

Timorese migrant workers in the Australian Seasonal Worker Program

By Ann Wigglesworth, Research consultant

Co-researcher: Abel Boavida dos Santos,
National University of Timor-Leste

Presentation outline

- The Seasonal Workers Program
- Why people migrate
- The research process
- Profile of workers and work roles
- Knowledge of, and satisfaction with conditions
- Social impacts and economic benefits
- Use of learnt skills and activities back home
- Cultural change

The Seasonal Workers Program

- The SWP is an Australian government initiative, to fill low-skill seasonal vacancies in Australia, led by the Department of Employment (DoE) and supported by Department of Home Affairs, Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).
- SWP is supported by the Labour Mobility Assistance Program (LMAP), managed by Cardno.
- SWP has recruited workers from Pacific Island countries since 2009 and Timor-Leste since 2012, making 10 sending countries
- SWP provides seasonal labour for horticultural in all States, and hospitality/hotel work in the north of Australia (northern WA, NT, northern Queensland)

Why migrate?

- Migration is driven by expected improvements in the life of a migrant's family which might include higher wages, employment, health and education
- Worker migration generally results in higher GDP growth in countries of destination.
- Remittances sent by migrants can have positive effects not only for their families, but also for communities and their country in general (ESCAP 2015).
- Migrant workers typically work in low skilled work, work that nationals do not aspire to do.

Experiences of migration in Timor-Leste

- In Timor-Leste, internal migration for education and to seek work has resulted in a massive increase in the population of the capital, Dili.
- Due to lack of jobs in Dili the Timor-Leste government sought to enhance work opportunities through two labour migration programs:
 - The South Korea Temporary Workers Program starting 2009 with three to five year contracts (see AAC 2016)
 - The Australian Seasonal Workers Program from 2012 with six month contracts.

Research outline

- This research in Timor-Leste was commissioned by the LMAP.
- A small team of data collectors was recruited and trained, with Abel Boavida dos Santos from National University of Timor-Leste as field supervisor and trainer.
- A questionnaire provided by Cardno was translated into Tetun and adapted for Timor-Leste.
- There were two phases of research, the Re-integration study November 2016 and the follow up Tracer study April 2017, interviewing the same workers

Timorese SWP workers per year

Year	Male	Female	Hospitality	Horticulture	Total
2012	7	5	12	0	12
2013	25	10	21	14	35
2014	100	31	46	85	131
2015	115	46	41	120	161
2016	227	71	34	264	298
2017	556	225	42	739	781
Total	1,030	388	196	1,222	1,418
%	73%	27%	14%	86%	100%

