



CAMBODIA ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT REPORT





Empowering Women to Recycle & Redistribute Soap to Save Lives | Economic Empowerment Report, Cambodia

Introduction

Eco-Soap Bank is a global non-profit organization employing disadvantaged women to save and recycle leftover soap waste from factories and redistribute it among at-risk communities. By harnessing the value of a previously wasted resource, the organization is working to create new good-wage employment and paths towards economic empowerment for disadvantaged local women, whilst also helping to mitigate one of the world's most damaging and overlooked humanitarian disasters – hygiene-related illnesses and deaths.

Today, Eco-Soap Bank operates four soap recycling hubs in Africa and Asia, employing 175 women. The recycling facility in Siem Reap, Cambodia is the largest hub in the network, generating steady employment for over 45 Cambodian (Khmer) women.

The absence of secure, living-wage employment constitutes a serious livelihood barrier for many Khmer women. Caught in the intersection of multiple hardships, women trying to establish themselves on the formal Cambodian labor market experience greater vulnerability due to prevailing social norms, structures, and an unequal allocation of resources. Overcoming these entrenched livelihood obstacles is essential for inclusive economic growth and one of the most important contemporary social interventions for women in Cambodia today.¹



In this report, we trace the financial and social impacts among Eco-Soap Bank's (Khmer) soap recyclers by tracking their ability to make tangible progress towards economic empowerment. Using a longitudinal survey design combined with in-depth life story interviews, we capture strong evidence of personal progress as well as significant overall increases in well-being.

During their first year with the organization, incomes increased by an average of 40%. At the same time, the women displayed a strong ability to maintain and improve their personal agency, manifested through both an increased ability to spend to meet their own needs, and a stronger ability to influence key household decisions. There were also important signs showing how access to resources and agency were being translated into an improved general well-being, with women reporting a significant decrease in finance-related stress levels and an improved life situation.

The findings strongly suggest that Eco-Soap Bank's recycling hub in Siem Reap represents an effective model to help local women make tangible progress towards economic empowerment.

¹ Asian Development Bank (2015), Promoting women's economic empowerment in Cambodia, Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong City, Philippines

To put the findings into context, the report begins with a brief historical overview of the gender equality situation in Cambodia. This is then followed by a short introduction of Eco-Soap Bank's employment model, and a methodology section containing the key concepts and data-collection methods utilized in the program evaluation process.

The impact section starts with a quantitative data summary comparing the soap recyclers' situation at the time of first being employed (baseline) to their situation after 12 months of employment with Eco-Soap Bank (endline). To give a more nuanced understanding of the statistical findings, we conclude with some short personal comments and two in-depth interviews.

The Context: Gender Equality in Cambodia

Cambodian society has taken important strides towards a more equal society during the last couple of decades, yet significant gender inequalities remain prevalent characteristics of key social domains. Harmful social norms are restricting what women can and should be; education levels remain low (almost 50% of women aged 25 or over have not completed primary education); the distribution of unpaid and domestic responsibilities is heavily unequally distributed (with 90% of the burden falling on women); and public decision-making represents an overwhelmingly male-dominated domain.²

Traditional social norms pertaining to the "virtuous Khmer woman" have, to some extent, been identified as a foundation for these inequalities. Gender norms – i.e., the social rules and expectations dictating what it means to be a good woman or man – are often internalized through socialization during an early age and then reproduced through social institutions and interactions.³ Many of these present-day female gender norms can be traced back to the Chbab Srey – a several-centuries-old code of conduct outlining the expected behavior of women and girls. According to this revered ancient text, the ideal Khmer woman should walk and talk softly, maintain peace within the household, and respect and obey her husband.⁴ While the requirement to memorize the entire Chbab Srey was removed from school curriculums in 2007, the ideas underpinning the text continue to be disseminated by families, institutions, textbooks, and common proverbs. Still today, over 80% of women feel that the social norms propagated in the Chbab Srey are relevant for Cambodia and for them personally.⁵

Despite some attempts to remove the Chbab Srey from formal discourse, the traditional gender beliefs that underpin it are intertwined in policies and ingrained in contemporary public opinion. Notable illustrations include: a National Childcare Policy that reinforces the idea that it is the women that should be responsible for taking care of the children and the household; public order laws that infringe on how women can and should dress; and the fact that 71% of emerging women entrepreneurs face negative judgements from their communities (while as many as 51% receive it from within their own families).⁶

Gendered norms in contemporary Cambodia are also expressed through more tangible structural inequalities. Unpaid care and household work is still a predominantly female undertaking, with men doing an average of 18 minutes per day of unpaid household work compared to 188 minutes for women. This distribution constitutes one of the most uneven in the world (only Mali has a bigger gender gap), and the demands associated with the unequal household burden have a detrimental effect on women's health, education, income, and ability to secure and maintain full-time employment.⁷

² Asian Development Bank (2015), Promoting women's economic empowerment in Cambodia, Asian Development Bank, Mandaluyong City, Philippines; Gavalyugova, Dimitria & Cunningham, Wendy (2020): Gender Analysis of the Cambodian Labor Market, World Bank, available at: <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/34201>; United Nations Cambodia (2022): Gender Equality Deep-Dive: Common Country Analysis, available at: <https://cambodia.un.org/en/174010-gender-equality-deep-dive-cambodia#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20deep,plans%2C%20policies%2C%20and%20programmes>.

³ Cislighi, Beniamino & Heise Lori (2020): Gender norms and social norms: Differences, similarities and why they matter in prevention science, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 407– 422.

⁴ Anderson, Emily & Grace, Kelly (2018): From Schoolgirls to "Virtuous" Khmer Women: Interrogating Chbab Srey and Gender in Cambodian Education Policy

⁵ United Nations Cambodia (2022): Gender Equality Deep-Dive: Common Country Analysis, available at: <https://cambodia.un.org/en/174010-gender-equality-deep-dive-cambodia#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20deep,plans%2C%20policies%2C%20and%20programmes>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gavalyugova, Dimitria & Cunningham, Wendy (2020): Gender Analysis of the Cambodian Labor Market, World Bank, available at: <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/34201>; United Nations Cambodia (2022): Gender Equality Deep-Dive: Common Country Analysis, available at: <https://cambodia.un.org/en/174010-gender-equality-deep-dive-cambodia#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20deep,plans%2C%20policies%2C%20and%20programmes>.

Khmer women's ability to earn a stable livelihood is further undermined by discriminatory job policies and the vulnerable nature of the work available to them. Even when women can secure and maintain waged labor positions, the circumstances are often highly precarious. Today, between 94% and 96% of the female labor force do not have employers that contribute to their social security and are not entitled to any paid leave or sick leave benefits.⁸ When formal employment is available, fixed-duration contracts are routinely used as a tool to undermine access to benefits and erode any sense of long-term job security. Pregnancy-based discrimination, forced overtime, and the unwillingness to pay for sick leave are all frequently reported issues that further exacerbate the volatile conditions for women trying to support themselves and their families via the formal Cambodian labor market.⁹

So, while some progress has been made lately, the conflation of harmful gender norms and structural limitations on labor market participation still constitutes a serious, persistent barrier for many Khmer women.

