social resources, such as access to assets and group membership. Making life choices also includes agency, and the A-WEAI measures this as the ability to make decisions about productive activities, and the use of income and assets linked to these productive activities (Alkire et al., 2013a).

Households participating in the projects were selected for the study from seven districts in two mountainous provinces in northern Vietnam. Baseline survey data were gathered in 2019 from a random sample of 2,622 participants who had expressed interest or enrolled in the projects (including one male and one female from 1,311 households). Baseline data were collected before specific project activities had been implemented. The A-WEAI and other survey questions were translated into Vietnamese and local data collectors, some who also spoke H'mong, Dao, Thai, and Nung, were trained on the instrument and were supervised by the authors. Translating questions in local languages was done orally, depending on the language preference and level of literacy of the respondent. All data were collected electronically on tablets and reviewed by supervisors. Any unanswered questions or incorrectly recorded responses were clarified with the data collectors.

Table 2 shows the gender, ethnicity, age, and education level of the respondents. We aimed to have approximately 200 households of each ethnicity in the sample, however, for the Kinh majority group this was not achievable because many were away at work at the time of the survey. Our data on educational level and income are similar to that found in other national surveys, in which the greatest number of H'mong respondents reported the least number of years of formal education, followed by Dao and Nung respondents (Phùng et al., 2016). However, a considerable number of Dao, H'mong, and Nung in our study also reported having completed some secondary education (though not necessarily all 12 years).

Table 1

The A-WEAI five domains of empowerment (5DE), corresponding six indicators and their respective weights.

Domains	Indicators	Weight
Production	Input in productive decisions	1/5
Resources	Ownership of assets	2/15
	Access to and decisions on credit	1/15
Income	Control over use of income	1/5
Leadership	Group membership	1/5
Time	Workload	1/5

Source: Alkire et al. (2013b)

Table 3 shows the average income for the different ethnic groups, as well as that for males and females (significant differences by gender in bold). For the overall sample, and Muong, Tay, Dao, and H'mong households, males' personal monthly income was significantly higher than females' personal monthly income (significant p-values in bold). Kinh respondents reported the highest average monthly personal income. Muong respondents reported the next highest average monthly personal income, also higher than H'mong respondents (who reported the lowest).

The analysis of the A-WEAI data followed the protocol laid out by Alkire et al.'s (2013b). We calculated an overall A-WEAI score, a weighted composite score of the 5DE (production, resources, income, leadership, and time) and the GPI (discussed below). The 5DE contributes to 90 % of the overall A-WEAI score, while the GPI contributes to 10 % of the overall A-WEAI score. For this study, the 5DE and GPI subindices were calculated and disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. Using the 5DE, we focus on the percentage of women and men who are dis/empowered. Using the GPI, we focus on the percentage of women who have gender parity with the primary men in their households, and the average empowerment gap across the different ethnic groups. All analyses are conducted using Stata.

3.2.2. Qualitative Data, participants and analysis

The qualitative data included semi-structured and open-ended interviews conducted at two time periods. In 2019, baseline interviews were conducted among 138 women. In 2020 (Time 2), follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted with 91 of these same women from baseline and 41 of their husbands. Table 4 shows the breakdown of interviewed women and men by ethnic group. Men were added to the qualitative part of the study at time two because data about men's roles, their participation in the project and livelihoods, and perceptions of gender norms were sought. Men from Dao, H'mong, Nung and Thai households were included as men from these ethnic groups were the most involved with the project and livelihoods (Tay and Muong men tended to work outside the home).

Interviews were conducted by a team of eight Vietnamese researchers, including several of the co-authors of this paper, who were trained in qualitative interviewing and supervised in field activities. Interviews and related observations of the household were conducted by a pair of interviewers, with one researcher usually able to speak local languages, if necessary. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, or local language, based on the preference of participants.

During the interviews, women and men were asked about their aspirations for themselves and their family, their involvement in project activities, their hopes for project outcomes, and the conditions of their lives (i.e., health, family life, and community resources). They were also specifically asked about norms and expectations for women and men in their household and community, such as who makes decisions about productive and household work and use of income, and how such decisions are made or nego-

Table 2
Survey participants by gender, ethnicity, age, and education level (2 participants were missing ethnicity, n = 2,620).

Ethnicity	Gender	Total respondents	Average age	No formal education	≤ Grade 4	Grade 5 ≤ 8	Grade 9 ≤ 12	> Grade 12	Total
Dao	Females	199	39	49 %	17 %	19 %	12 %	4 %	100 %
	Males	205	40	23 %	22 %	19 %	24 %	12 %	100 %
H'mong	Females	192	36	76 %	7 %	8 %	8 %	2 %	100 %
	Males	192	37	33 %	12 %	14 %	29 %	13 %	100 %
Kinh	Females	133	47	1 %	5 %	47 %	28 %	20 %	100 %
	Males	135	47	1 %	6 %	39 %	25 %	28 %	100 %
Muong	Females	178	39	6 %	28 %	33 %	27 %	7 %	100 %
	Males	176	40	3 %	16 %	32 %	26 %	22 %	100 %
Nung	Females	199	39	41 %	8 %	14 %	32 %	6 %	100 %
	Males	198	38	25 %	10 %	16 %	33 %	17 %	100 %
Tay	Females	210	41	10 %	23 %	40 %	19 %	8 %	100 %
	Males	205	43	5 %	20 %	44 %	20 %	11 %	100 %
Thai	Females	199	41	14 %	27 %	30 %	18 %	12 %	100 %
	Males	199	43	13 %	23 %	26 %	19 %	20 %	100 %

Table 3
Average monthly personal income (in USD), overall by ethnic group, and significant differences between females and males.