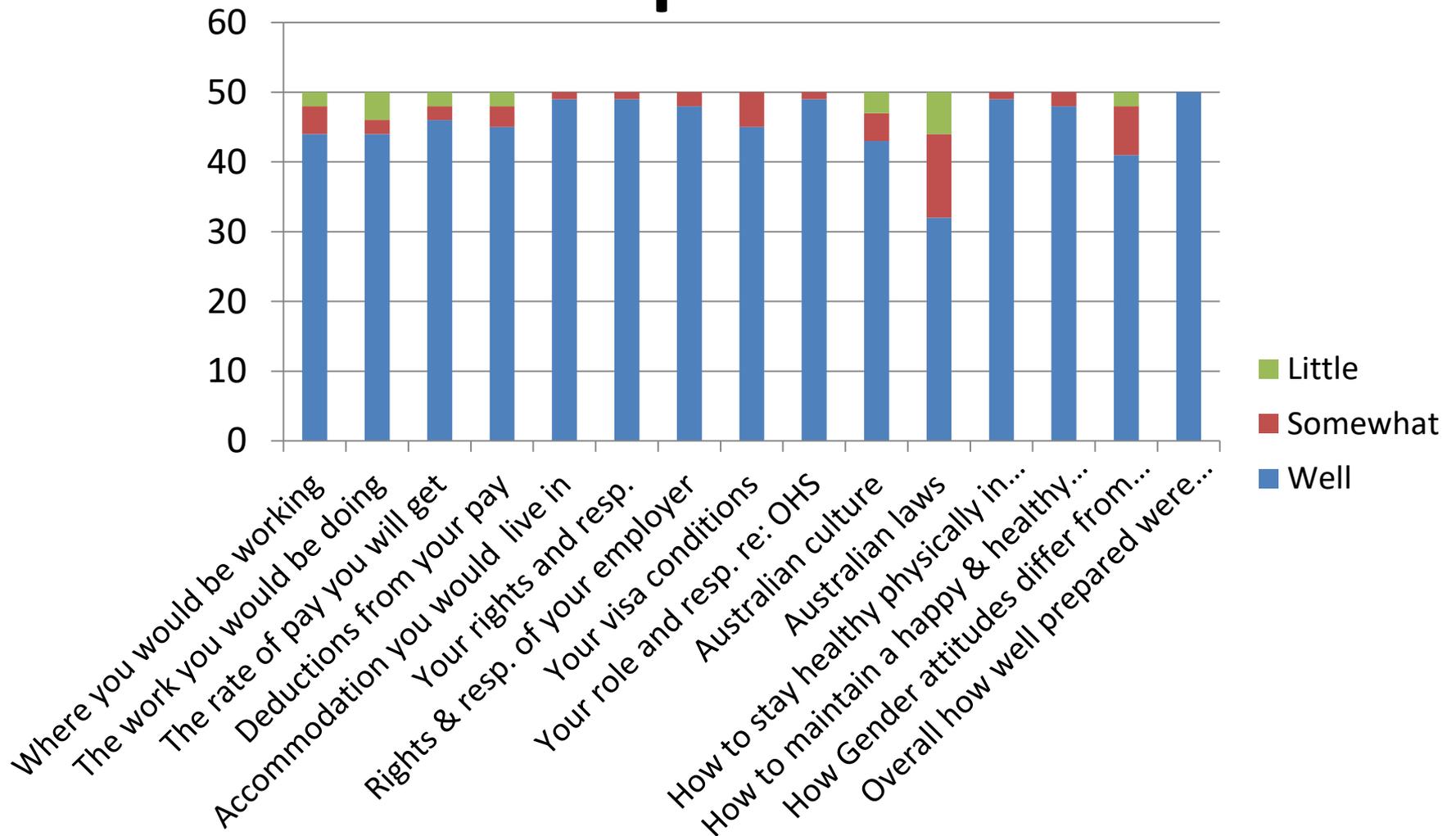
Profile of interviewed workers

- Of the 50 workers interviewed, 10 were women and 40 were men, with an average age of 30, most between 26 and 35 years old.
- Forty-nine were Catholic and one Protestant
- Most were married, 48% registered church marriage, 10% by customary marriage, 36% had never married.
- 70% of workers interviewed have just secondary school education, and 22%, mostly in the older age ranges, have a university degree.

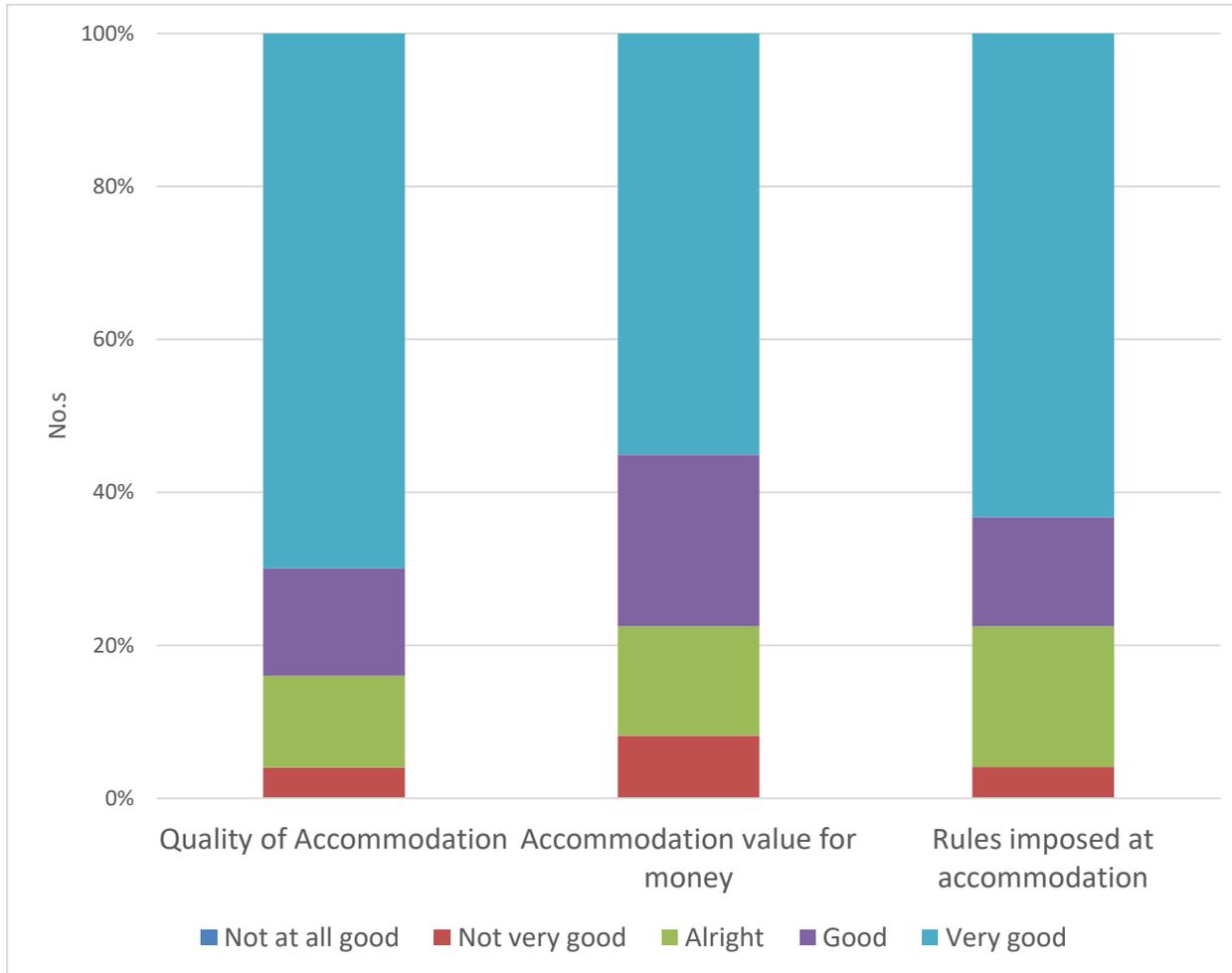
What work were you mostly doing?

