

Challenges and opportunities

of the EU-Vietnam Voluntary
Partnership Agreement for
women and civil society



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Cover photo: *Workshop in a micro enterprise in one of the surveyed areas* by SRD.
February 2020

Disclaimer:

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Forest in a surveyed area. Photo: SRD



List of Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation
FINNIDA	Finnish International Development Agency
FLEGT	Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade
FORMIS	Forestry Sector Monitoring and Information System
JIC	Joint Implementation Committee
JPC	Joint Preparation Committee
LURC	Land use right certificate
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SRD	Centre for Sustainable Rural Development
TLAS	Timber Legality Assurance System
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
V4MF	Voices for Mekong Forests
VNForest	Vietnam Administration of Forestry
VNGO-FLEGT	Network of Vietnamese non-government organisations on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade
VPA	Voluntary Partnership Agreement
VPA-IM	Impact Monitoring of the VPA

Executive summary

Vietnam is currently preparing to implement its Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the EU. It is expected to generate economic, social, and environmental benefits and to ensure safeguards to protect vulnerable stakeholders who may have limited capacity to meet the VPA requirements. Due to their pre-existing position in the forestry sector, women are considered a vulnerable group.

Strictly enforcing VPA standards may pressure small businesses, leading them to either close down or undergo restructuring. As women are often employed as short-term unskilled workers, they may face increased job insecurity. Male workers have better prospects as they often take more skilled and permanent roles.

On the other hand, rigorous enforcement may also raise safety, labour and health standards for all. This could benefit uncontracted short-term female workers. Modernising the timber value chain may also increase pay and opportunities for training.

Gender disparities in land titling could become more noticeable after VPA implementation. Due to discriminatory practices in rural areas, women often do not have their names registered in land use right certificates. With the VPA implementation, this could hinder women's ability to make decisions regarding timber harvesting.

Implementation of the VPA will take place through a multi-stakeholder mechanism. This presents an opportunity to address gender issues, by enabling Vietnamese NGOs to participate in monitoring and evaluating the VPA's impacts on women.

Female employees in the workshop. Photo: SRD



Recommendations to address gender issues through the VPA-IM mechanism:

- Advocate for the integration of cross-cutting themes such as gender in the VPA-IM.
- Engage in the development of the VPA M & E mechanism. There needs to be strong cooperation between VN-Forest and civil society in order to implement the VPA-IM.
- NGOs with grassroots experiences should regularly conduct community surveys to monitor gender issues. The purpose of monitoring is to identify areas where women play a stronger or weaker role in the timber value chain, and to develop training for women on technical and business skills to enable them to meaningfully participate in the modernised timber value chain.
- NGOs should integrate awareness-raising components into their community surveys. The purpose is to educate women in rural areas about their rights and build positive attitudes towards women's land ownership among the local people. Stakeholders may collaborate through local mass organisations such as the Women's Union in Training of Trainers (TOT) and awareness campaigns to effectively reach the local audience.
- Review the current forest sector legal framework and policy from a gender perspective through using multi-stakeholder mechanisms such as the Core Group to undertake national and provincial level dialogue and consultation. Particular attention should be given to regulations on enterprise, labour, health, safety and land use rights.
- NGOs should use the VPA-IM mechanism to collect gender-disaggregated data in the forestry sector. There must be good coordination between VN-Forest and civil society to develop a gender-disaggregated database in FORMIS. This is important because inadequate gender-disaggregated statistics compounded by limited technical capacity on gender analysis hinder informed policy making.
- NGOs should improve the gender balance of its targeted member organisations such as forestry associations and forest user groups, and support women to participate in decision-making.
- Encourage the development of female worker associations within timber processing enterprises.

Manufactory of a surveyed area. Photo by SRD



1. Introduction

Background

Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) are legally binding bilateral trade agreements that promote the trade in legal timber and timber products between the EU and targeted timber exporting countries. At the core of each VPA is a timber legality assurance system (TLAS), which verifies the legality of timber along the supply chain, from logging to transportation, processing, and export. Vietnam and the EU began negotiating a VPA in 2010 and concluded it in October 2018. Once the system setup is complete, Vietnam will only export FLEGT-licensed timber products to the EU.

