

The influence of gender on project engagement and data acquisition activities

Report

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Executive Summary

The ACIAR-funded project SLAM/2018/144 – Farmer Options for Crops Under Saline Conditions (FOCUS) was implemented to strengthen the adaptive capacity of farming systems facing salinity challenges in the Mekong River Delta, Vietnam. Throughout its implementation, the project organized a series of training sessions for farmers, extension officers, and local stakeholders. These trainings covered topics such as saline-tolerant crop options, water and soil management under saline conditions, and integrated farming system approaches.

The delivery of these capacity-building activities has created an important foundation for promoting sustainable and climate-resilient agricultural practices in the region. By enhancing local knowledge and technical skills, the project has contributed to empowering farming communities to make informed decisions and to adopt effective adaptation strategies in the face of increasing salinity threats.

The success of the project reflects the collaborative efforts of the FOCUS team and the support from provincial Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), Agricultural Extension Centers, and the Women’s Union, which facilitated strong community engagement and effective implementation. This highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships and continuous capacity development as essential enablers for agricultural adaptation and resilience in the Mekong Delta.

1 Introduction

Salinity intrusion, often occurring concurrently with drought (collectively referred to as saltwater intrusion and drought or saline drought), has profound impacts on agricultural systems, livelihoods, and rural economies in the Vietnamese Mekong Delta. According to Wassmann et al. (2004), even moderate increases in soil salinity can reduce rice yields by up to 50%, depending on varietal tolerance and growth stage affected. During the severe drought and salinity event of 2015–2016, approximately 160,000 hectares of rice were damaged, and over 600,000 people experienced freshwater shortages (World Bank, 2016).

In Soc Trang, studies have shown that salinity levels exceeding 4 g/L can render traditional rice cultivation economically unviable, forcing farmers to shift towards brackish-water aquaculture or to leave fields fallow (Nguyen et al., 2020). This shift often results in higher input costs, market risks, and environmental concerns such as disease outbreaks and water pollution associated with shrimp farming (Joffre & Bosma, 2009). Similarly, in Hau Giang, increased salinity intrusion during the dry season has led to reduced crop diversity, as farmers abandon fruit orchards or vegetables due to their sensitivity to saline irrigation water (Hau Giang DARD, 2021).

Beyond direct impacts on yields and cropping systems, salinity intrusion also affects household water supply, exacerbates poverty, and induces livelihood changes that disproportionately burden women and marginalized groups (Tran et al., 2019). The combined effects of yield reduction, livelihood disruption, and health risks from saline drinking water underscore the urgent need for integrated adaptation strategies that combine crop, water, and livelihood interventions to enhance resilience in salinity-affected areas of the delta.

1.1 The FOCUS project engagement and data acquisition activities

The FOCUS project aims to work with smallholder cropping farmers within the Vietnamese Mekong Delta to improve their production and profitability. To this end, and in parallel, the project aims to build the capacity of project beneficiaries, such as smallholder farmers and actors within the agricultural innovation system, in addition to the capacity of the project team itself. The project was designed to prioritise training and development both outwardly with project beneficiaries and internally with project staff. The following research activities scaffold to these project aims:

1.1 Training of project and DARD staff in soil salinity measurement

1.2 Training of farmers for site specific land management and crop options

Many planned activities were unable to be carried out as originally planned, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, a range of training and capacity development activities were able to be undertaken, in various formats, both for external (i.e. farmers, DARD) and internal (project staff, CTU students) stakeholders.

This document reports on the gendered dimensions of these activities.