Sector	What work were you mostly doing?	Number of workers
Horticulture	Picking fruit or vegetables	16
	Clearing old crops, planting new crops & weeding	8
	Packing fruit or vegetables	5
	Tractor/truck driver	4
	Irrigation	1
	Pruning	1
	Total workers	35
Hospitality	Housekeeping	5
	Hotel work	5
	Kitchen hand	2
	Restaurant	2
	Gardening	1
	Total workers	15

Understanding of SWP work and conditions prior to arrival



Accommodation

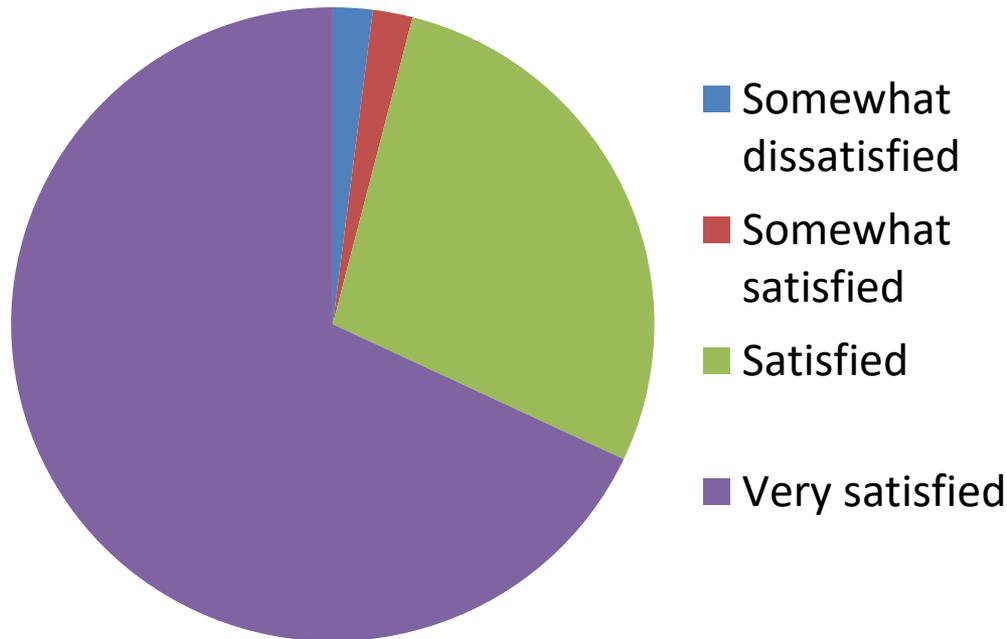


Four out of five rated their accommodation “good” or “very good”.