VPAs must ensure there are social safeguards to protect vulnerable stakeholders who might be overlooked in the VPA process due to their under-representation at the negotiation table. For this reason, Vietnam's VPA includes a clause about monitoring the economic, social, and environmental impacts of VPA implementation. The structure and details of the impact monitoring mechanism are currently being discussed.

Throughout the VPA process, Vietnamese NGOs have worked hard to improve forest governance and support vulnerable stakeholders. By bringing their issues to the attention of government and the international development community. Women could be significantly affected by the VPA as they often have a vulnerable position in the forestry sector. It is therefore critical to analyse women's present situation, understand the implications of implementing the VPA for women, and determine possible ways to improve gender equality. It is crucial to use the opportunity of the VPA to address women's social and economic issues and to promote gender equality in the forestry sector.

The position and role of women in Vietnam's forestry sector is rightly receiving increased attention at the moment, as evidenced by recent studies including that of Forest Trends'¹ research in to gender and timber value chains. This study seeks to complement the emerging body of understanding, by presenting a specific analysis of the role of women in small timber processing businesses and in relation to forest land ownership, as well as exploring how NGOs could support gender issues through impact monitoring mechanisms in the VPA.

Research objective

The overall objective of this research is to analyse how the VPA might affect women, and to identify ways for civil society to monitor and improve gender equality in the context of VPA implementation in Vietnam.

To achieve this objective, the following tasks were undertaken:

- (i) review of legal framework and current state of gender equality in forestry;
- (ii) analysis of specific gender issues in the timber value chain and the implications of the VPA on women, given their pre-existing conditions; and

- (iii) identifying possible solutions and utilising the VPA as a forum to achieve this goal, including mechanisms within the VPA to engage NGOs in monitoring and ensuring the social and economic benefits to women.

This research paper is partly based on evidence collected in two surveys done by SRD and the Network of Vietnamese non-government organisations on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (VNGO-FLEGT) in 2018 – 2019, which further demonstrates Vietnamese NGOs' capacity to monitor social safeguards for vulnerable stakeholder groups. The paper also discusses opportunities for civil society engagement and how they can work in collaborative manner with the government, including the establishment of a participatory impact monitoring mechanism.