Within this context, the ability to create safe and stable work environments with full social benefits – health insurance, pensions, paid leave etc. – where women can work together towards shared objectives, can serve as a promising foundation for growth and personal development. That, at least, is the notion guiding Eco-Soap Bank's operations in Cambodia.

The Eco-Soap Bank Model

To help dismantle ingrained livelihood barriers, Eco-Soap Bank employs and trains disadvantaged women to recycle and redistribute soap to schools, refugee camps and NGO partners working directly with vulnerable populations. All soap recyclers are local women with no previous reliable source of income. The immediate aim is to alleviate financial burdens, help them support their families, and encourage development and growth as individuals. The long-term objective is to create tangible progress towards economic empowerment for all women employed at Eco-Soap Bank.



To achieve these objectives, Eco-Soap Bank offers an employment package consisting of a steady living-wage income, social benefits (pensions, health insurance, etc.), vocational training, and opportunities to participate in workshops and education programs.

During their employment, soap recyclers play an active role in shaping their work and education environment, and progress is followed-up through surveys and interviews. Within these varying forums, soap recyclers can discuss topics they identify as relevant, as well as provide information pertaining to predetermined qualitative and quantitative indicators. The follow-up framework also includes feedback mechanisms to improve internal learning and development, explore potential issues, and help overcome any unexpected obstacles.

Impacts are evaluated by tracking tangible progress towards economic empowerment.

⁸ United Nations Cambodia (2022): Gender Equality Deep-Dive: Common Country Analysis, , available at: <https://cambodia.un.org/en/174010-gender-equality-deep-dive-cambodia#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20deep.plans%2C%20policies%2C%20and%20programmes>.

⁹ Gavalyugova, Dimitria & Cunningham, Wendy (2020): Gender Analysis of the Cambodian Labor Market, World Bank, available at: <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/34201>; United Nations Cambodia (2022): Gender Equality Deep-Dive: Common Country Analysis, , available at: <https://cambodia.un.org/en/174010-gender-equality-deep-dive-cambodia#:~:text=The%20objective%20of%20this%20deep.plans%2C%20policies%2C%20and%20programmes>

Evaluation Methodology

Economic empowerment is a multifaceted concept. Today, empowerment is generally equated to gaining the capability to make strategic life choices.¹⁰ Within this wider understanding, economic empowerment relates more specifically to individual-level processes and pertains to the financial resources needed to define and make progress towards personal goals.¹¹

It is, however, overly one-dimensional to presume that resources automatically engender an ability to define and reach personal goals. Women in Cambodia, and across many of the least developed countries, face a myriad of deeply rooted structural constraints and barriers that can hinder progress. Which makes it essential to consider both immediate increases in resources and the capability to translate such gains into tangible achievements.¹²

To account for the multifaceted nature of empowerment, Eco-Soap Bank utilizes a conceptualization that encompasses three distinct outcome dimensions: access to resources, personal agency, and achievements.¹³ Each empowerment indicator is operationalized through a series of measurable variables and conclusions are drawn by analyzing holistic change across all domains.

Table 1. Breakdown of Economic Empowerment Dimensions and a Selection of Key Performance Indicators

Access to Resources	Agency	Achievements (Wellbeing)
• % change in income • Savings • Ability to afford essential expenses (nutrition, bills, school fees, etc.)	• Control over income • Purchasing power • Capability to influence household decisions	• Change in stress levels • Change in confidence • Change in life situation

The data for this report was collected through pre-post surveys with newly employed soap recyclers as well as in-depth life story interviews. Baseline surveys were completed in December 2022 and follow-ups (endlines) conducted in January 2024. All newly recruited soap recyclers in Siem Reap – employed for less than 1 month at the time of the baseline – participated in the surveys, so no further sampling was required. A total of 15 women completed the pre-post surveys. In addition, 5 women were invited to tell their stories through an in-depth life story interview. Two of these interviews are featured here. Participation in both surveys and interviews was completely voluntary.