But when too many people share a bathroom or kitchen facilities, queues cause being late for work

Worker satisfaction

SWP satisfaction



- 96% of workers said they were satisfied with SWP, most very.
- Many said they earned good money and it was regularly paid
- Learning English language was valued by many workers.
- Most workers believed that they had gained useful skills which they could put to use when they return home

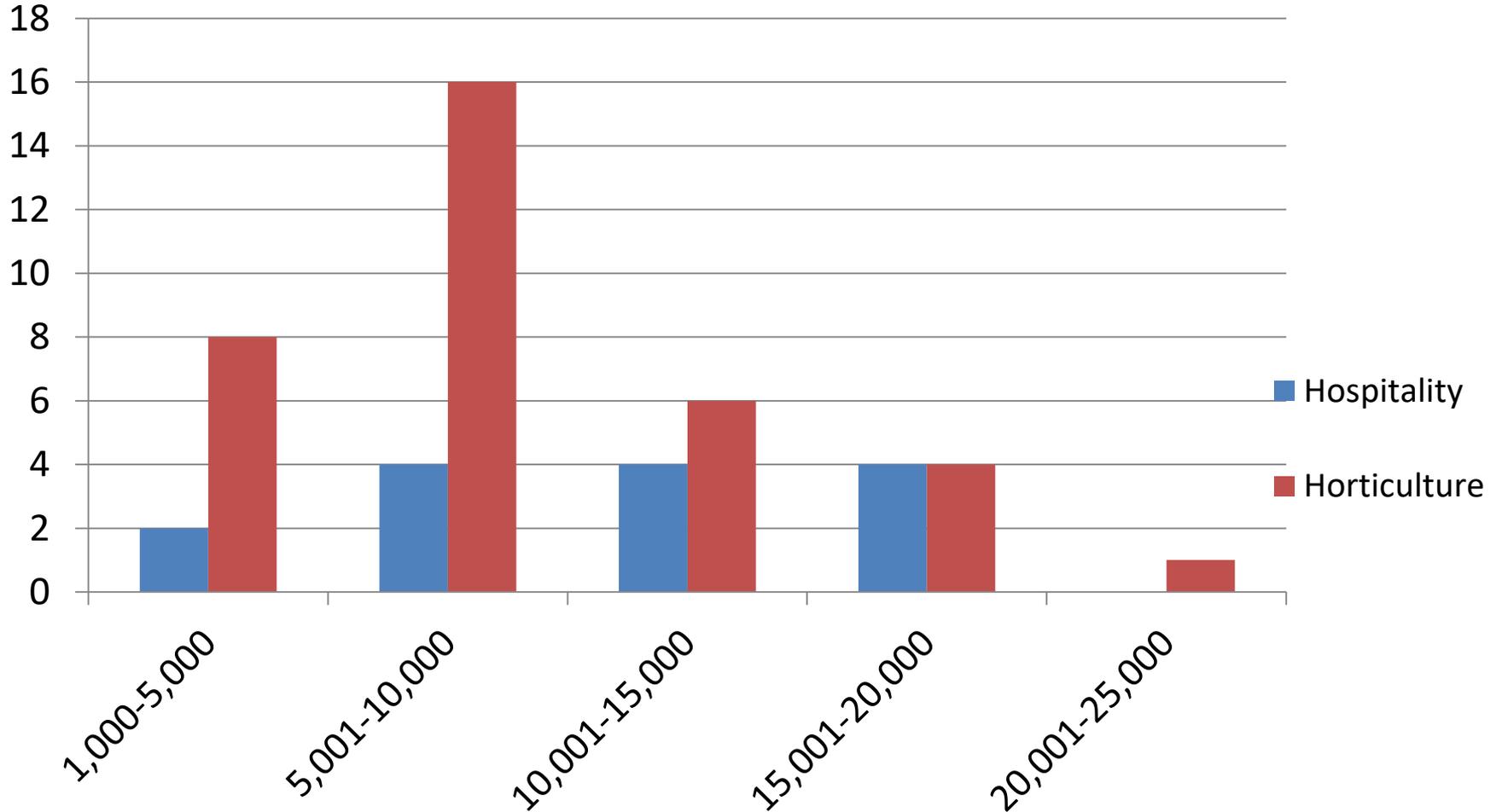
Positive impacts described by workers

- Workers get a good salary which finances their family needs.
- They can save to build a house or start a new business to benefit the family in future.
- They pay school fees for their children and send siblings to university.
- They are able to pay for the health needs of their family, including their children, their parents, and disabled family members.
- Children are proud because their parent is working in Australia.
- They can buy a motorbike to get the children to school or help the family business