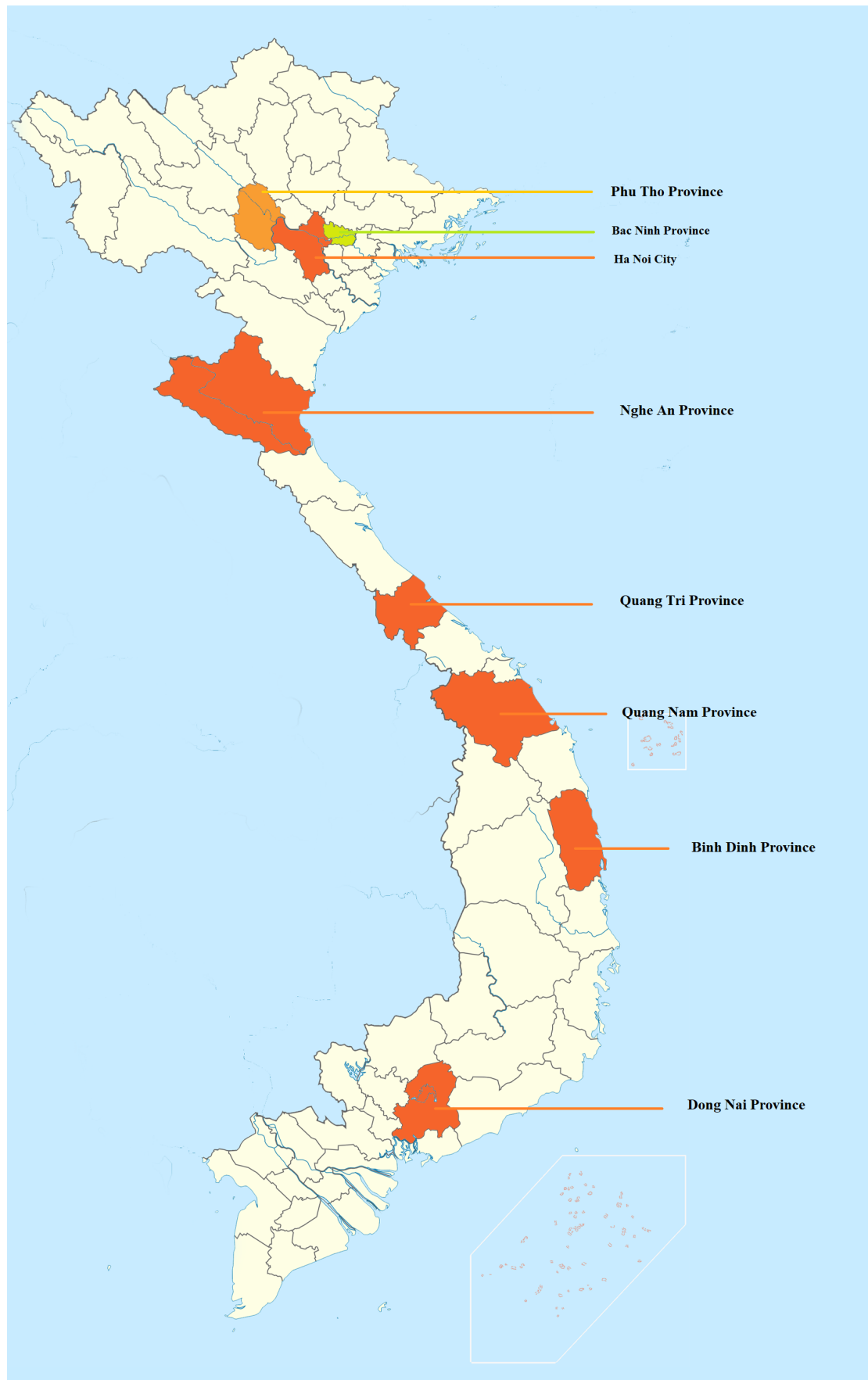
Research method

The research analysed existing materials and data. The literature review is drawn from current policies, strategies, reports, and studies published by the government and civil society including local and international NGOs, associations, universities and research institutes. The research utilises gender-disaggregated data from two baseline surveys conducted in eight provinces throughout the country (Hanoi, Phu Tho, Bac Ninh, Nghe An, Quang Tri, Quang Nam, Binh Dinh, and Dong Nai) in 2018 – 2019. These baseline surveys are part of the initiative of the VNGO-FLEGT network to monitor the impacts of the VPA on vulnerable groups. The surveyed provinces are in regions with different geographic and socio-economic features. The dataset from the two surveys comprises 647 forest smallholders/households and 122 timber-processing businesses. As identified in previous studies, these groups are vulnerable due to their sheer numbers and limited capacity to comply with strict timber industry standards.

Survey questionnaires were used to gather information on the operation, capacity, and compliance level of the two groups. The surveys aim to collect information from both male and female respondents in order to achieve objectivity and balance.

Summary of surveys conducted, which inform this report

	Survey questionnaire for forest smallholders (2018)	Survey questionnaire for small and micro enterprises (2018)	Survey questionnaire for small and micro enterprises (2019)
Number of respondents	647	36	86
Number of questions	30	26	29
+ General information	14	13	3
+ Awareness and access to information regarding timber legality	2	1	15
+ Business performance and compliance with timber legality	13	11	4
+ Forest governance and policy	1	1	7
+ Gender question	5	4	4



Map of the research provinces. Prepared by SRD

2. Overview of the role and position of women in forestry

Legal framework and policy

Vietnam has issued laws, strategies, and national programs to support equal rights and opportunities for women. These include the Law on Gender Equality 2006, the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011 – 2020, and the National Action Program on Gender Equality 2016 – 2020. Government institutions have been established for the purpose of formulating and reviewing gender-related policies and advising on gender integration and women's empowerment. The Department of Gender Equality is established under the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). There is also the National Committee for the Advancement of Women, Committees for the Advancement of Women in all government ministries, and Women's Unions at the central and local levels.