Ethnicity	Overall			Females			Males			t	p
	n	mean	sd	n	mean	sd	n	Mean	sd		
Dao	382	\$106	\$89	189	\$87	\$74	193	\$126	\$98	-4.358	<0.001
H'mong	373	\$91	\$99	186	\$78	\$93	187	\$104	\$103	-2.516	0.012
Kinh	219	\$206	\$134	100	\$197	\$118	119	\$212	\$146	-0.826	0.41
Muong	337	\$132	\$117	168	\$117	\$84	169	\$147	\$141	-2.382	0.018
Nung	366	\$105	\$170	185	\$94	\$205	181	\$116	\$125	-1.243	0.215
Tay	392	\$126	\$113	197	\$108	\$107	195	\$144	\$117	-3.182	0.002
Thai	376	\$116	\$86	186	\$110	\$77	190	\$121	\$93	-1.259	0.209
Total	2445	\$1,208	\$1,207	1211	\$1,069	\$1,197	1234	\$1,344	\$1,202	-5.673	<0.001

Table 4
Qualitative participants by gender, ethnicity, and timepoint.

Ethnicity	Baseline females	Time 2 – females	Time 2 – males
Dao	29	23	13
H'mong	31	25	17
Muong	18	10	0
Nung	21	13	5
Tay	17	9	0
Thai	22	11	6
Total	138	91	41

tiated. Participants were also asked about involvement in economic and social groups in their community, such as local agricultural production training or women’s groups. These questions are similar to the questions in the A-WEAI, but they were open-ended and elicited more in-depth data about the complexity of women’s and men’s lives.

Interviews were immediately transcribed in Vietnamese and a memo was written to summarize key themes and observations. All interviews were also translated into English so that non-Vietnamese researchers could oversee the coding and analysis. The Vietnamese version of the interviews were then coded in NVivo by several co-authors of this paper. The codebook was developed through a discussion of the key themes that were initially documented in the memos. For the purposes of this paper, we examined key themes associated with the aspirations they had for themselves and their family, particularly in relation to their involvement in the economic empowerment project.

4. Findings

4.1. A-WEAI Results: Overall, decomposition and by ethnic group

Our analysis of the A-WEAI in Table 5 shows that the percentage of men overall who are disempowered is less than the percent-

age of women who are. However, the same proportion of women and men achieve adequacy in productive decisions, ownership of assets, and control and use of income (See Table 6).⁴

The percentage and extent of dis/empowerment of women and men are measured using the 5DE described above. Table 5 shows the results for all respondents and by ethnicity at baseline. Overall, the A-WEAI score for this sample is 0.862. The disempowered headcount shows that, on average, a majority, or 58 % of women and 68 % of men were empowered. However, the rate of those empowered varies considerably by ethnic group, and between women and men in groups. For instance, H'mong women and men were the most disempowered group, with considerably more H'mong women than men disempowered, while both Thai women and men had a similar disempowerment rate.

The GPI score shows that 70 % of women at baseline achieved gender parity with the primary male in their household. H'mong women had the lowest percentage at baseline (49 %); 71 % of Nung women had achieved gender parity while over three-fourths (76 %) of Dao women reported they had achieved gender parity and 78 % of Thai women had gender parity, the greatest percentage at baseline. Our A-WEAI results indicate that a smaller percentage of women were disempowered as compared to the results from other studies where women were significantly less empowered as compared to their male counterparts (e.g., O'Hara and Clement, 2018; Kumar et al., 2021).

When examining the decomposition of the A-WEAI by ethnicity, interesting findings emerge. Table 6 shows that 99 %–100 % of women and men were empowered at baseline in regards to the domains of input into productive decisions and ownership of assets. In addition, 96 %–100 % of women and men were empow-

⁴ These indicators may not be sensitive enough to detect gender differences in these domains in this context since the thresholds were developed in contexts with different gender norms and/or more gender inequality. So, while men and women both achieve adequacy, they may own different assets or are involved in different decisions.

Table 5
Baseline A-WEAI results overall and by ethnicity.

