

A THOUSAND STITCHES

Patch by patch, a group of women are earning a better life for themselves and their family. Giselle Whiteaker travels to Binh Thuan Province to hear their stories. Photo by Quinn Ryan Mattingly

MAKING A QUILT IS A DETAILED PROCESS requiring patience, dedication and a whole lot of time, assets that women in poor rural regions of Vietnam possess in abundance. Vietnam Quilts, an NGO, has been able to harness these attributes into a sustainable income for these women, but it hasn't all been smooth sailing.

It took time to train the initial group of 35 women to produce quilts that people wanted to buy. The quilts were initially sold from Thanh Truong-Kervyn's house, the founder of the NGO. Friends who could forgive crooked lines and imperfect edges were the target market. This continued for three years, but as the women's skills grew, so did the sales. Eventually, the decision was made to bite the bullet and invest in a shop.

The quilters work in groups and are managed by a group leader. The quilting is done at the group leader's house. Despite the heat, the women sit on the floor with the quilts spread over their legs. Sometimes several women will work on one blanket. They chatter and laugh as they stitch, and collaborate to solve problems while children drop in to the house on their way home from school. Part of the charter is to provide employment locally so that the women can stay close to their families and children can attend school regularly.

◦ Binding Tales

Nguyen Thi Dao, 48, is a member of that first group. Before this she was looking after her children at home and doing occasional tailoring work. As a rice farmer, her husband's salary was seasonal and it was difficult to make ends meet. Dao was part of a women's credit group run by Mekong Plus when she heard about the quilting work. She immediately asked to join and started work the next day. She hasn't looked back.

"At the beginning I didn't understand where it would go or what my job would be, but I wanted to make money, so I decided to try," explained Dao. "I received a lot of support, so I kept trying even though it wasn't easy. Day by day, as I learnt how to do the work, it became easier and I started to enjoy it." Now she is the group leader of a productive team of 26 women, who between them produce around 100 quilts every month.

The women are now quilting in the middle room of Dao's house. The front of the house is a construction zone as she is adding an extension to give more room to the project. She believes it's worth the investment.

"If I didn't have this job," she says, "my children would not have been able to go on to university. They would have stayed in the village and looked for work."

Dao loves a challenge and knows the designs inside out, so she's the first choice for the more difficult patterns. "My favourite quilts are the new designs and custom orders. Sometimes I only get a picture of the design and I have to figure out the pattern. It can be stressful, but I love seeing the finished product."

Similarly, 33-year-old Le Thi Be Tha has been with the organisation for seven years. She and her husband moved to Ho Chi Minh City, but realised their income was not going to be enough when Tha became pregnant. They moved back to Duc Linh to be closer to their family and lower their expenses. Now they have an eight-year-old son and a seven-year-old daughter.

When they first moved back they rented a small house, but with Tha's work effectively doubling the family income they have been able to buy their own place and slowly furnished it. Now Tha is saving for a second motorbike.

"My whole life has changed," she says. "With this money I can take care of my children and my husband. He is very happy that I earn so much for the family."

She knows all the tricks of the trade now, and working alone can complete a king-sized quilt in one of the more difficult designs in 12 days. Tha claims the most difficult part of the quilt-making is stitching the quilt backing and top to the batting in the middle. The fabric slips and it needs to be positioned perfectly. "It also gets really hot sitting under the quilt," she laughs.

This year Vietnam Quilts celebrates a decade of quilt-making and now 340 women across Vietnam and Cambodia are in full-time employment as quilters, including most of the original 35.

For more info on Vietnam Quilts, visit www.vietnam-quilts.org