Table 1: The number of participants in the training course from 2019 to 2023

| No. | Date | Name of training | Location | Project | Government | Farmers | Men | Women |
|-----|-----------------|--|--|---------|------------|---------|-----|-------|
| 1 | 13/3/2019 | Salinity training | Can Tho | 8 | 30 | | 21 | 17 |
| 2 | 14/3/2019 | Salinity training | Hau Giang | 10 | 35 | | 34 | 11 |
| 3 | 15/3/2019 | Salinity training | Soc Trang | 9 | 40 | | 30 | 19 |
| 4 | 18/3/2019 | Salinity training | An Giang | 8 | 17 | | 21 | 4 |
| 5 | 5-11/06/2019 | Saline training course for EC monitoring groups | Can Tho, Hau Giang, An Giang and Soc Trang | 5 | 41 | | 34 | 12 |
| 6 | 24/9/2019 | Meeting with DARD | Soc Trang & Hau Giang | 2 | 10 | | 10 | 2 |
| 7 | 29 & 30/10/2019 | Meeting with DARD | Soc Trang & Hau Giang | 10 | 20 | 4 | 28 | 6 |
| 8 | Nov-2019 | Salinity training by FOCUS, IHE and Salt Doctors Company from The Netherlands | Can Tho, Soc Trang | 3 | 3 | 28 | 23 | 11 |
| 9 | 12-18/6/2020 | Salinity training by FOCUS and ODA-A8 project from CTU | Can Tho, | 10 | 50 | 42 | 71 | 31 |
| 10 | 21/10/2020 | Compost training | Lieu Tu (Soc Trang) | 4 | 4 | 21 | 24 | 5 |
| 11 | 19/11/2020 | Compost training | Long Phu (Soc Trang) | 4 | 2 | 24 | 19 | 11 |
| 12 | 18/10/2021 | Chameleon | Online | 10 | 12 | 30 | 18 | 34 |
| 13 | 22/10/2021 | Chameleon | Online | 12 | 5 | 16 | 11 | 22 |
| 14 | 7/2/2022 | Salinity training | Can Tho | 0 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 6 |
| 15 | 2022 | Compost training | Can Tho | | | | | |
| 16 | 2022 | Enumerator training | Can Tho | | | | | |
| 17 | Mar-2022 | The workshop "Potential for development of short-cycle dryland crops on rice field soils under conditions of water shortage in the dry season" | Long Phu, Soc Trang | 10 | | 15 | 17 | 8 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------|-------------------------------|---------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| 18 | 15/4/2022 | Salinity training | Thoai Son, An Giang | 0 | 16 | 0 | 6 | 10 |
| 19 | 20/5/2022 | Salinity training | Vi Thanh, Hau Giang | 0 | 21 | 1 | 5 | 17 |
| 20 | 2023 | The soil constraint trainings | Can Tho | 15 | | | 10 | 5 |
| 21 | 2023 | The soil constraint trainings | Hau Giang | | 8 | 10 | 11 | 7 |
| 22 | 2023 | The soil constraint trainings | An Giang | | 4 | 12 | 10 | 6 |
| 23 | 2023 | The soil constraint trainings | Soc Trang | | 10 | 8 | 9 | 9 |

2 Methodology

This report aligns with milestone 1.3 of the FOCUS project and reports on the gendered dimensions of training and scientific activities undertaken within the project.

Since 2019, despite disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the FOCUS project has implemented a range of training and technical capacity-building activities targeting climate-resilient agriculture. These included:

- Salinity measurement in Soil and Water (2019, 2020): Empowered farmers and technical officers to understand and monitor salinity intrusion – a major challenge in the Mekong Delta.
- Application of Organic Compost (2020): Promoted soil moisture retention techniques using organic inputs.
- Technical Training on Soil management and Drought-Salinity adaptation (2023): Engaged multiple stakeholders in practical resilience strategies.
- Workshop on Dry-Season crops (2022): Explored livelihood diversification through drought-tolerant crop development.

These activities were implemented across four provinces – Can Tho, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, and An Giang – with diverse participation from farmers, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) staff, university faculty and students, Women’s Union representatives, and media officers. Training formats combined on-site demonstrations and thematic workshops, enabling flexible, locally adapted learning approaches.

3 Findings

3.1 Gender within project engagement activities

3.1.1 Women's participation and engagement

Regarding, quantitative trends: Women's participation has gradually increased over time (Table 1):

- 2019–2020: Women made up 25–35% of total participants. For instance, in a 2019 training in Soc Trang, 19 out of 49 participants were women.

In 2019, the project implemented a series of training activities focusing on salinity issues across multiple provinces in the Mekong Delta. From March 13 to 18, 2019, salinity training sessions were held consecutively in Can Tho, Hau Giang, Soc Trang, and An Giang, providing foundational knowledge on the impacts and management of salinity intrusion for local farmers and technical officers. Notably, in the training on March 15, 2019, in Soc Trang, women accounted for 39% (19 out of 49 participants), reflecting a relatively high female participation rate in a context where technical agricultural trainings often see low female attendance.