Indexes	All Ethnic Groups		H'mong		Dao		Thai		Nung	
	Female (n = 608)	Male (n = 608)	Female (n = 124)	Male (n = 124)	Female (n = 165)	Male (n = 165)	Female (n = 150)	Male (n = 150)	Female (n = 169)	Male (n = 169)
Disempowered Headcount (H)	0.425	0.321	0.724	0.414	0.347	0.300	0.278	0.262	0.405	0.33
Average Inadequacy Score (A)	0.345	0.331	0.392	0.343	0.319	0.326	0.352	0.309	0.301	0.34
Disempowerment Index (M0)	0.147	0.106	0.284	0.142	0.111	0.098	0.098	0.081	0.122	0.112
5DE Index (1-M0)	0.853	0.894	0.716	0.898	0.889	0.902	0.902	0.919	0.878	0.888
% of Data used	77.00 %	77.30 %	79.00 %	79.80 %	75.20 %	78.80 %	76.70 %	84.00 %	77.50 %	68.00 %
% women w/ no gender parity (H _{GPI})	30.40 %	-	51.20 %	-	23.60 %	-	21.80 %	-	29.50 %	-
Average Empowerment Gap (I _{GPI})	17.60 %	-	22.90 %	-	14.20 %	-	18.90 %	-	12.30 %	-
GPI	0.947	-	0.883	-	0.967	-	0.959	-	0.964	-
% of Data Used	68.80 %	-	69.40 %	-	66.70 %	-	73.30 %	-	66.30 %	-
A-WEAI score	0.862	-	0.733	-	0.897	-	0.908	-	0.887	-

Table 6
5DE Index decomposed: Percentage of respondents achieving adequacy in each WEAI indicator for overall sample and by ethnicity.

Domain	Gender	Total (%)	H'mong (%)	Dao (%)	Thai (%)	Nung (%)
Input into productive decisions	Female	99	96	100	100	100
	Male	100	100	100	100	100
Ownership of assets	Female	100	100	100	100	100
	Male	100	100	100	100	100
Access to and decisions on credit	Female	66	54	72	76	62
	Male	73	72	75	74	70
Control over use of income	Female	96	91	100	94	99
	Male	99	100	98	97	100
Group membership	Female	77	49	84	85	84
	Male	77	65	81	90	71
Workload	Female	65	38	70	80	69
	Male	80	74	81	82	83

ered in the domain of control over the use of income. Thus, the domains of input into productive decisions, ownership of assets, and control over and use of income were not sources of disempowerment. These domains of empowerment are different from those found in other studies, such as Ragsdale et al. (2018), where decision-making and ownership of assets were two domains in which Ghanaian women were less empowered than men.

Some disparities occurred in access to and decisions on credit, where more H'mong, Dao, and Nung men had greater adequacy in access/decision than women. Thai women had slightly greater adequacy in access to and decisions on credit than men. The domain of group membership shows different disparities across the ethnic groups. H'mong men achieved greater adequacy than women, while Dao and Nung women had greater adequacy than men. Thai men also had greater adequacy but both Thai women and men had the highest adequacy of all groups.

Workload accounted for the biggest percentage of women's disempowerment at baseline across all ethnic groups. For instance, only 38 % of H'mong women achieved adequacy in the workload domain (Table 6). Dao and Nung women also achieved less adequacy in workload than men, though at 70 and 69 %, respectively, which were considerably more than H'mong women. Thai women (80.5 %) and men (82 %) achieved relatively similar adequacy. Workload accounted for 47.1 % of women's disempowerment while group membership accounted for 42.5 % of men's disempowerment (Table 7). Workload had the biggest effect on disempowerment for Dao women (53.9 %), Nung women (51.5 %), H'mong (43.9 %), and Thai (40.8 %). Only for Thai men (45.1 %) did workload have a bigger effect than for women.

Group membership contributed the most to H'mong men's disempowerment (49.8 %) and Nung men's disempowerment (51.0 %). Both group membership and workload had the biggest effect on Dao men's disempowerment (39.3 % for each domain). Only for Thai women (30.2 %) did group membership have a greater effect on disempowerment than men (25.5 %) (See Table 7).

Given these data that show equal rates of women and men achieving adequacy in ownership of assets, input into productive decisions, and control over income, we analyzed the qualitative data to understand what women valued for themselves and their families to be empowered from such projects. In the next section we discuss these findings.

4.2. Qualitative findings

Themes from the qualitative data also revealed that women felt they had access to resources, in most cases, and they generally participated, with some exceptions, in decision-making related to production and the household. Given these results, we wanted to understand from the qualitative data what they felt was important for their empowerment. We found two themes in the qualitative data regarding aspirations women have for themselves and their community that differ from how empowerment is measured and enacted through activities in these projects. The first is an aspiration to be literate that was particularly important for H'mong and Dao women. Formal education or literacy training were not components of the project's model initially, though Kinh and English literacy was provided in a couple of communities later in the project. In most communities, the projects focused on providing material resources as well as disseminating knowledge specific to

Table 7
Domain contributions toward disempowerment by gender and ethnicity.