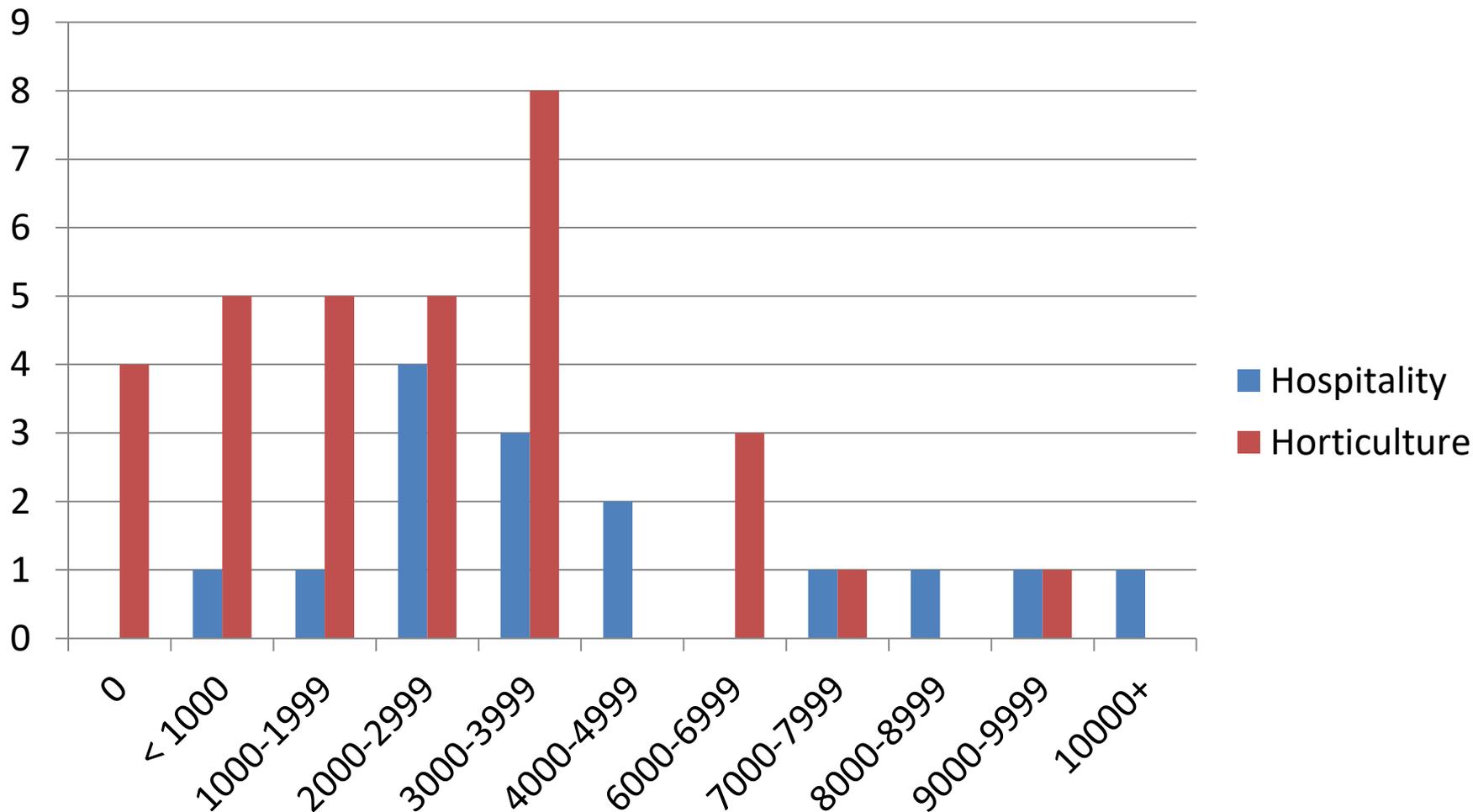
Negative impacts described by workers

- When the family know a worker is getting a lot of money, the family force them to spend a lot of money on customary ceremonies.
- Children lack the attention and affection from their father or mother who is absent from the family.
- The family, particularly the spouse and sometimes parents, are left with more work.
- Some husbands worry that their wife doesn't have his protection when he is far away.
- Sometimes mistrust occurs because they are far away from each other, particularly by husbands or boyfriends of women workers.