Subsequently, from June 5 to 11, 2019, a specialized training course for EC (electrical conductivity) monitoring groups was organized across all four provinces, enhancing local capacity in salinity monitoring for sustainable agricultural management. Furthermore, the project emphasized institutional coordination through meetings with the Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) of Soc Trang and Hau Giang in September and October 2019, aiming to share results, adjust plans, and strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration. In November 2019, the project also partnered with IHE and Salt Doctors Company from the Netherlands to deliver an advanced salinity training in Can Tho and Soc Trang, bringing updated knowledge and practical solutions from international experiences.

Overall, these 2019 activities not only contributed to strengthening technical capacity in salinity management but also laid the groundwork for gender integration. Female participation rates ranged from 25% to 39%, setting the stage for enhancing women's roles in technical training and agricultural decision-making in subsequent years. This reflects the project's strategic orientation towards promoting gender equality alongside technical development, aiming for a more sustainable, inclusive, and equitable agricultural system.

- 2020-2022: In Long Phu workshop, 8 out of 25 respondents (32%) were women.

From 2020 to 2022, the project continued to expand its capacity development activities with increasing thematic diversity and geographical coverage. Between June 12–18, 2020, salinity training sessions were organized by the FOCUS project in collaboration with the ODA-A8 project from Can Tho University, held in Can Tho to strengthen local knowledge on salinity management.

Additionally, compost training was conducted in Lieu Tu (Soc Trang) on October 21, 2020, and in Long Phu (Soc Trang) on November 19, 2020, introducing practical techniques to improve soil fertility and agricultural sustainability.

In 2021, despite COVID-19 restrictions, the project adapted to online modalities by conducting Chameleon trainings on October 18 and 22, focusing on water management technologies and sensor applications, thus maintaining knowledge transfer amidst pandemic constraints. Entering 2022, training activities intensified further. On February 7, 2022, a salinity training session was held in Can Tho, followed by additional compost training and enumerator training within the year to build both technical and research capacities among local stakeholders.

Moreover, in March 2022, a significant workshop titled “Potential for development of short-cycle dryland crops on rice field soils under conditions of water shortage in the dry season” was held in Long Phu, Soc Trang, fostering interdisciplinary dialogues on crop diversification under climate stress. Subsequent salinity trainings were organized on April 15, 2022, in Thoai Son (An Giang) and May 20, 2022, in Vi Thanh (Hau Giang), expanding outreach to additional provinces.

Importantly, across the 2020 to 2022 training activities, women accounted for approximately 32% of total participants, indicating a sustained and meaningful female presence. While this proportion is comparable to earlier years, it underscores the continued commitment to gender inclusivity in project design and implementation. These training activities from 2020 to 2022 demonstrate the project’s strategic shift towards not only sustaining its core focus on salinity but also integrating complementary themes such as composting, crop diversification, and technological innovations. This inclusive approach, reflected in the consistent engagement of women, has strengthened resilience-building efforts through diversified and gender-sensitive capacity development interventions.

- 2023: The proportion rose significantly, ranging from 30% to 50% depending on the province. Women from various sectors – farmers, DARD officers, and Women’s Union members – were consistently represented.

In 2023, the project further advanced its capacity development initiatives by conducting a series of soil constraint training sessions across four provinces: Can Tho, Hau Giang, An Giang, and Soc Trang. These trainings aimed to address soil-related challenges that limit agricultural productivity, aligning with the project’s broader goal of promoting climate-resilient and sustainable farming practices.

In Can Tho, the training engaged a total of 15 participants, with 10 men and 5 women, translating to a female participation rate of 33%. In Hau Giang, participation was notably balanced across four training sessions, with female representation ranging from 30% to 50%. For instance, one session recorded 8 male and 10 female participants, marking a 55% female majority, while another session had 11 men and 7 women (39% female). Similarly, in An Giang, four sessions were conducted with varying gender compositions. One session recorded 4 male and 12 female participants (75% female), while others ranged between 37–50% female participation, demonstrating significant women's engagement.

In Soc Trang, the training sessions also showed consistent female inclusion, with participation data such as 10 men and 8 women (44% female), 9 men and 9 women (50% female), highlighting near parity in certain classes. Overall, the proportion of women attending the 2023 trainings ranged from 30% to 75%, with multiple sessions achieving gender parity or female-majority attendance.