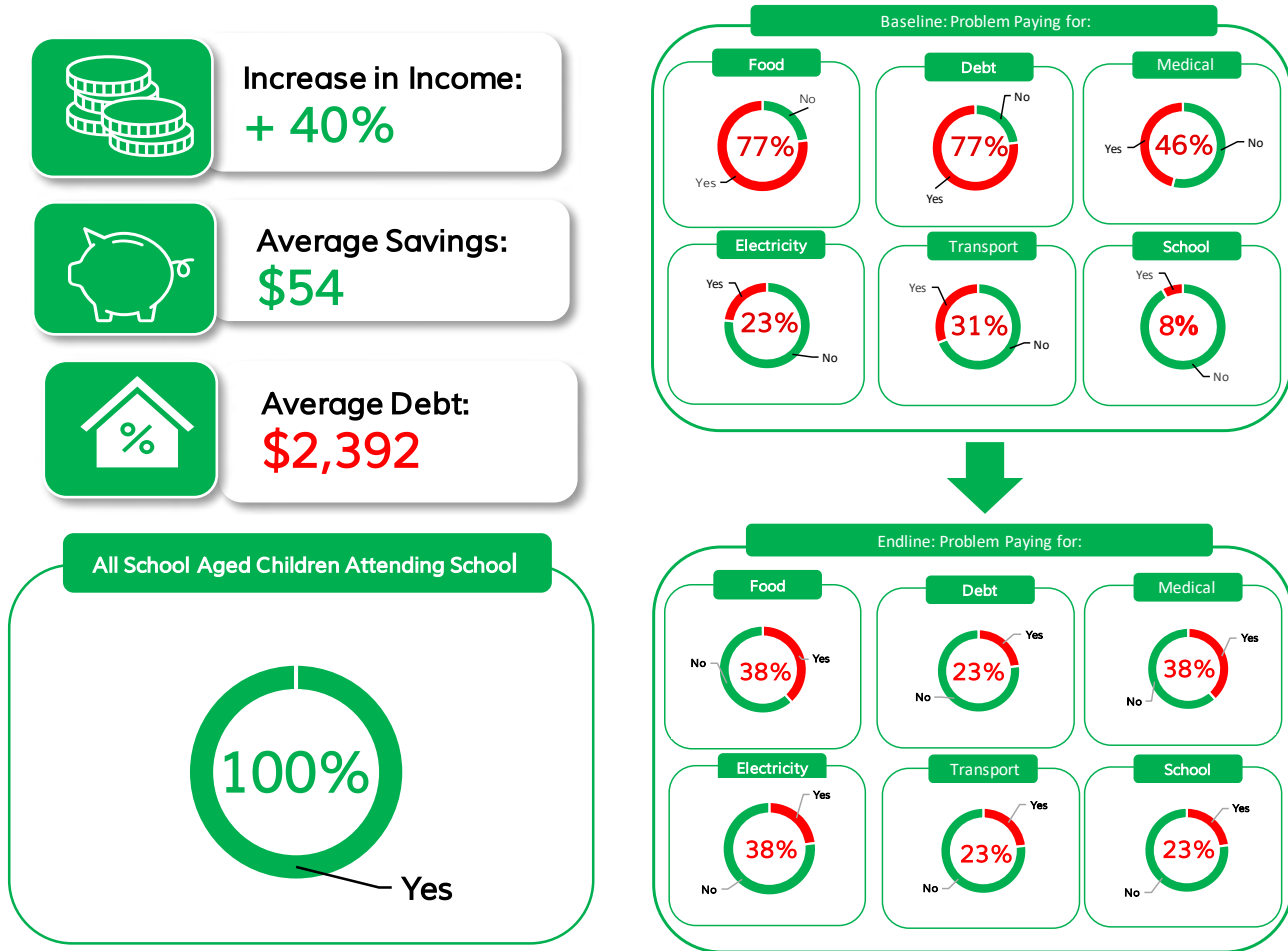
Impacts

Access to Resources and Ability to Pay

Compared to the year before joining Eco-Soap Bank, the overall income among soap recyclers had increased by an average of 40% at the end of their first year with the organization. At the time of the endline survey, 100% of soap recyclers had access to a savings account, compared to 0% the year before. Saving amounts were relatively minor, averaging out on a bit over \$50. Yet, considering that just 8% of the women had any savings at all before they joined the organization, this slight overall increase can be seen as a step in the right direction. Debt levels were still quite high, but the ability to keep up with debt repayments had improved significantly. A similarly encouraging tendency could be seen in the ability to afford good food. While more women had difficulties paying for school fees at the endline survey, 100% of women reported that all their school aged children were now attending school.

¹⁰ Kabeer, Naila (1999): Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, Development and Change, Vol. 30, pp. 435-464.
¹¹ See Golla Anne Marie, Anju Malhotra, Priya Nanda and Rekha Mehra (2018): Understanding & Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: Definition, Framework & Indicators, International Center for Research on Women
¹² Kabeer, Naila (1999): Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, Development and Change, Vol. 30, pp. 435-464.
¹³ For methodological foundations see; Kabeer, Naila (1999): Resource, Agency, and Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, Development and Change, Vol. 30, pp. 435-464

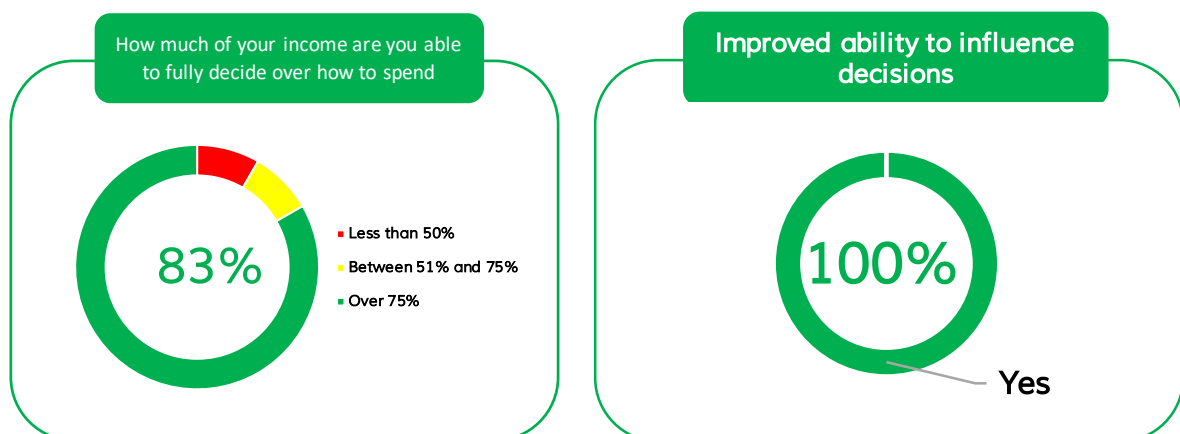
Resources

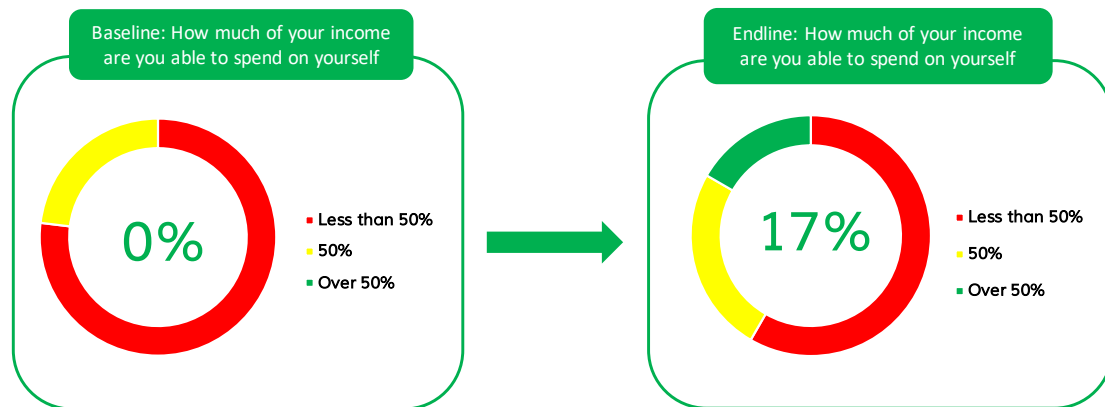


Agency

There were also some very encouraging indications of how the women were able to take control and manage their increased access to monetary resources. 83% of women said they fully decided over how to spend at least 75% of their income. They were also more able to spend their income on themselves. 100% said their ability to influence decisions at home had improved during their first year with Eco-Soap Bank.