In the forestry sector, the 2017 Forestry Law stipulates the right to equal access to forest land and forest-based livelihoods, and the right to own land. Clause 7 of Article 14 governs forest allocation, lease, repurposing and appropriation, and highlights the principles of equal participation and gender non-discrimination. The law also stipulates the women's equal right to access information on forest development plans, job opportunities, decent work and professional training. The 2006 – 2020 Forestry Development Strategy advocates for capacity building for forestry officials on gender mainstreaming and gender-integrated monitoring in forestry.

Female employees. Photo: SRD



Table 1: Legal framework and policies on gender equality in Vietnam

Scope	Document	In force	Summary
International	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	1979	Guidance to evaluate existing policies and programs from gender perspective as well as formulate new policies that promote and protect the rights of women.
	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action	1995	Detailed outline and plan for advancing women's rights with 12 critical areas of concern, including decent jobs and the rights to land and assets for women, and participation of women in public policies.
	Agenda for Sustainable Development 2030	2015	Goal 5: Commitment to gender equality and empowerment of all women by, among other objectives, guaranteeing women's equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and property, financial services, inheritance, natural resources, etc.
National and forestry sector	Law on Gender Equality	2006	Ensuring equal rights to both women and men in all fields and requiring all the ministries to mainstream gender in their strategies. Article 4: eliminate all forms of gender-based discrimination, create equal opportunities for both genders in socio-economic development and human development of the country. Clause 1, Article 7: gender equality in politics, economy, culture, domestic and social life, and create favourable conditions for both men and women to equal opportunities and participation in and benefit from the development process. Clause 1, Article 13: gender equality in labour, recruitment, pay and employment benefits.
	National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011 – 2020	2012	Ensuring gender equality in political, economic, cultural and social domains, contributing to sustainable development.
	National Action Program on Gender Equality 2016 – 2020	2015	Narrowing gender gaps and enhancing women's status in some sectors, industries, regions and localities.
	Forestry Law 2017	2019	Clause 7, Article 14: equal participation and gender-based non-discrimination in forest allocation, lease, repurposing and appropriation. Equal job opportunities, decent work and governmental supports for professional training for women.
	Forestry Development Strategy 2006 – 2020	2007	Capacity building on gender issues for forestry officials. Investment in local governmental agencies for gender mainstreaming and gender-sensitive monitoring in forestry.

Current forestry practice

Notwithstanding these policies, gender bias and discrimination still exist in practice. A woman's role is often considered to be collecting subsistence-based products for family nutrition and healthcare, while men engage in logging timber and other commercial activities. Thus, opportunities for women are often limited to low-return activities. Men tend to control high-value production which generates more income. Timber and other commercial products like charcoal are typically considered male domains.² Women generally do not have the same access to technology, credit, and training as men and women are generally underrepresented in village forest committees and community forest associations. Consequently, in forest communities, women's interests and needs may not be fully addressed.³

² FAO, 2013

³ FAO, 2016



Workshop in an enterprise in a surveyed area. Photo: SRD

In the context of land governance, discriminatory practices against women are prevalent, especially in rural forest communities. The land allocation process is managed by provincial authorities, who may be influenced by customary practices that reinforce gender prejudice. Furthermore, women typically do not inherit land because after marriage they move into their husbands' homes. Because women do not own land and their names are not usually registered on land use certificates, they face tremendous risks in cases of land dispute, divorce, and property division.⁴ Furthermore, it is difficult for women to access legal services in their communities because of their perceived social position, the local power structure, and bureaucratic complexities.⁵ In rural forest areas, few women have a good understanding of the law. Local organisations such as the Women's Union usually assist women in civil conflicts, but these organisations also lack professional knowledge to help solve conflicts, or the resources to educate women about land rights.⁶

The lack of gender-disaggregated data in forestry further complicates the situation. Without sufficient data, it is difficult to accurately assess women's involvement in forestry and the added value of their specific roles. If public data is restricted or missing from the decision-making process, it is more difficult to monitor and make changes to address their needs. Vietnam's forestry sector uses a database management platform called Forestry Sector Monitoring and Information System (FORMIS). The forest administrative agency is the main user, but it can also be used by other such as enterprises, research institutes, NGOs and households. FORMIS can be used to help agroforestry livelihood development, protection of community rights in forested areas, sustainable forest management and forest protection. However, FORMIS has no specific component designed for addressing gender or social equity issues.⁷

As the body of research continues to grow, it becomes clear that advancing equal rights and opportunities for women remains work in-progress. Women in the forestry sector still face barriers to economic and social opportunities, education, job, training, land ownership, and decision-making.