Level of savings (AUD) by no. workers



Estimated remittances sent home in AUD



Expenditure of workers since return home – (top five items)

Expenditure item	No workers (of 39)	Av. worker expenditure (USD)
Everyday expenses such as food and transport	37	1,743
House improvements (building or renovation)	26	3,382
School fees or other educational expenses	23	1,020
Household goods	22	579
Customary obligations	18	963
Transport (motorbike, car, truck)	16	1,841
Savings in bank	13	2,699
Starting a business	9	3,094
Electronic goods (NB: mobile phones were bought in Australia to take home by 35 workers and computers by 21)	7	424

Skills acquired in Australia that will be useful at home?

Horticulture workers:

- Fruit picking and packing skills 66%
- Planting 46%
- Pruning 37%
- Operating a tractor 34%

Hospitality workers:

- Cleaning, making beds 86%
- Cleaning and kitchen work 80%

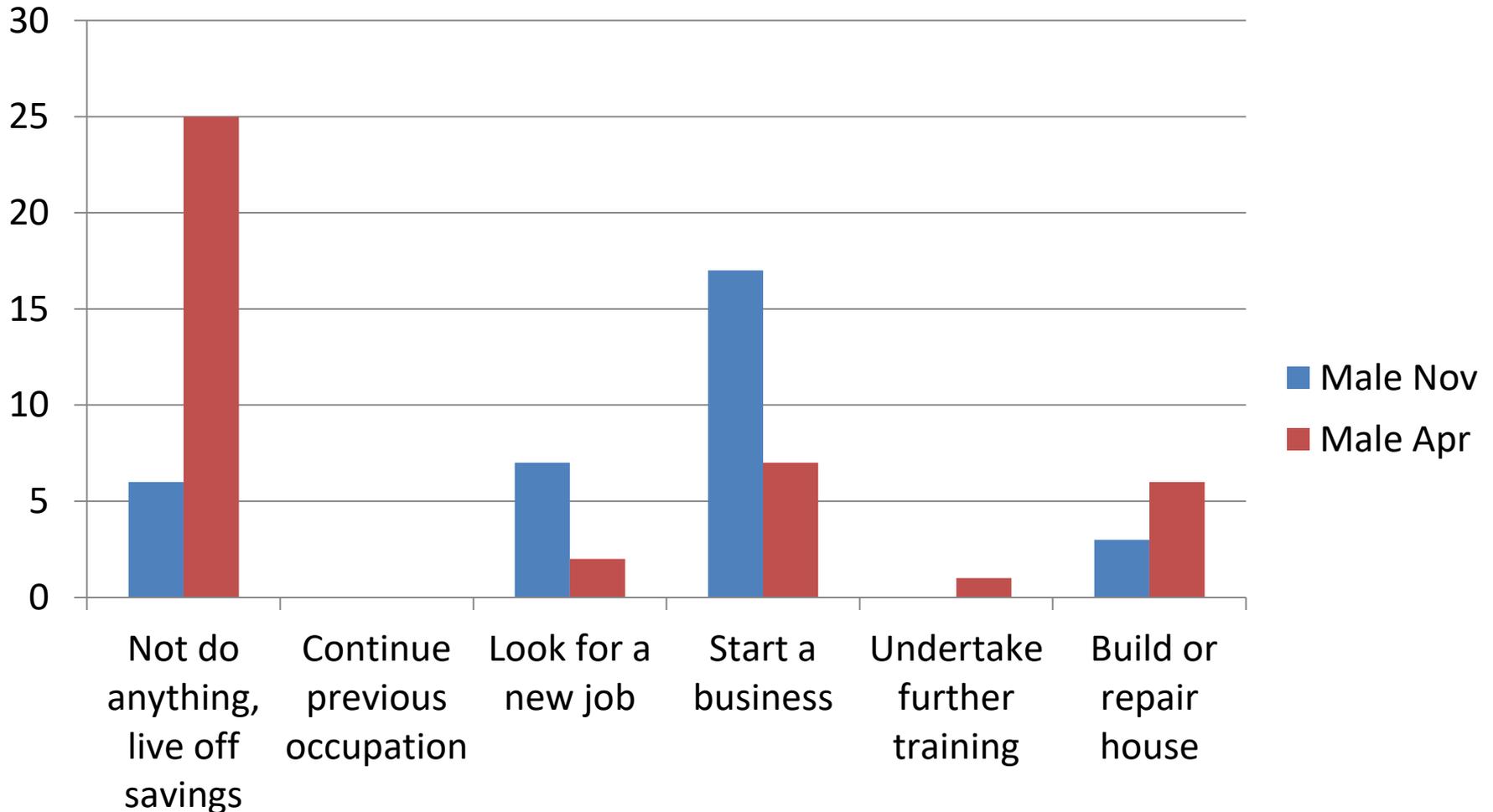
All workers:

- English skills 98%
- Working in groups/teams 90%
- Occupational Health and Safety 82%
- Using household appliances 84%
- Punctuality 78%

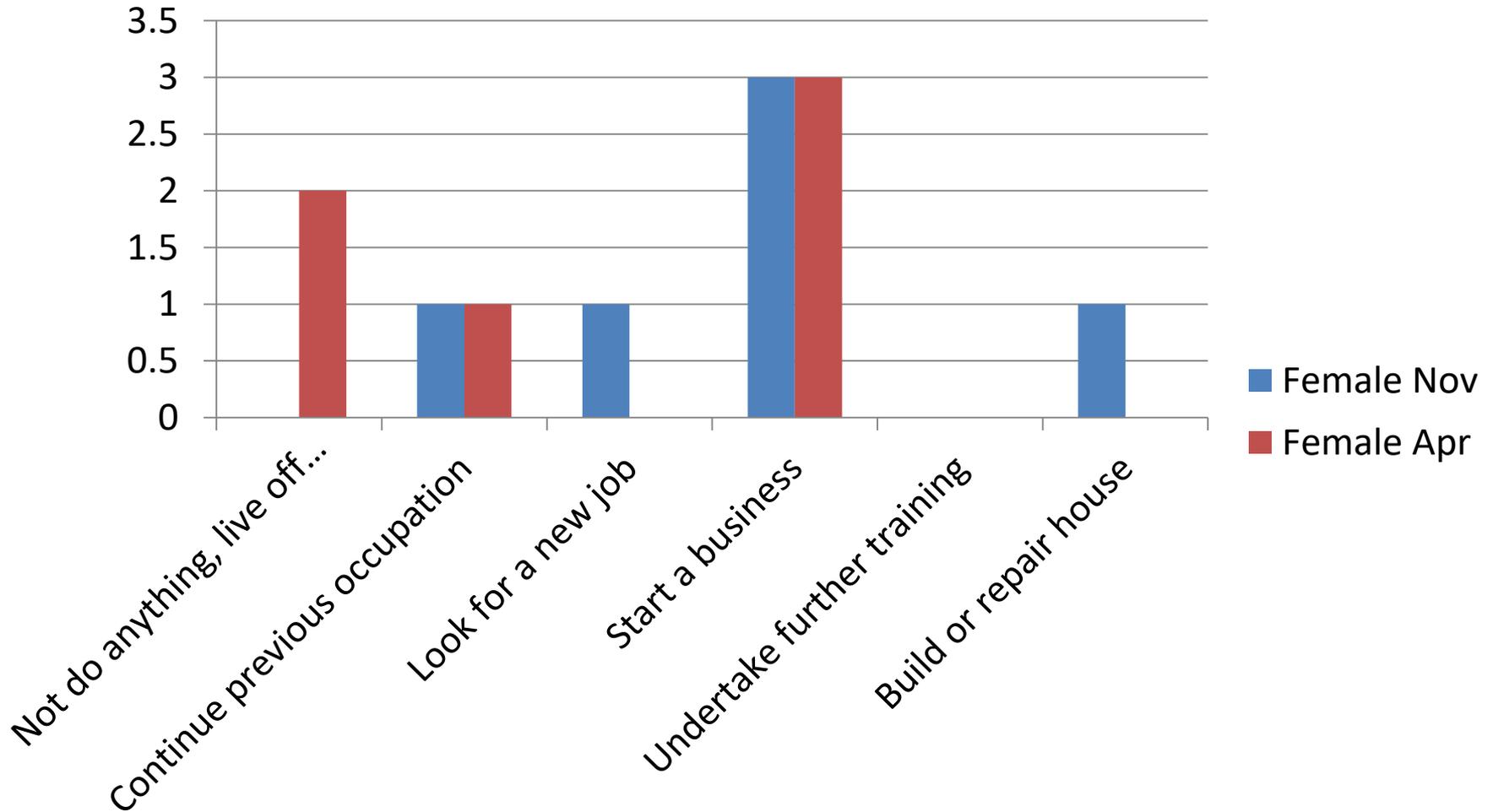
Working for the family livelihood

- Most workers had participated in SWP several times. Good workers are invited to return to the same employer.
- Australian employers want to build a reliable workforce where trained and effective workers return year after year
- Much of the earnings is spent on improving home infrastructure, buying material goods and paying education fees for family members
- Later workers start to consider longer term investments in their future, often looking to set up a business.
- Some men felt 'in limbo' and demoralised because there were few options to contribute to the family on return to Timor.
- Workers seek SWP work to earn money to establish a better life in Timor-Leste in future, not to continually be migrant workers.