Agency



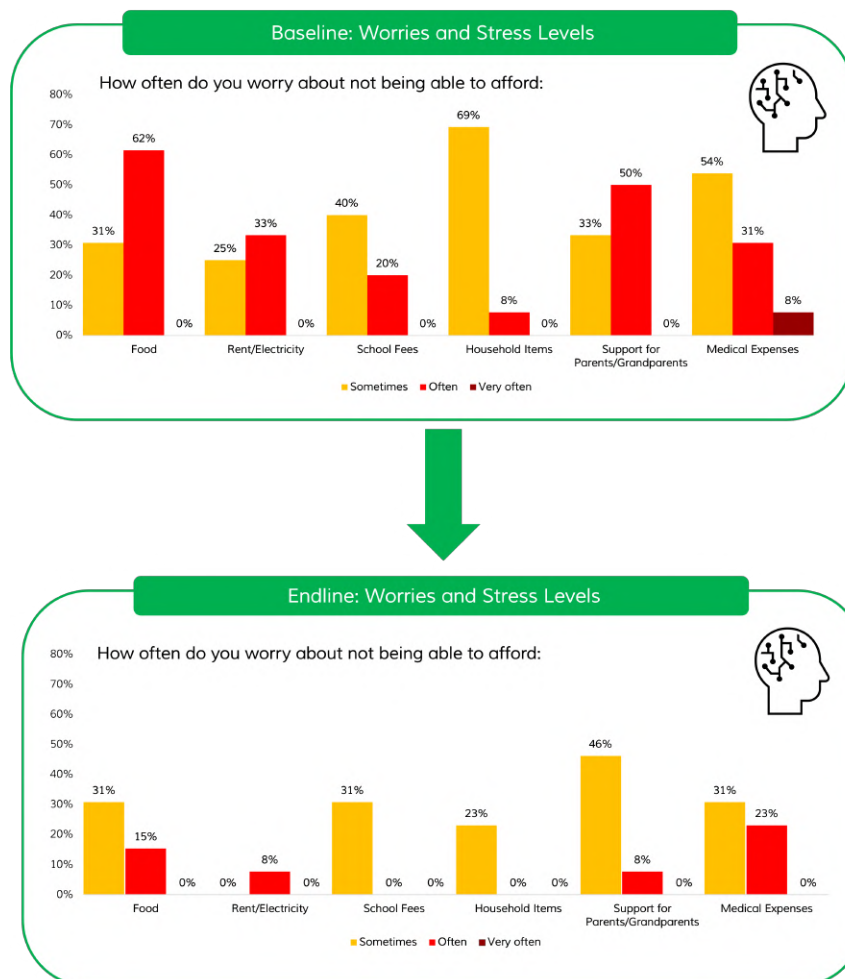


Achievements (Well-being)

Change in overall well-being was measured by looking at the difference in finance-related stress-levels and life situation. Finance-related stress levels were estimated by asking the women how frequently they worried about not being able to pay for essential monthly expenses. To assess changes in life-situation, the women were asked to rate their agreement with a series of statements pertaining to different aspects of their life. Questions ranged from material conditions to general happiness and feelings about the future.

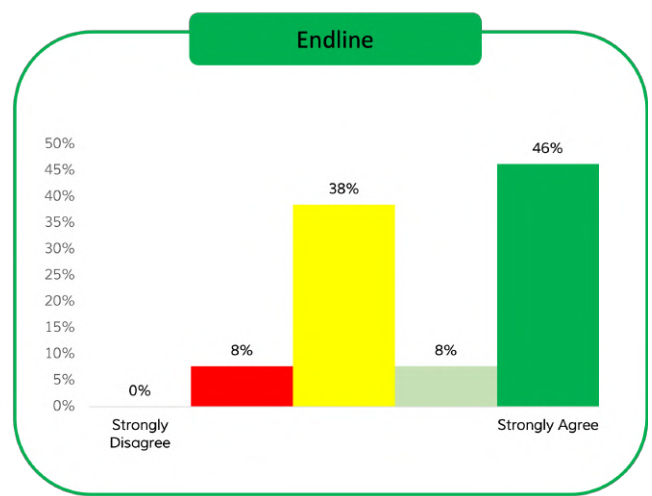
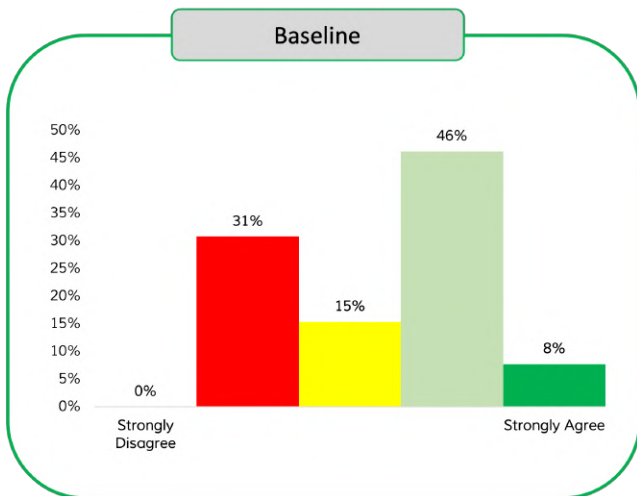
The result showed a distinct decrease in stress-levels, with the biggest change found when looking at worries over food purchases, rent, and household items. The experienced life situations, on the other hand, had improved across all dimensions, with the biggest change reported in relation to “having the important things I want in my life” and “being able to do the things I want in life”.

Stress-Levels

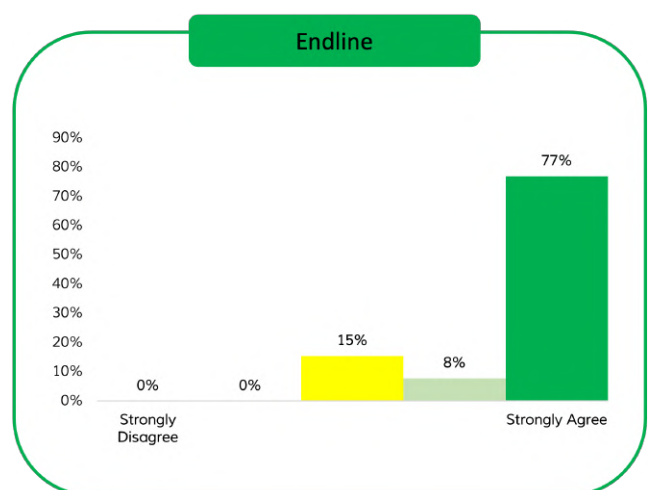
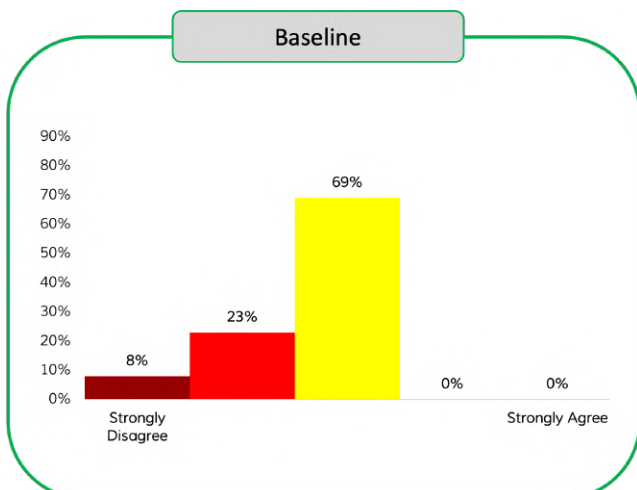
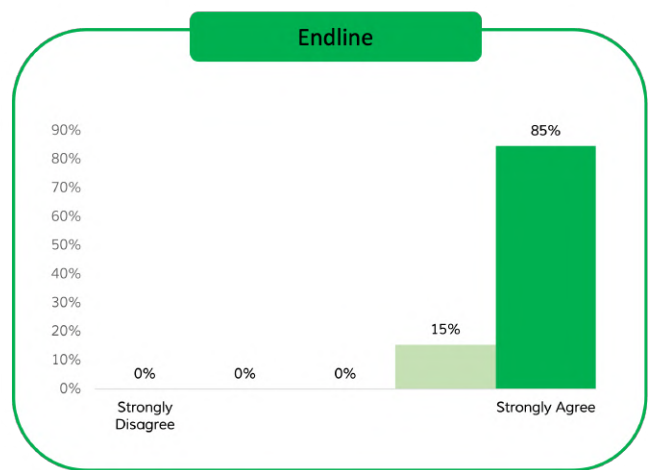
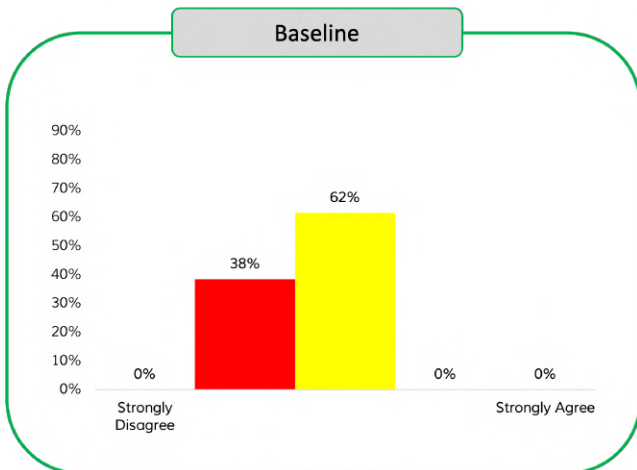