4 Nguyen & Vu, 2019

5 Ingalls et al., 2018

6 FAO, 2017

7 FINNIDA, 2015

3. The implications of the VPA for women

Vietnam is currently preparing for VPA implementation. Once the system is operational, it will apply to all timber and timber products sold in and from Vietnam. The VPA is expected to bring economic, social and environmental benefits to Vietnam as FLEGT-licensed timber will automatically meet the requirements of the EU market, thus importers will be exempt from the time-consuming due diligence process. The VPA also supports Vietnam to improve forest governance and to follow the path to sustainable forest management.

On the other hand, the rigorous standards and law enforcement required by the VPA could negatively affect vulnerable groups, and men and women are likely to be affected differently. This research examines the implications of VPA on women in two important stages of the timber value chain: timber harvesting and timber processing.

Female workers in timber processing

Vietnam has about 5,400 forest product processing enterprises in 2019, of which small and micro businesses account for 93 per cent (Vietnam Administration of Forestry⁸. Of the 500,000 workers in this sector, 55 – 60 per cent are skilled permanent workers, while 40 – 45 per cent are low-skilled short-term workers⁹. The latter group normally works less than seven months per year as specified in the Labour Law. Timber processing businesses often employ both permanent and short-term workers based on specific tasks and the skills involved.

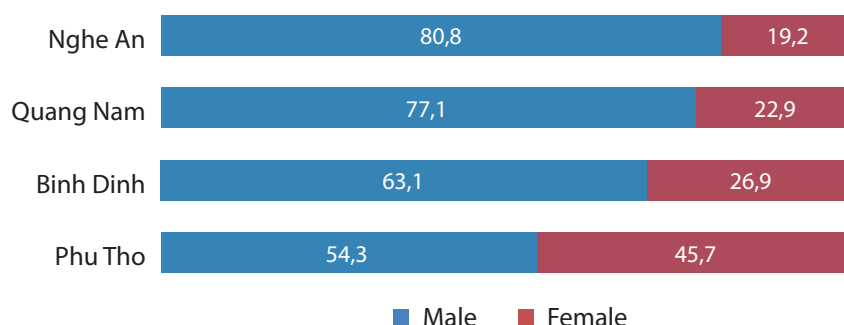
Principle V of the VPA is “Compliance with regulations on timber processing”. This requires strict compliance with regulations related to business operation, safety, environmental protection, and proof of timber origin. Stringent business standards and a strong regulatory environment could potentially increase pressure on small and micro enterprises with limited capacity. Those enterprises that are unable to comply may have to shut down or at least stop performing activities where they can’t comply. It is likely to be short-term unskilled workers that are first in line for lay-offs when changes take place. Permanent skilled workers have better prospect in terms of job stability.

According to the survey of 36 small and micro timber processing enterprises by SRD and VNGO-FLEGT in 2018, 65 per cent of permanent workers are male. Province-wide percentages are displayed in Figure 1. In all four provinces, women have fewer permanent jobs than men in timber processing.

8 VNForest), 2019

9 MOLISA, 2019

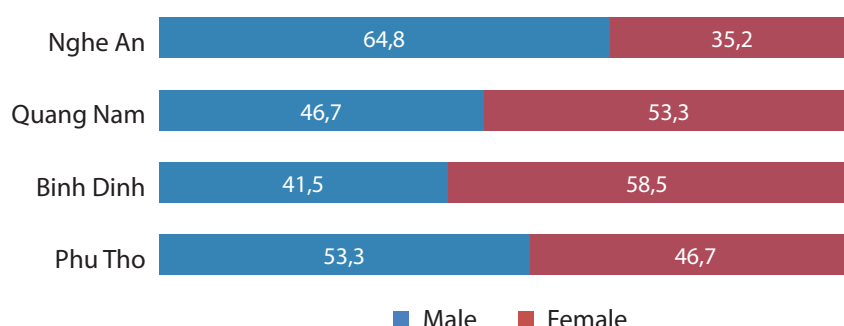
Figure 1: Gender of permanent workers in small and micro timber processing businesses (in percentages)



Source: SRD, 2019

For short-term jobs in timber processing, the data indicates that women have more involvement. Out of four provinces, women account for more short-term workers in the provinces of Quang Nam and Binh Dinh.