Group	Gender	Production	Resources		Income	Leadership	Time
		Input into productive decisions (%)	Ownership of assets (%)	Access to and decisions on credit (%)	Control over use of income (%)	Group membership (%)	Workload (%)
Total	Female	1.2	0.0	15.3	4.9	31.4	47.1
	Male	0.0	0.0	17.1	2.8	42.5	37.7
H'mong	Female	2.9	0.0	10.8	6.5	36.0	43.9
	Male	0.0	0.0	13.3	0.0	49.8	37.0
Dao	Female	0.0	0.0	17.0	0.0	29.1	53.9
	Male	0.0	0.0	16.8	4.7	39.3	39.3
Thai	Female	0.0	0.0	16.6	12.4	30.2	40.8
	Male	0.0	0.0	21.6	7.8	25.5	45.1
Nung	Female	0.0	0.0	20.9	1.3	26.4	51.5
	Male	0.0	0.0	18.0	0.0	51.0	30.9

agricultural production products or tourism through nonformal training. But this training did not address broader literacy needs. Literacy, as these women described it, is more than a utilitarian resource useful for improving their productive work; it also is intrinsically important for being regarded with dignity. The importance of literacy for dignity illustrates the value of education within the Vietnamese society (See also [Völker & Doneys, 2021](#)).

The second theme relates to aspirations for the collective well-being of women’s households and the collective wellbeing of women’s communities, and particularly social and economic equity among community members. Concerns with collective wellbeing may in part be reflected in the similar rates for women and men of achieving adequacy in the resources, decision-making, and use of income domains of the A-WEAI. Their aspiration for equity and collective wellbeing also reflected concerns related to the project’s focus on women, and their individual role in productive work and decision-making. Both these themes show possible disconnects between projects activities focused on material and financial resources and on women’s individual access and use of these resources.

4.2.1. Aspirations to be literate: Being a dignified person and expanding opportunities

The aspiration to be literate in Kinh language, the dominant and national language were expressed by women who felt least able to participate and make decisions outside the home, and for some who interacted with buyers and customers, they aspired to learn English to expand their opportunities. A majority of adult H'mong and Dao women had no formal education, and many were not able to communicate fluently in Kinh language. They expressed a desire to learn Kinh. Our qualitative and quantitative data show that older H'mong and Dao women were less likely to participate in training or formal meetings outside the house (usually conducted in the Kinh language). This H'mong woman clearly indicated how her level of literacy affected her involvement in the project:

Because I don’t know the language, I can’t read. So every time they call for training, my husband goes. When my husband came home from training, he passed on instructions on how to plant, fertilize, spray ... Then we both worked together.

In her situation, the husband shared information gleaned from participating in the trainings and they “worked together” to improve their household agricultural productivity, but the wife was not able to participate in the community meetings because of her limited Kinh. This woman’s lack of participation is congruent with the gender gap in the percentage of H'mong women and men achieving adequacy in the group membership domain of the A-WEAI.

Low levels of literacy also affected how women saw themselves, and were seen by others, as competent people. A H'mong woman

who was approximately 35 years old (though she did not know her exact birthdate) shared how illiteracy affected how she participated in project training and activities for growing medicinal herbs.

Woman: I am illiterate, so I don’t go outside much.

Interviewer: There are a lot of H'mong people who are illiterate but still participate in social activities. Why don’t you?

Woman: Because I don’t know much, so I don’t go, even when I really want to.

Interviewer: What if the events consist of only H'mong people who speak H'mong

Woman: I rarely participate in the events. I don’t even go to the events where they only use H'mong.

Interviewer: Is it because your husband doesn’t allow you to participate?

Woman: No, he lets me go to whatever event I want to go to. I just don’t want to go.

At times throughout the interview, she referred to herself as “stupid” because she did not know how to sell things in the market. However, she recognized that if she could learn basic numeracy and literacy, she could be involved in the livelihood by selling products.

I don’t know how to do calculations. I am very self-conscious because I think I am stupid. If the project organizes classes that teach women how to calculate, I will surely attend those classes. There are people who come in here and buy our products and they don’t necessarily have to always do business with the husbands. They’ll conduct business with the wives too.

Her husband conveyed a desire for his wife to participate in trainings and social events. But he also explained that “she cannot calculate and speak in Kinh language”, and therefore, he felt ashamed. Being illiterate in the dominant language not only affected the woman and her dignity, but also her husband’s sense of her and his dignity. Importantly, he noted he wanted to ensure his children were educated.

The importance of aspirations to be literate in Kinh and English, and the effects of illiteracy on their possible futures is exemplified by another H'mong wife and husband, both in their late 40 s and born in the 1970s, when access to formal schooling was extremely limited. The husband spoke Kinh fluently in our interviews, but his daughter-in-law translated for his wife. This husband had been a commune official, a position he lost because, in his words, he was regarded as “not educated enough”. His belief was confirmed during other interviews where we learned from other men interviewed in the village (who were younger and had more schooling) that they had been recruited to serve as commune officials. The husband and wife’s village recently began to participate in a tourism development project, and they decided to be a part of the pro-

ject. This H'mong couple hoped their older son could participate in the tourism training and be able to work in the village, as he and his wife currently worked in China as migrant workers. Although the husband participated in all the formal meetings and trainings for the new tourist project, his wife hadn't gone to any. The wife initially explained her inability to do so as: "I haven't had a lot of exposure to society" and she didn't like going to meetings and talking with other people. She explained that her parents had not allowed her to attend school as a child. And although she had participated in a number of literacy classes as an adult, she "couldn't learn well". However, she voiced a strong desire to acquire both Kinh and English. In fact, she stated that "I really want to learn English", as it is an important language in the tourism sector.