Life Situation

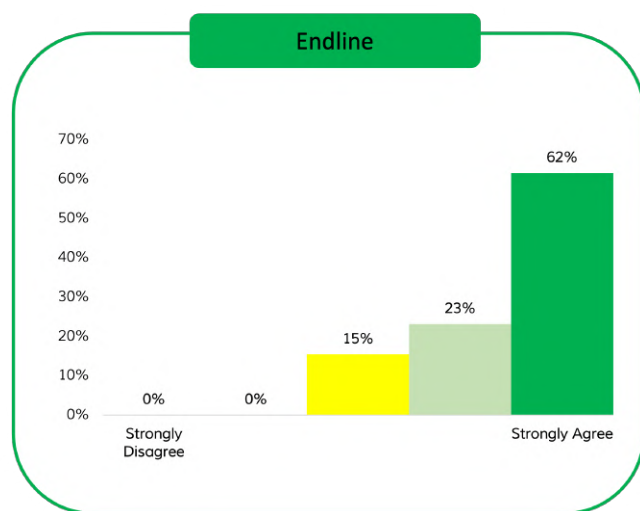
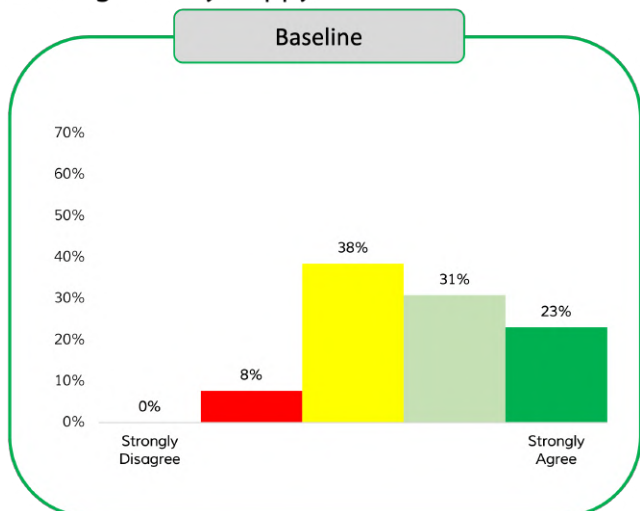
I am satisfied with my life:



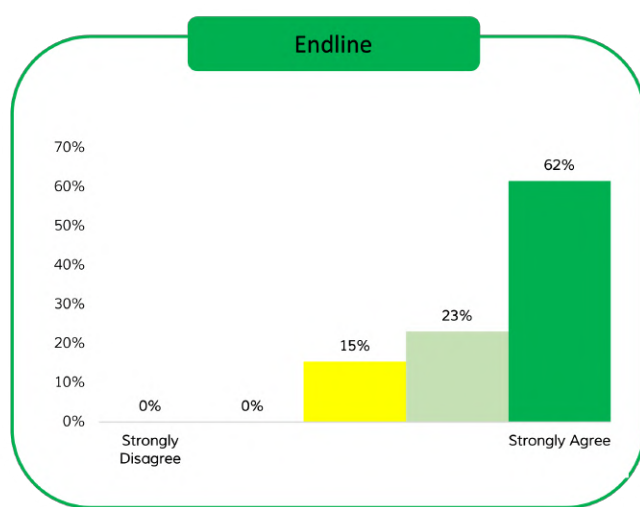
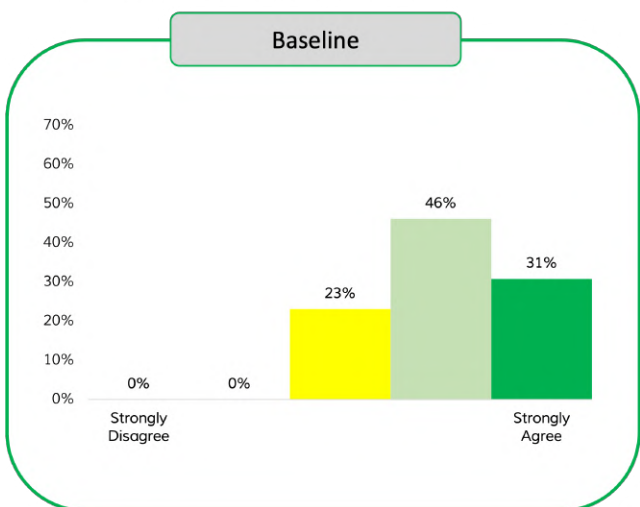
I have the important things I want in my life:



I feel generally happy:



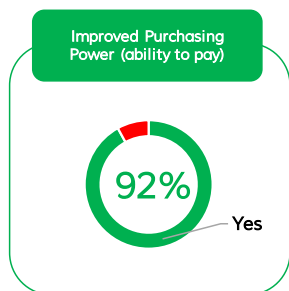
I feel positive about my future

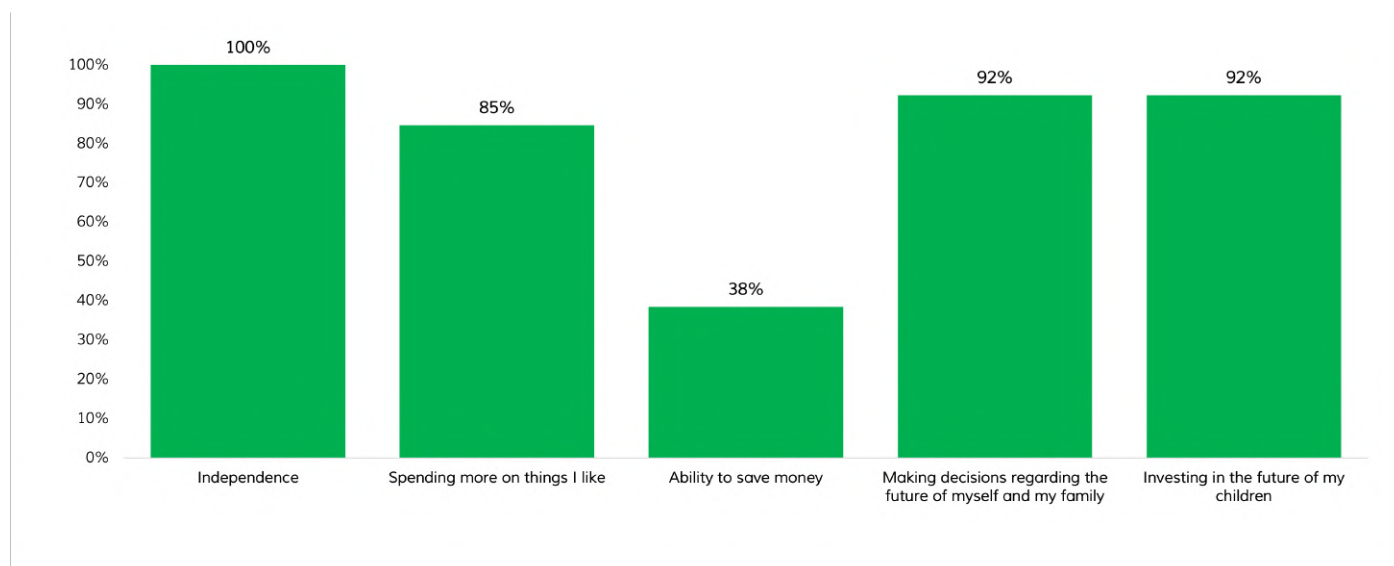


Achievements (Personal Progress)

Lastly, we wanted to know if the first year with Eco-Soap Bank has had an impact on personal capabilities and the ability to progress towards individual future goals and dreams. The results were, again, very positive, with a vast majority reporting improvements within key capabilities and high hopes for the future.

Progress and Capabilities





Viewed holistically, the quantitative data above offers a strong indication of the tangible impacts the women have felt during the first year of employment. This notion was further enhanced when asking about the changes experienced during their first year with the organization. Below, we have included a selection of short interview excerpts. We then conclude with two full in-depth interviews conducted in January 2024.

- My time with Eco-Soap Bank has helped make a positive difference in my life in many ways. My confidence has improved, and I have gained the ability to solve problems more efficiently. I can also afford to purchase the things I want now. – Pan Sophy, 22, Siem Reap, Cambodia

- I used to be someone who preferred solitude and had limited communications with the people around me. Since joining Eco-Soap Bank, I have experienced significant personal growth. I now engage with my teammates and have gained valuable [vocational] experience in soapmaking. These days, I am able to both support and spend a lot more time with my family. With my regular income, I no longer worry about financial stability. – Khoun Keo, 23, Siem Reap Cambodia

- Since joining the organization [Eco-Soap Bank] I have been able to afford enough food, purchase items I desire (including a phone), and support my children's education. Additionally, I have successfully managed to pay off loans and cover medical expenses. The health insurance [provided to everyone at the organization] has proved to be incredibly helpful. – Tum Sall, 27, Siem Reap Cambodia

- Working at Eco-Soap Bank brings me immense joy. I am now able to provide support to my family and dedicate more time to caring for my children. I have also had the opportunity to go on enjoyable trips with my teammates, exploring beautiful places I had never seen before [Eco-Soap Bank provides free staff retreats for all soap recyclers]. I also feel fortunate to have access to health insurance, bonuses, seniority pay, and delicious Friday Lunches together with the team. It is truly a fulfilling experience. – Korn Mon, 33, Siem Reap, Cambodia

- Working with Eco-Soap Bank has not only allowed me to contribute to my family's well-being (and most importantly my children's schooling), but it has also given me valuable learning experiences. I have learned about soap making and formulation of materials. The support and motivation from the team has been very uplifting. They always share ideas and provide guidance when needed – it is a very positive working environment. – Lay Chanmai, 22, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Life Stories

For the full-length interviews we were privileged to get the opportunity to sit down with Hing Sreyheak and Pov Neang for an in-depth discussion of some of the key events that shaped their lives. The conversation focuses on their background, personal challenges, and some of the tangible improvements experienced during their first year with Eco-Soap Bank.

Pov Neang, 33, Siem Reap, Cambodia

A seemingly endless stream of tears is steadily making its way down her cheeks, slowly but surely dripping down to form small puddles on the table where we just sat down for an interview. The sleeves and collar of her shirt are already soaked by her attempts to subdue the flow of tears. Only a single question has been asked so far: Where did you grow up and how was it there?

It is easy to see that Pov Neang is a proud and strong woman, but re-living the past is not always easy. The memories that are now flooding back have undeniably taken an emotional toll. Telling her story is difficult, but she is determined to share her experiences to help inspire others.

- I grew up in a small rural farming community in Kampong Thom province. Our house was a rudimentary small shed with wood floors, tree branches for walls, and palm leaves as a roof. We had no electricity or toilet. The house was located about 10 km from the nearest market town, and we had no form of transportation. Not even a bicycle. Most people in the community were small-scale farmers growing rice, cashew nuts, and mango.



After describing her quaint rural home village, Neang suddenly stops. She tries to gather herself for a moment. Reminiscing about her childhood home has evoked memories of her parents, and old feelings and emotions are now coming back. The memory of her father is painful, and she does not wish to go too much into details.

- I had no father. My father left me and my mother when I was just 1 year old. At that time, my mother was 8 months pregnant, and we were left all alone. My mother worked as a farmer planting rice, but it was very difficult for her to get enough money to support the family.

It still hurts her to think back to that time. She dries her tears and continues.

- My family struggled a lot during that time, and everybody had to do everything they could to help.

For Neang, this meant she had to grow up very quickly.

- I stopped school in grade 1. My mother and older sister had to go to work to find money to support the family. I had to quit school so I could help take care of my younger siblings when they were working.

Abandoning school at such an early age was difficult. She was very happy in school and wanted to continue. But she understood that the family needed money for food.

- There was just no one else around that could take care of my younger siblings. I knew I had to do it to help the family.

By taking on this responsibility at home she was able to help some of her brothers and sisters finish school. She is very proud that her sacrifice and hard work could help them get an education.