Figure 2: Gender of short-term workers in small and micro timber processing businesses (in percentages)



Source: SRD, 2019

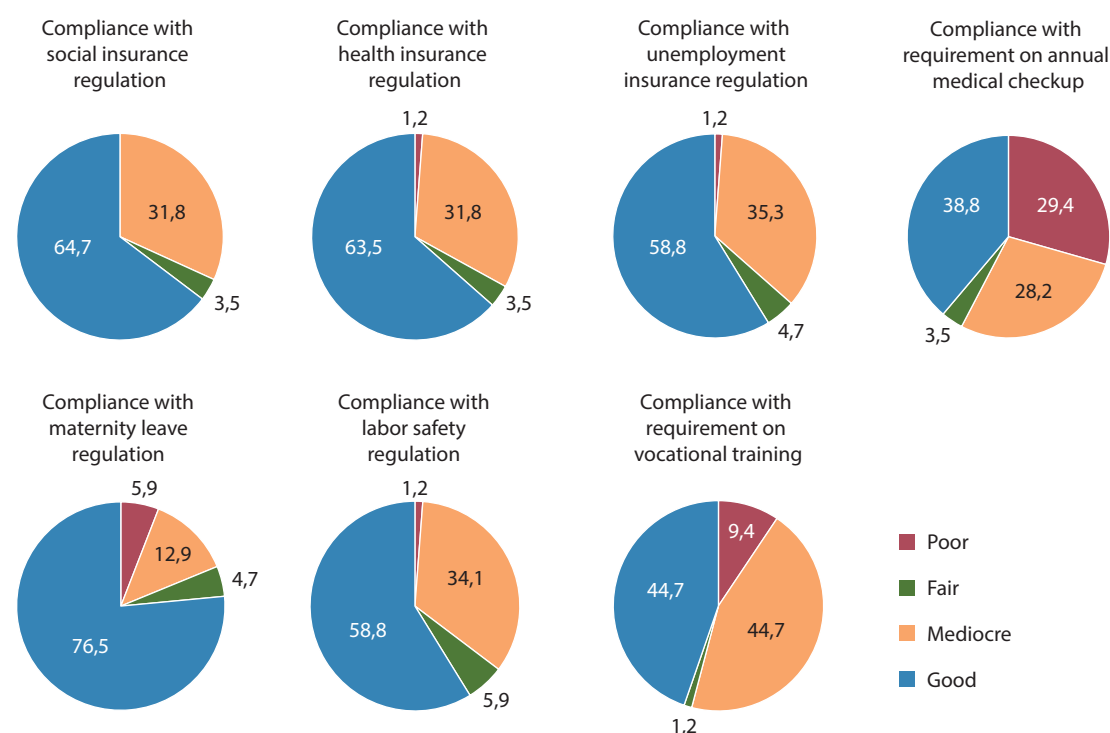
Reasons that businesses are hesitant to hire female workers on permanent basis include that they are concerned about maternity leave, that they believe women cannot do work that requires physical strength, and that in rural areas where women undertake more traditional household responsibilities, female workers need more flexible working hours. Women are therefore often recruited for low-skilled, short-term jobs which are most at risk when the VPA is implemented. This is likely to be compounded by the fact that women have fewer opportunities to attend professional training leaving them confined to less important or subordinate roles, and less resilient to changes in the timber industry.

Employment benefits for women in timber processing

Once the VPA is implemented, businesses will need to strictly comply with regulations on health, labour, and environmental safety. All workers will benefit from improved working conditions. Principle VII of the VPA is “Compliance with regulations on tax and labour”. This requires full compliance with existing regulations including labour rights, social insurance, health insurance, and unemployment insurance. This will benefit women as they are more often on short-term jobs without contracts. Female workers are likely to benefit from well enforced labour standards required by the VPA, including social insurance benefits and maternity leave.