While some husbands, as the one discussed above, felt ashamed that their wives were illiterate in Kinh, other men noted the respect and dignity they felt and that their wives received from others in the community, when these women were perceived to be knowledgeable persons. As a 48-year old H'mong man stated about his wife's participation in the project: "My wife is hard-working and thoughtful. Participation in the project helped her to be more knowledgeable, and thus more respected".

H'mong and Dao women and men also had aspirations that their children would complete schooling and continue to post-secondary education, particularly because they had not had opportunities for education. Aware of the challenges they confronted without literacy in Kinh and a basic education, they wanted alternative opportunities for their children. For example, several H'mong families who planned to engage in tourism had sent their children to study English. One Dao woman who had not gone to school as a child explained how she saved her earnings to send her two daughters to university (to be teachers) and her son was also studying. "They all have a degree. I wish that they will get a job in a state organization so they don't have to work as hard as their parents." Another Dao woman who had completed grade 7 and was more literate than her husband, spoke about her hopes for her children: "I want my daughter and son to have a job in the future, so that they don't have to go out to the fields and be exposed to the sun like me ... I want [my daughter] to work at a company".

These examples illustrate that literacy is an important outcome for women to feel empowered. They also had aspirations for their children to be literate and educated. Without literacy in Kinh language, women had less access to public resources, like formal meetings, loans, or goods that they needed for their livelihoods. Many development projects prioritize access to material resources, and while women can obtain some resources without literacy (or with the help of their husbands or children), their access was also compromised. From a capability perspective, literacy is not only an instrumental capability that is necessary for utilizing material resources and engaging in opportunities. It also has intrinsic value, giving a sense of dignity and worth to both individual women and their families. Literacy allows women and men to imagine possibilities beyond the immediate outcomes sought by many agricultural development projects (i.e., improving their productivity and income). The women and men we interviewed clearly expressed a desire for a different future for themselves and for their children.

4.2.2. Aspirations for community wellbeing: Shared and equitable development

Women also expressed that collective wellbeing including better household income and more education of their family and the community was important to achieve from their participation in the project, in addition to the individual economic gain they might achieve for their household. Development projects in Vietnam are often designed to involve the whole community. This commonly

takes the form of the commune leader encouraging people in the village to get involved, but the resources and outcomes are primarily directed at individual households. Another form of community development is cooperatives in which households work together to access resources and a buyer. Supporting the collective outputs of agricultural products or tourism services are seen as better for the buyer/customer and for households. Despite the 'collective' structure of cooperatives, some households get greater access to certain resources than others, and equity is not necessarily a principle nor a result from cooperatives. Our data, however, show that women were concerned with collective wellbeing and equitable access and distribution of economic and social goods.

Aspirations for community wellbeing were particularly evident among women engaged in tourism and vegetable/herb cooperatives. This is, in part, because these projects aimed to involve the whole village through pooling resources. For example, communities would designate a plot of land for collective use of growing vegetables, or they would share resources, such as plows or transportation services. In the tourism sector, women worked together to produce meals or cultural products for tourists. Even though tourist services involved many families across a village, the social and economic returns were not necessarily equitable. In a Thai village in Son La, tourism is a new service. That meant that the village and surrounding area needed to be developed to host tourists, including ensuring that homes in the village had electricity and roads were built to connect homes, village centers, and tourist areas. A few households had renovated their homes and hosted guests. Others had not been able to secure enough loans to build according to tourism guidelines, or they had not yet fully renovated their homes. For instance, they explained they had not yet built toilets or provided beds that were necessary for a homestay, as they understood the requirements. This uneven access to resources created inequities and potential conflicts in the village. Both those who benefited more economically and those who did not hoped that the project and their tourism services would contribute to the whole village. One Thai woman whose home hosted many guests commented:

I wish all 16 households who participated in the project will have guests next year. ...

I just hope it develops sustainably. I don't want unhealthy competition in the commune. Every-one who does tourism here are all relatives, or friends of each other. It would be good for tourism in the commune to expand. However, with expansion comes problems we cannot foresee, such as [fair] prices and [household and community] reputation.

Another Thai woman from the village who did not have a well-developed homestay stated that it was important for the project to support groups of households who could engage in different services so that their involvement and the income was shared across the village.

The project shouldn't invest in each household individually but rather create groups, such as a handicraft merchandise group ... I think that is a very clever thing the project has done. That way, the whole commune will benefit from the project rather than just a few households ... I think that's a fair way to treat every-one in the commune. It will increase a sense of unity and the whole commune will do tourism together.

Tourism also raised a collective concern around development and protection of their land and water resources and culture. This is a concern of the tourism industry because one model is to develop specific ethnic communities to show their history and culture to outsiders (Dũng, 2008). Thai women and men were proud of the beauty of their region, as well as the cleanliness of the vil-

lage, including all the trees and flowers they had planted. But they were also concerned about maintaining the sustainability of the environment and cultural practices, including religious artefacts that have significance to the community.