- Even if I could not go myself, it made me happy to see that I could help my siblings go to school.

Neang stayed home and took care of the home and her sibling until she turned 13. After that, it was time for her to get a job of her own.

- When I was 13 years old, I started work. Everyone in our community were farmers, so I worked in the fields. I mostly worked for my neighbors, helping them to clear out weeds so the plants could grow properly. I remember working for 8 hours a day, making 3000 Riel for a full day's work (about \$0.75). I did not earn a lot, but I could help buy food for my family. When I was not working in the fields, I helped my mother by selling cakes and vegetables in the village.

Neang worked the fields around her village until she turned 16. She was then approached by a broker who convinced her she could make more money by working in close-by Thailand.

- I hoped to make some more money by working in Thailand. But I had no passport, so I could not go through the border checkpoint. Instead, we had to sneak past the police to get in and out of Thailand. I was so scared and kept crying when we were forced to run and hide from the police.

Working conditions in Thailand were far from ideal. They had no papers and thus no rights. The police were always chasing them, and they had to move from field to field to avoid detection. There was no accommodation, so she slept outside, unprotected, hiding in different parts of the forest at night.

- We could not move around freely. It felt like a prison. I was really scared. We were always running and hiding from the police, and the broker kept moving us around to work in different fields.

The pay was a bit higher than in Cambodia, but a lot of what she earned had to be used to pay off the police.

- First, we had to pay the police in Kampong Thom province [to get past the border]. But then we might get caught by other police from somewhere else, and then we had to pay them too. After that, the money I had left was just enough to cover the most basic stuff, like food.

Neang lived this precarious life, going back and forward to Thailand, for over 4 years.

Then, her sister-in-law invited her to come and help take care of their home in Siem Reap. Her sister-in-law had just had a baby and needed some extra support while recovering. Since Neang had also managed to start her own family during the tumultuous Thailand years – she was now married and had a young son – this momentary hiatus suited her well. She stayed home and helped take care of the children for a year before going back to work.

Without education and experience, finding decent employment was, however, difficult, and she had to take on two jobs to earn enough support for her family. Days were extremely long, and she remembers being very tired and stressed.

- Every day I woke up at 4am to cook rice for my family. I then started work at 5am. I was doing the dishes at a breakfast restaurant. When my morning shift at the restaurant finished, I went to work the afternoon/evening shift at a massage spa. The shifts at the massage place were long and I was usually not back home until around 12 or 1am at night. When I came home, I just took a quick shower and went to sleep. I needed to be up at 4am again the next day. Every day was like this.

There was barely any time for sleep, but she says she had no choice. She was the only one in the family that made any money, and the family had a motorcycle loan and other expenses that needed to be paid.

- When I started work, I just had a bicycle. But when I tried to go home at night I kept being threatened by criminals. So, I had to take a loan to buy a motorcycle. Just to feel a bit safer at night.

When the COVID19 pandemic hit, the restaurant and massage sector stagnated, and she lost both jobs.

- The situation was really difficult for me then. I could not afford to pay for school for my son. We did not even have enough to eat. I always had to cut out a little bit of food here and a little bit there.

It was during this nadir that Neang was first introduced to Eco-Soap Bank. A soap recycler from Eco-Soap Bank, living in the same village, recognized her situation and reached out to help.

- She [the soap recycler] could see that I was struggling and understood that I needed help. There was an opening as a cleaner and she recommended me.

Neang started as a cleaner at Eco-Soap Bank, but as soon as she had some time over, she went to help the soap recyclers. The team quickly noticed her ambitions and told the management, who transferred her into a soap recycling position. She remembers being very happy, but also a bit scared.

- I remember being scared in the beginning. I did not want to let the team down and worried I would not be able to complete my tasks properly. But the team was so nice to me. They encouraged me and told me that it was okay not to know everything from the start. They told me there was no rush and that I did not need to worry. They said: we will teach you and you will learn. Then I felt much better. I am so proud that I can do everything here now.



Neang has only been working as a soap recycler for a year but has already started to notice some positive changes in her life.

- Working as a soap recycler has helped me a lot. With my salary and bonus, I can now pay for school, food, and clothes for my son. I can pay all my bills.

She pauses for a bit, then laughs.

- I also really enjoy the tradition of Friday Lunch.

Every Friday the whole team gathers to cook and eat lunch together. The camaraderie and team spirit she shares with the rest of the women at Eco-Soap Bank has been a very important aspect for her.



- Before I started here, I felt very lonely. I had no one to talk to. Now, I feel such warmth from the whole team here. They always support and motivate me. They encourage me to share and talk about my feelings. They give me advice and help me a lot.

This informal support structure has brought a new sense of security to her life. She knows that she is not alone, and that there are people there for her when she needs it.

- We always support each other. I am not scared anymore. I feel safe right now and I know that I can afford to pay for the things me and my son need.

While she still finds it difficult to speculate too much about the future, she feels like she is on the right path.

- If I can continue to work with Eco-Soap Bank, I know I can overcome my problems. I am confident I can pay off my loan, afford my bills, and build a good future for my family.

Hing Sreyheak, 27, Siem Reap Cambodia

A redly tinted sand road zigzags its way through a small community and stops at a group of beige concrete houses in the outskirts of Siem Reap, Cambodia. While located just a couple of kilometers outside of the bustling city center, the surrounding area is more reminiscent of rural stillness than urban frenzy.

Hing Sreyheak and her sister, Hing Sreykhouch, meet us at the end of the red sand road and take us down a narrow passage leading to a group of wooden houses. We sit down in the soothing shadow of a large mango tree.

The seating area overlooks a small lake largely covered in greenery and wildflowers. Just next to us, children are laughing and playing in a large sand pile. Ducks and chicken freely roam the grounds. A couple of dogs growl suspiciously in the background, while a tiny black puppy excitedly runs around our feet and then cools himself from the mid-day heat by jumping into a bowl of water left in the outside washing area.



Sreyheak looks composed. Life is stable now. It is, however, safe to say that it has been far from the case for most of her life.

She takes a deep breath. Then starts at the very beginning. Somewhat emotional, but with a steady hand, she guides us through the winding paths of her life.

- I grew up in a traditional wooden house in the rural parts of Siem Reap province. My father was a scrap collector. He collected bottles and things and sold it.

- My mother left me when I was 8 months old. She moved to Thailand and started a new family. Growing up without a mother was difficult, and she struggles to hold back the tears when she thinks back to that time.

- All I had from my mother was an old picture. That was the only thing I knew about her, how she used to look like. The other children in school bullied me for it. They kept asking: Where is your mother? Why don't you have a mother?

- It was really upsetting and hurt me a lot. I felt lost and just wanted someone to call "mother". So, I started to call my neighbor Mom instead.

Sreyheak's father always did his best to take care of her and her siblings. He was a good man working hard from morning until evening to take care of his family. She had a close relationship with her father and remembers him fondly. Even if money was scarce, he encouraged her to go to school. Sreyheak really enjoyed school.