In 2019, SRD and VNGO-FLEGT network conducted a survey of 86 timber processing enterprises across northern, central and southern Vietnam. Respondents self-assessed their compliance with regulations on female workers' rights. Most enterprises thought they complied well with regulations on social insurance, health insurance, unemployment insurance, and maternity leave, but some judged their compliance as mediocre. Overall, the assessment indicated that there is still room for improvement, and compliance could be greatly improved by offering medical check-ups and vocational training for female workers.

Figure 3: Self-assessment on compliance with regulations on female workers' rights (in percentages)



Source: SRD, 2019

In order to raise awareness about female workers' rights and improve compliance levels among businesses, it is important to introduce and practice gender equality, including improving internal rules and introducing labour contracts and female workers' associations. While most enterprises had internal rules and labour contracts to protect the rights of female workers there were very few female workers' associations.

Figure 4: Gender equality practice within timber processing enterprises (in percentages)

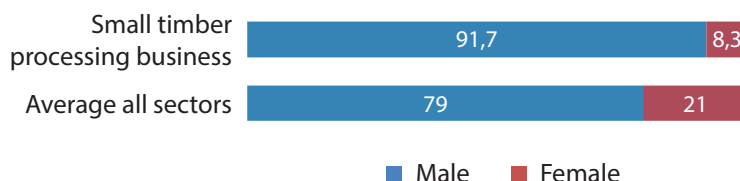


Source: SRD, 2019

Timber processing enterprises owned by women

Vietnam currently has 95,906 women-owned businesses, or about 21 per cent of the total number of businesses in operation.¹⁰ Timber processing business owned by women are even more scarce. Of the 36 small timber processing enterprises surveyed, only three (8.3 per cent) are owned by women (as registered in the business registration certificate).

Figure 5: Gender of business owners in timber processing (in percentages)



Source: SRD, 2019

None of the women-owned timber processing enterprises had fully complied with regulations on labour, health, and safety. In addition, none has fully complied with regulations on employment benefits, including paying for social insurance and health insurance for employees with contracts. The VPA, once implemented, would drive these women-owned enterprises out of business, unless they take necessary steps to comply with all regulations.

An example from Phu Tho province

Ms. Do T.D. is the owner of a small timber processing enterprise in Thanh Son district, Phu Tho province. Last year her mill processed about 7,800 cubic metres of acacia planks. Her permanent workforce included 21 men and 6 women.

The exact number of workers without contract was undisclosed, nevertheless the owner indicated that many workers had no labour contract. The mill also did not fully comply with safety measures and social insurance benefits.

Given the limited sample size, no generalisations can be made regarding women-owned timber processing enterprises. Further research should be undertaken on women-owned enterprises in the timber value chain in order to obtain more statistically significant results.

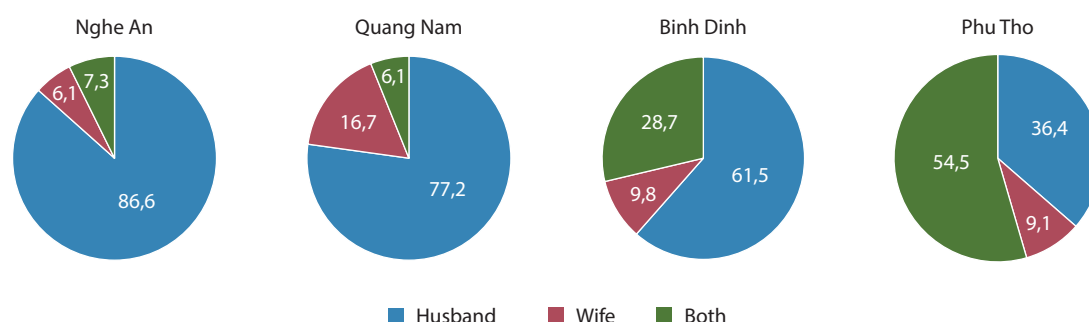
Forest land use rights for women

In Vietnam, production forest land of 3,106,627 hectares (ha) has been allocated to more than one million households with land use right certificates (LURC). The law specifies that if the land and attached properties are common property of husband and wife, they must both register their names on the LURC. However, the majority of forest land LURCs are registered only under the husband's name.