One of our goals is to restore our ancient Thai temple. It's the first temple in this region . . . Another goal is to bring back some festivals during March and April, like the Pray for the Rain festival, or during May and June, like the Statue Cleaning festival . . . These festivals just get passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.

Related to collective wellbeing was the aspiration for men to be involved in the project so that they too could share in the work and income. While the projects focused on increasing women's involvement and their productivity, there was a recognition by staff that men's involvement was important to support beneficial cultural norms (e.g., changes in gender norms) and economic outcomes (see also [Doneys et al., 2019](#); [Spark et al., 2020](#)). Thai and H'mong women and men said that family wellbeing was supported by both the husband's and wife's involvement in livelihood efforts. Therefore, women were not only concerned about their own empowerment, but also the whole family's wellbeing. A Thai woman who had an active homestay explained:

[Initially] the majority of participants were women, but now more and more men joined with their wives. Previously, women played a key role in the kitchen but now their husbands also cook with them. In the past, my husband never washed dishes, he now happily helps me when I have too much work.

Women's aspirations for their families' and communities' wellbeing show that they perceived their life was better if husbands and others in their community were also involved; they felt they had greater power with and through these relationships. Working toward collective wellbeing was not regarded as sacrificing or undermining an individual's wellbeing; rather, women noted that collective wellbeing was necessary for both economic and social gains. Women and men alike stressed the importance of being happy within their families and community even if they did not always have higher incomes. Women's concern for others and the community is notable particularly when development projects emphasize and measure women's individual empowerment.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Considering aspirations as a distinct domain in processes of empowerment has implications for how empowerment projects, models and measures include what women value for themselves, their families, and communities. Assessing aspirations, or what women value, in addition to other measures of agency, such as decision-making or use of income, may also address the problem of misalignment that can occur between project aims and achieved outcomes for women. As illustrated in our findings, if women value outcomes, such as literacy, that were not generally supported by the projects, there may be a misalignment with the empowerment outcomes that are measured. [O'Hara and Clement \(2018\)](#) argue that normative measures, including the WEAI, may assess the values of those measuring or designing the measure rather than the participants' values. They note that it is difficult, and limited, to assess agency through the concepts of participation and decision-making. In our study, we also asked what women valued for themselves and their families and what they aspired to achieve from their participation in these projects.

Our study found that women achieved similar levels of adequacy as men in the domains of ownership of assets, input into decisions, and control over use of income. Divergences occurred

particularly in group membership and workload. Qualitative data show that women had additional aspirations not captured by the A-WEAI that mattered for their empowerment and wellbeing.

Our qualitative data show that particularly H'mong and Dao women valued being literate in the national language and English as critical for their empowerment and wellbeing. Many women, and women particularly from these ethnic groups, were denied formal schooling during the 1970s to 1990s in Vietnam. Often their lower educational levels are attributed to both ethnic and gender norms in which girls' education is not valued. But opportunities for schooling were also affected by severe economic deprivations in Vietnam following many wars, and by political discourse that positioned ethnic minority groups as backward or not "Kinh enough" ([Jamieson et al., 1998](#); [Baulch et al., 2002](#)). In the past two decades, the dominant narrative that schooling is necessary for economic growth has been adopted by most families, including those from these ethnic groups ([Dang & Glewwe, 2018](#)). But being literate for these women was not only instrumentally useful for accessing resources, making decisions, and earning income; it was important for regarding oneself and being regarded by others with dignity. Development projects focused on women, and particularly women from these ethnic groups, need to consider the importance of literacy not only as a tool for economic success, but also for its social and cultural value – of being seen as a dignified person. For example, [Völker and Doneys \(2021\)](#), in a study of women's own perceptions of key components of empowerment, also found that Vietnamese women regarded education as the most important domain, above others, including income.

Women across several ethnic groups in this study also spoke to the importance of household and community wellbeing as critical outcomes from economic empowerment projects. This finding highlights the importance of projects to not only emphasize women's individual participation and decision-making in empowering them, but also the participation of and outcomes for those around them. Recent research shows that women's empowerment can occur with and through others ([Ange et al., 2019](#); [Galiè & Farnworth, 2019](#)) and therefore, development initiatives need to consider how women's empowerment is fostered through the connections women have with others.

Aspirations for collective wellbeing also reflect these ethnic groups' past economic and social insecurity in which they have been unable to achieve equitable socio-economic outcomes ([World Bank, 2019](#)). These aspirations may also reflect the social and cultural practices in these ethnic groups in which norms of care and collective wellbeing are not only gendered (regarded as appropriate for women), but also cultural and political, in which taking care of each other vis-a-vis government initiatives can destabilize their communities and change their economic opportunities is necessary. In a similar way, [Rao \(2017\)](#) also calls for an analysis of gender equality and empowerment measures to reflect relations among generations through time, and to consider the social-political experiences of poverty and desired wellbeing.