These figures demonstrate a remarkable increase in women's participation compared to previous years, reflecting not only their growing interest and agency in technical agricultural topics but also the effectiveness of the project's gender mainstreaming strategies. Beyond numerical increases, qualitative feedback indicated that women were active learners and contributors, particularly valuing topics on soil treatment techniques for their direct applicability to household farming decisions and livelihood enhancement. This surge in female participation further consolidates the project's objective of fostering an inclusive and gender-responsive agricultural extension approach, ensuring that women are equally equipped with the knowledge and skills to drive sustainable farming innovations in the Mekong Delta.

Diverse roles beyond attendance: Women did not merely participate as passive learners; they held multifaceted roles that reflect a shift in soft power and leadership within the agricultural system:

Producers and beneficiaries of project models.

Technical officers at Plant Protection Stations and Agricultural Extension Units (e.g., Ms. Nguyen Thi Huyen Tran, Ms. Lam Thi Thu Huong).

Community connectors through the Women's Union, responsible for local communication and outreach.

Active evaluators, providing constructive feedback and engaging in dialogue to improve the models.

Feedback from the 2022–2023 sessions revealed that women increasingly expressed the desire to continue learning and disseminating knowledge:

- Many women valued soil treatment and water-saving techniques for their practicality and relevance.
- In the dry-season crop workshop, participants showed specific interest in maize and beetroot, citing high economic potential.
- 100% of female respondents in a 2022 survey agreed that project models were scalable, highlighting benefits such as increased income, water efficiency, and compatibility with local farming contexts.

These responses demonstrate women's strategic thinking and independent judgment in agricultural decision-making, reflecting a gendered lens on sustainability and livelihood suitability.

3.2 Gender within project capacity development activities

The participation and roles of women within project capacity development activities have demonstrated both quantitative growth and qualitative transformation over time. From 2019 to 2020, women comprised approximately 25–35% of total training participants, as exemplified by a 2019 training in Soc Trang where 19 out of 49 participants were women. This participation remained steady in 2022, with women accounting for 32% (8 out of 25) in the Long Phu workshop, before rising markedly to 30–50% across provinces in 2023. Beyond numerical representation, women engaged in diverse roles, not merely as passive recipients of knowledge but as producers and beneficiaries of project models, technical officers at Plant Protection Stations and Agricultural Extension Units (e.g., Ms. Nguyen Thi Huyen Tran and Ms. Lam Thi Thu Huong), and as critical community connectors through the Women's Union, facilitating local outreach and communication. Moreover, they emerged as active evaluators, providing constructive feedback to enhance project models.

Feedback from the 2022–2023 sessions underscored women's strategic thinking and agency; participants expressed strong interest in soil treatment and water-saving techniques for their practicality, while dry-season crop workshops revealed enthusiasm for maize and beetroot due to their perceived economic potential. Notably, 100% of female respondents in a 2022 survey agreed that project models were scalable, highlighting benefits such as income generation, water efficiency, and contextual compatibility with local farming systems. These findings illustrate that women are not only increasingly participating in capacity-building activities but also exercising independent judgment and strategic decision-making, thereby reflecting a gendered lens on

sustainability and livelihood suitability within the agricultural sector.

4 Discussion

4.1 Gender mainstreaming: progress and gaps

While female participation rates have improved, gender integration in the program design remains basic. Key issues include:

Lack of gender-specific needs assessments: What technical areas do women prioritize? What barriers hinder their participation?

Insufficient support for vulnerable women (e.g., female-headed households, ethnic minorities, the poor) who face greater challenges attending extended training.

Logistical constraints: Training time, location, and delivery methods may not align with the schedules of women balancing childcare and domestic responsibilities.

Limited female representation in leadership roles: Despite some highly qualified women trainers, their visibility remains limited.

Between 2019 and 2023, the project achieved notable progress in gender mainstreaming within its capacity development activities. Quantitative data illustrate a clear upward trend in female participation, increasing from 25–35% in 2019–2020 to 30–75% in 2023, with several training sessions achieving gender parity or even a female majority. This improvement reflects targeted efforts to adapt training content, scheduling, and outreach strategies to be more inclusive and responsive to women's needs.

Qualitatively, the roles of women within project activities have also evolved significantly. While women initially participated primarily as learners, they have progressively taken on more diverse and influential roles, including as evaluators providing constructive feedback, technical officers at Plant Protection Stations and Agricultural Extension Units, producers and direct beneficiaries of project models, and community connectors through the Women's Union networks. Their contributions have been instrumental in enhancing the relevance and scalability of project interventions, such as soil treatment and water-saving techniques, which women particularly valued for their practical benefits to household farming and livelihoods.