- School was easy for me. The teachers were nice, and I really liked learning new things.

But her time in school would not last very long.

When Sreyheak was in 2nd grade, her father suddenly and unexpectedly passed away.

His death was a major trauma. While she was still a young child, she remembers it all clearly.

He had not been sick; he just went to sleep one night and never woke up.

For a girl who had grown up without a mother, the loss was almost too much to handle.

- I had already lost my mother, and now I did not have a father either. I could not accept losing my father too. I did not want to let him go.

- I still remember sleeping next to his body until they came and took him away.

After her father's passing, Sreyheak could no longer find the strength to attend school. She had also lost the support and encouragement she previously got from her father.

- I was sent to live with one of my older brothers and his family. They were not very nice to me. School was far away. No one would take me, and we did not have a bicycle. So, I stopped going to school.

After her father's death Sreyheak's older siblings began looking for their mother in Thailand. No one knew where she was living or even if she was still alive. But, after a while, they found her.

- When I was 13 years old, I went to see my mother in Thailand for the first time. It was very strange in the beginning. I was happy to see and hold my mother, but her face no longer looked the same as it did in my old picture. I had to ask my sister: Is this really our mother?

- But I got used to it in the end.

She continued to visit her mother during the coming years but, remained with her brother's family in Siem Reap. While she was still just a child, they showed little kindness and demanded she would support herself.

So, when she was 14 years old, she started working.

- My job was to mix concrete and carry bricks. It was very hard and heavy work. But I had no choice, I needed money. I worked in construction for about 3 years. Then I got married and moved to live with my husband's family.

The marriage did not last very long. Sreyheak was still very young when she got married and pregnant. Her husband did not offer much support and spent most of his time away from her. The little money they had, her husband wasted and never gave anything back. After a while, the situation became untenable.

- I was 16 years old and 8 months pregnant when I divorced my husband.

Life as a divorced and pregnant teenager was not easy. She remembers being scared and worried that she would not be able to feed her young child. Fortunately, she could stay with her sister during the last month of her pregnancy.

But she did not stay still for long.

Just two months after giving birth she moved to her mother in Thailand and started working on a sugar cane farm.

- It was a bit scary since I did not have a passport. But the work itself was fine, I had become used to hard work by then.

The salary was never really enough, and she struggled to buy baby formula and other items needed to take care of her newborn daughter.

- It was seasonal work. Sometimes we had money, sometimes we had not.

To try to gain a more stable footing in life, she eventually moved back to Siem Reap. After returning, she worked a variety of jobs in construction, a beauty shop, local restaurants, and as a cleaner. Despite multiple jobs, she continued to struggle to pay for essential things like books and school for her daughter. Life was, however, relatively stable for a while.

Then, about two years ago now, another traumatic incident would throw everything on its head again.

Late one night, while sleeping alone in her room, Sreyheak was abruptly awakened by a terrifying sound. Suddenly, an unknown man appeared from the darkness and attacked her. Fearing for her life, she fought back with all her force and screamed out as loud as she could.

- I kept hitting and screaming, just hoping someone would hear.

Her resistance worked, and the man abandoned his attack and ran away.

The incident, which she believes was an attempted murder, did, however, leave very deep emotional scars. In the aftermath of the attack, she lost her voice and suffered from post-traumatic stress symptoms. She became increasingly reclusive and did not want to talk or see anyone. It took a long time for her to work through the trauma and reach a place where she could start thinking about returning to work.

Sreyheak was finally able to join Eco-Soap Bank in December 2022. She remembers how scared she was in the beginning.

- When I started at Eco-Soap Bank, I was still suffering the repercussions of my attack. I was afraid to talk to people and ask questions. I was very silent and avoided people. My confidence was very low.

But she also remembers how kind and welcoming the women at Eco-Soap Bank were. She felt the team supported her from the start and she quickly learnt how to use the different soap recycling machines.

After a while she could feel her confidence growing. She started to ask questions and join in conversations with the other women. All of a sudden, she started to make new friends.

- Working at Eco-Soap Bank completely changed my life in a positive way. Before I was always alone. Now I have a lot of friends. I can joke, smile, and be happy again. It has really helped me to get over all the trauma I experienced.

- I am not scared anymore and I worry much less now. I have bought a roof for my house, and I know I have a steady income so I can pay all my bills. My daughter can go to school [which is something she could not afford earlier], and I can buy the things she needs for now. I even have some savings today!

Sreyheak's sister, Sreykhouch adds:

- My sister has had a really difficult life. After our father died, she had to move around to different families that did not look after her. Her brother's family was not nice to her, her mother's new family



was not nice to her, and her husband was not nice to her. She had to work so hard to fend for herself from a very early age.

- Before she started at Eco-Soap Bank, she was very lonely and had no friends. She made very little money and could not afford to buy the basic things she and daughter needed. She did not have any savings and could not make any plans for the future. She worried a lot and was very tired. She was not happy.

- Now [since joining Eco-Soap Bank] I have seen a great change in my sister's life. She is happier than before, worries less, she can afford to buy food and other things she likes for herself and her daughter. She has transformed from a shy, silent, reclusive person into a person that is much more open. She smiles and jokes, and when she has something to say, she is no longer afraid to say it.

She continues:

- The team at Eco-Soap Bank has become like a second family for my sister. They always motivate and support her. I believe she is going to continue to get better and better.

Today, Sreyheak is no longer scared for the future.

- My dream is to own my own small restaurant. I want to have my own house, and I want to see my daughter graduate from school.

She is positive and believes she is on a good path now.

- I have skills and a steady income now. I believe I can continue to work and save money to reach my dreams.



Conclusions

A single year represents a relatively short time span, and it is Eco-Soap Bank's strongly held belief that true change comes from stability and sustainability. The soap recycling operation in Cambodia is therefore not a short-term program. It is designed with longevity in mind. The aim is that all women employed at Eco-Soap Bank should be able to feel safe not only for the immediate future, but for as ever long as they feel a need. Allowing them to create a stable life, raise their children in a secure and nurturing environment, and progress towards future goals and achievements. That, we believe, is how to build a stronger foundation for this, and future generations of women in the least developed countries.

Considering this, the changes captured during this one-year evaluation are highly encouraging. The results show important progress within both measurable and more qualitative empowerment dimensions. Access to financial resources has increased, personal agency has improved, and there are promising signs of positive change in overall well-being.

The findings strongly suggest that Eco-Soap Bank's soap recycling hub in Siem Reap represents an effective model to help local women make tangible progress towards economic empowerment.

Eco-Soap Bank humbly thanks all the dedicated partners that made this possible, but the work is far from completed. There are still red numbers that need to be turned green and life dimensions in need of further improvement. But that is exactly why we are continuing to build for the long run. Together,

we can expand this proven platform and create more enabling, long-lasting environments where women can feel safe and secure as they strive to build the lives they desire and deserve.