Both these findings speak to the importance of conceptualizing and measuring empowerment beyond material resources and individual agency, which are often tied to available opportunities and 'choices' for women in their specific context. By including women's aspirations for themselves and others, we can see the possibilities and alternative futures that women and ethnic minorities seek for themselves. Projects that focus on increasing women's access to or use of material resources or assets may be limited in their empowerment outcomes. Building human capital resources, such as literacy, requires more investment but may have more sustainable empowering effects. Understanding what women value for their lives and in relation to development interventions can help avoid prescribing what an empowered woman should be and do in any given context. A capability perspective centers what a woman

values for her wellbeing, and thus informs empowerment projects and measures such as the A-WEAL. Yet few projects include an assessment of women's aspirations and how they align with the resources a woman accesses and the agency she enacts. Most models of empowerment, and related measures of them, as O'Hara and Clement (2018) have argued, may not capture how women see themselves, their roles, and the ways in which they critically navigate social and economic changes in their lives. Women's aspirations are important for development projects to understand in order to foster the change women seek for themselves, which is at the root of empowerment for oneself and one's community.

Funding

This work was supported by the Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government, and Cowater International through the GREAT program (Grant No. AUS4EQUALITY/GREAT19030).

The views in this paper are those of the authors and not those of DFAT, Cowater International or GREAT staff.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Joan DeJaeghere: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Nancy Pellowski Wiger:** Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Hue Le:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Phuong Luong:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Nga Thi Hang Ngo:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Thanh Thi Vu:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Jongwook Lee:** Data curation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge researchers at the Tay Bac University and the Agriculture and Forestry Research & Development Center for Mountainous Region (ADC), Thai Nguyen University for their involvement with data collection. We also thank Nga Le at GREAT, Vietnam and Mia Urbano at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia for their input and insights into this study. Thanks also goes to Sheetal Digari for conducting a review of literature and formatting the diagram.

References

- Alkire, S., Meinzen-Dick, R., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A., Seymour, G., & Vaz, A. (2013a). *The women's empowerment in agriculture index* (OPHI Working Paper No. 58). University of Oxford. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/11815/ophi-wp-58.pdf?sequence=1>.
- Alkire, S., Malapit, H., Meinzen-Dick, R., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A.R., Seymour, G., Vaz, A. (2013b). *Instructional guide on the women's empowerment in agriculture index*. International Food Policy Research Institute. https://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/Basic Page/weai_instructionalguide_1.pdf.

- Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), *Culture and public action* (pp. 59–84). Stanford University Press. <https://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=5765>.
- Ange, P., Ballet, J., Carimentrand, A., & Marius, K. (2019). Changing women's lives? Empowerment and aspirations of fair trade workers in South India. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 15(1), 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2019.1582554>.
- Anderson, C. L., Reynolds, T. W., Biscaye, P., Patwardhan, V., & Schmidt, C. (2021). Economic benefits of empowering women in agriculture: Assumptions and evidence. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(2), 193–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1769071>.
- Baulch, B., Chuyen, K. T. T., Haughton, D., & Haughton, J. (2002). *Ethnic minority development in Vietnam: A socioeconomic perspective* (No. 2836). World Bank. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/286981468778478735/122522322_20041117152609/additional/multi0page.pdf.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674212770>.
- Callard, A. (2018). *Aspiration: The agency of becoming*. Oxford University Press. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/aspiration-9780190085148?cc=us&lang=en>.
- Conradie, I. (2013). Can deliberate efforts to realise aspirations increase capabilities? A South African case study. *Oxford Development Studies*, 41(2), 189–219. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600818.2013.790949>.
- Conradie, I., & Robeyns, I. (2013). Aspirations and human development interventions. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 14(4), 559–580. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2013.827637>.
- Dalton, P. S., Ghosal, S., & Mani, A. (2016). Poverty and aspirations failure. *The Economic Journal*, 126(590), 165–188. <https://doi.org/10.1111/econj.12210>.
- Dang, H. A. H., & Glewwe, P. W. (2018). Well begun, but aiming higher: A review of Vietnam's education trends in the past 20 years and emerging challenges. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 54(7), 1171–1195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2017.1380797>.
- DeJaeghere, J. (2018). Girls' educational aspirations and agency: imagining alternative futures through schooling in a low-resourced Tanzanian community. *Critical Studies in Education*, 59(2), 237–255.
- DFAT. (2015). Gender equality and women's economic empowerment in agriculture: Operational Guidance Note. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/operational-guidance-note-gender-equality-and-womens-economic-empowerment-in-agriculture.pdf>.
- Doneys, P., Doane, D. L., & Norm, S. (2019). Seeing empowerment as relational: Lessons from women participating in development projects in Cambodia. *Development in Practice*, 30(2), 268–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2019.1678570>.
- Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(4), 1051–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.50.4.1051>.
- Duong, B. H. (2008). Contesting marginality: Consumption, networks, and everyday practice among Hmong girls in Sa Pa, northwestern Vietnam. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 3(3), 231–260. <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2008.3.3.231>.
- Eger, C., Miller, G., & Scarles, C. (2018). Gender and capacity building: A multi-layered study of empowerment. *World Development*, 106, 207–219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.024>.
- Flehtner, S. (2017). Should aspirations be a matter of policy concern? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 18(4), 517–530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2017.1364224>.
- Galiè, A., & Farnworth, C. R. (2019). Power through: A new concept in the empowerment discourse. *Global Food Security*, 21, 13–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2019.07.001>.
- Hanmer, L., & Klugman, J. (2016). Exploring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries: Where do we stand? *Feminist Economics*, 22(1), 237–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2015.1091087>.
- Hart, C. S. (2016). How do aspirations matter? *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 17(3), 324–341. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2016.1199540>.
- Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS). (2015). The social determinants of gender inequality in Vietnam: Findings of a research study between 2012–15. <https://isds.org.vn/an-pham/social-factor-determining-gender/>.
- Jamieson, N., Le, C., & Rambo, A. (1998). *The development crisis in Vietnam's mountains*. Honolulu: East-West Center.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and Change*, 30(3), 435–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>.
- Kabeer, N. (2011). Between affiliation and autonomy: Navigating pathways of women's empowerment and gender justice in rural Bangladesh. *Development and Change*, 42(2), 499–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2011.01703>.
- Kumar, N., Raghunathan, K., Arrieta, A., Jilani, A., & Pandey, S. (2021). The power of the collective empowers women: Evidence from self-help groups in India. *World Development*, 146. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105579>.
- Malapit, H., Pinkstaff, C., Sproule, K., Kovarik, C., Quisumbing, A. R. & Meinzen-Dick, R. S. (2017, May). The Abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (A-WEAI). IFPRI Discussion Paper 1647. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3012806>.
- Malapit, H., Quisumbing, A., Meinzen-Dick, R., Seymour, G., Martinez, E. M., Heckert, J., ... Yount, K. M. (2019). Development of the project-level women's empowerment in agriculture index (pro-WEAI). *World Development*, 122, 675–692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.06.018>.
- Ministry of Labour, War Invalids, and Social Affairs (MOLISA). (2020). *Decision of Poverty Review in Vietnam*, (No. 835/QĐ-BLĐTBXH). Vietnam Ministry of Labour,