Male workers' planned activities on return, and actual activities 6 months later



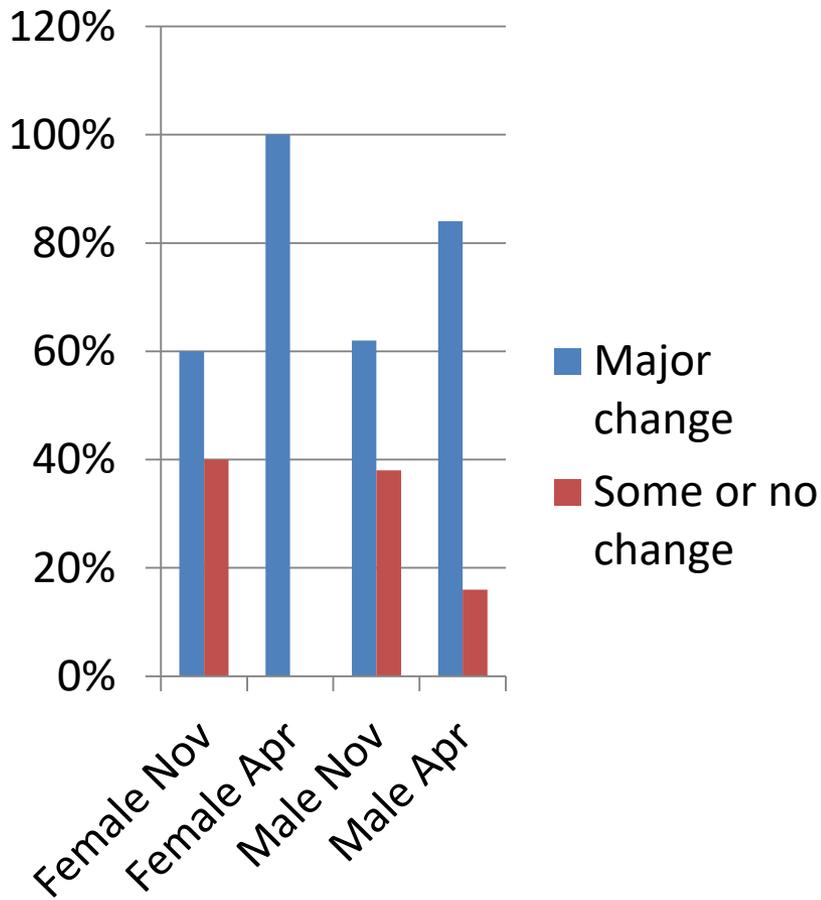
Female workers' planned activities on return, and actual activities 6 months later.



Work outcomes in Dili

- Two workers found a new job, one returned to a previous job.
- Ten workers established a new business, three women and seven men. These were:
 - Establish a Guest House,
 - Establish a restaurant
 - 3x set up a shop (general store x 2, clothing store)
 - 2x food processing for sale (tofu & tempe, bread)
 - Bought truck for transport business
 - Importation of motorbikes for sale
 - Became a money lender

Cultural change



- Australian standards of gender equality caused them to question their gender stereotypes.
- Men learned that women can fulfil most work roles
- Men found new ways to deal with anger without violence
- Men learned they could also do household tasks
- Women gained confidence to make their own decisions.

Analysis

- Many workers wanted to start a business but failed to do so, even when they had saved money to start a business.
- Skills in hospitality, life/work skills and English were used in starting businesses
- No worker found horticulture skills to be useful at home
- Urban unemployed youth were recruited, who had no interest in farming, nor access to land.
- The potential for horticultural development in Timor, could be better supported by matching of workers with their destination, ie. rural workers with hill dwellers in temperate zones and coastal dwellers in tropical zones, to maximise ability to use learned horticultural skills on return home.

Conclusion

- As a result of this research, SWP recruitment in the districts will be piloted.
- The government of Timor-Leste should be more strategic in its use of SWP to build new productive skills through relevant Ministries (Agriculture, Tourism).
- Reintegration support for workers should facilitate contacts to existing business support and marketing programs, and should also benefit returned workers from South Korea.
- The recognition by workers of women's equal ability in the workplace and the questioning of patriarchal attitudes is an important but unexpected outcome.
- Ongoing research should continue to trace the social and economic outcomes of the SWP.