However, despite these encouraging achievements, several key gaps remain that limit the transformative potential of gender integration within the project. Firstly, there is a lack of systematic gender-specific needs assessments, resulting in limited understanding of the technical areas women prioritize and the barriers hindering their participation. Without such analysis, training design risks failing to address women's practical and strategic interests in agricultural development.

Secondly, insufficient targeted support is available for vulnerable groups of women, including female-headed households, ethnic minority women, and women from poorer backgrounds, who face additional constraints such as financial hardship, limited mobility, and restrictive sociocultural norms, making it difficult for them to attend extended trainings.

Thirdly, logistical constraints continue to pose challenges. Training schedules, locations, and delivery methods often do not align with women's daily responsibilities, including childcare, household management, and farm work, thus limiting their ability to fully engage despite their interest and willingness to participate.

Finally, while there are highly qualified female trainers and technical officers involved in the project, their visibility in leadership roles remains limited. Women are underrepresented as lead facilitators, trainers, or decision-makers within training activities, reducing opportunities to showcase female expertise and inspire broader shifts towards women's leadership within community agricultural systems.

Addressing these gaps is critical to moving beyond gender-sensitive approaches towards gender-transformative programming, where women are not only participants but also influential leaders shaping sustainable, equitable, and inclusive agricultural development pathways in the Mekong Delta.

5 Implications and further research

5.1 Gender within project engagement activities

To enhance gender sensitivity and inclusion in future training programs, the following are proposed:

To address the identified gaps and enhance gender-transformative impacts within project activities, the following recommendations are proposed:

Conduct systematic gender-specific needs assessments

Integrate gender analysis into all training design and planning phases to identify women's specific technical priorities, capacity needs, and participation barriers. This should include pre-training surveys or focus group discussions with diverse groups of women (e.g., farmers, female-headed households, ethnic minorities) to tailor content and delivery methods accordingly.

Develop targeted strategies to support vulnerable women

Design and implement targeted support measures for vulnerable groups, such as providing transportation allowances, childcare services during training, or flexible micro-training modules for women with mobility or time constraints. This approach will enhance equity in access and ensure that no group is left behind.

Adapt training logistics to women's schedules and responsibilities

Review and adjust training times, durations, and locations to better align with women's daily routines and caregiving responsibilities. Consider community-based training close to participants' homes, shorter sessions with cumulative modules, and alternative delivery methods (e.g., digital micro-learning for women with limited mobility).

Enhance Women's Leadership and visibility in project activities

Proactively promote women into visible leadership roles within trainings and project implementation. This includes recruiting and supporting female facilitators and trainers, featuring women's success stories in project communications, and creating mentorship opportunities to build

confidence and leadership capacity among female participants.

Foster partnerships with Women's Union for Co-Design and delivery

Deepen collaboration with the Women's Union and local women's groups to co-design training content, outreach, and delivery. Their insights ensure cultural relevance, build community trust, and strengthen pathways for women to share and scale knowledge within their networks.

Implementing these recommendations will advance the project from its current gender-sensitive orientation to a gender-transformative approach, empowering women as equal decision-makers and leaders in sustainable agricultural development in the Mekong Delta.

5.2 Gender within project capacity development activities

Provide targeted support for vulnerable women

Offer transport allowances, flexible training schedules, and on-site childcare support.

Design micro-training modules or digital learning formats to include women who cannot commit to full-day or multi-day sessions.

Adapt Training logistics to Women's realities

Adjust training duration, venue, and time to align with women's daily routines (childcare, household chores, farm work).

Favor village-based training or hybrid models that reduce travel time and household disruption.

Promote Female leadership and Visibility

Recruit and support women as facilitators, trainers, and technical leads in project activities.

Include women's stories in project communication materials and create mentorship programs to build women's confidence in leadership.

Co-Design with Local Women's networks

Strengthen partnerships with the Women's Union and grassroots women's groups to co-create content and outreach strategies.

Engage them in monitoring, evaluation, and scaling of successful models.

Advance Internal Gender capacity

Encourage research and reflection within the FOCUS team about gender dynamics in research roles and participation.

Offer gender-sensitivity training for staff and foster an inclusive work culture that supports equitable collaboration.

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6 Appendices

6.1 Subheading

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