- War Invalids, and Social Affairs. <http://english.molisa.gov.vn/Pages/News/Search.aspx?TuKhoa=MOLISA>, Decision of Poverty Review.
- Murphy-Graham, E. (2012). Opening minds, improving lives: Education and women's empowerment in Honduras. *Vanderbilt University Press*. <https://www.vanderbiltuniversitypress.com/9780826518293/opening-minds-improving-lives/>.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. *Harvard University Press*. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674072350>.
- O'Hara, C., & Clement, F. (2018). Power as agency: A critical reflection on the measurement of women's empowerment in the development sector. *World Development*, 106, 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.02.002>.
- Phùng, Đ. T., Nguyễn, V. C., Nguyễn, C. T., Nguyễn, T. N., & Tạ, T., K. V. (2016). Ethnic minorities and sustainable development goals: Who will be left behind? (Research report). Irish Aid, Committee of Ethnic Minorities, and United Nations Development Programme. <https://www.vn.undp.org/content/vietnam/en/home/library/poverty/ethnic-minorities-and-sustainable-development-goals-who-will-be.html>.
- Quisumbing, A., Meinzen-Dick, R., & Malapit, H. (2022). Women's empowerment and gender equality in South Asian agriculture: Measuring progress using the project-level Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (pro-WEAI) in Bangladesh and India. *World Development*, 151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105396> 105396.
- Ragsdale, K., Read-Wahidi, M. R., Wei, T., Martey, E., & Goldsmith, P. (2018). Using the WEAI+ to explore gender equity and agricultural empowerment: Baseline evidence among men and women smallholder farmers in Ghana's Northern Region. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 64(2), 123–134. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2018.09.013>.
- Rao, N. (2017). Assets, agency and legitimacy: Towards a relational understanding of gender equality policy and practice. *World Development*, 95, 43–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.02.018>.
- Robeyns, I. (2017). Wellbeing, freedom and social justice: The capability approach re-examined. *Open Book Publishers*. <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/682>.
- Rowlands, J. (1997). *Questioning empowerment: Working with women in Honduras*. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/questioning-empowerment-working-with-women-in-honduras-121185/>.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf. <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/163962/development-as-freedom-by-amartya-sen/>.
- Sellar, S., Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2011). Appreciating aspirations in Australian higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 41(1), 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2010.549457>.
- Spark, C., Sharp, T. L., & Koczberski, G. (2020). Relationality and economic empowerment: The role of men in supporting and undermining women's pathways. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 57(7), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2020.1850697>.
- Völker, M., & Doney, P. (2021). Empowerment as one sees it: Assessment of empowerment by women participants of development projects. *Development in Practice*, 31(1), 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2020.1828284>.
- World Bank. (2019). *Drivers of socio-economic development among ethnic minority groups in Vietnam*. World Bank. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/32307>.