10 Vietnamese Government, 2014

The survey on forest smallholders by SRD and VNGO-FLEGT indicates that 64 per cent of the surveyed households have LURCs registered under their husbands, 25 per cent have LURCs registered under both husbands and wives, and 11 per cent have LURCs registered under the wives or other family members. A 2013 survey by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on women's access to land (including residential land, agricultural land and forest land) in ten provinces, found that out of 1,250 surveyed households only 22 per cent had LURCs registered under both husbands and wives, and 18 per cent had LURCs registered under the wives.

Figure 6: Holders of forest LURCs (in percentages)



Source: SRD, 2019

Among the four provinces, Phu Tho has the highest percentage of LURCs registered with both names of husband and wife. The lowest percentages are in Nghe An and Quang Nam. Demography and culture are important factors contributing to these discrepancies. In Phu Tho, the survey took place in a district where the majority were well-educated King people. In Nghe An, the survey was conducted in a mountainous district with ethnic minorities. In Quang Nam, gender prejudice has prevailed in many communes and villages. Consequently, gender bias against women is substantial in forest land ownership.

An example from Nghe An province

Ms. Nguyen T.T. is the wife of Tran V.T. in Thanh Chuong district, Nghe An province. The family has two plots of forest land. The first plot is 0.25 ha and the second plot 0.15 ha.

Both LURCs have been registered under the husband. The wife has no knowledge about land rights.

Depending on the interpretation of the law, where LURCs are registered in one name, the right to use land and associated properties may belong to the named person. That means women may not be able to harvest timber without their husband's consent. Principle I of the VPA states: "Harvesting of domestic timber complies with regulations on land use rights, forest use rights, management, environment and society". Therefore, proof of land use rights are required for harvesting timber. If women are not properly included in LURCs, their ability to make decisions regarding timber harvesting could be reduced.

4. Vietnamese NGOs for supporting women through the VPA

The VPA has provisions to ensure social safeguards for vulnerable groups. Article 15 on Stakeholder Involvement stipulates a monitoring mechanism involving representatives of relevant government agencies, NGOs, forest associations, enterprises, trade unions, local communities and people living in forest areas. Article 16 on Social Safeguards specifies the need for evaluating the impacts of VPA implementation. These provisions form the legal basis for Vietnamese NGOs' engagement to ensure that the VPA has no adverse effect on vulnerable groups. As previously discussed, women could be significantly impacted by the VPA, so the government and NGOs must focus attention on their concerns.

During the negotiation process, there was some participation from women, such as in targeted focus group discussions and capacity building workshops. The VPA Implementation Framework has been modified to better integrate women's participation in the VPA, though mostly in general terms. State and non-state actors are inadequately prepared for the task of gender integration in the VPA implementation.¹¹ In addition, NGOs are not represented on either the Steering Committee or the Working Groups. They were also absent from the negotiation table (unlike in other VPA countries).

In response, Vietnamese NGOs formed the VNGO-FLEGT network in 2012 to promote and coordinate NGO inputs. The network has always considered gender equality as a priority and both men and women have participated in capacity building and research activities. Community consultation and surveys have always ensured the participation of both male and female respondents. In 2018, the network assessed the VPA's impacts on forest smallholders and small timber processing enterprises in four provinces. In 2019, it improved the assessment method and extended it to small and medium-sized enterprises in seven provinces. The assessment covered gender issues in the timber value chain, such as women's land use rights, the work burden undertaken by women in afforestation, women leadership in timber processing business, female workers' rights, wages and benefits, working conditions and training opportunities for women.

Other NGOs have also engaged in activities to address gender issues in the context of the VPA. The project "Voices for Mekong Forests" (V4MF) provides capacity building on the theme of gender and VPA. The project has also identified gender gaps that need to be addressed through forest governance. This long history of engaging with the question of gender in the VPA means that NGOs are uniquely well-placed to inform discussions and propose action.

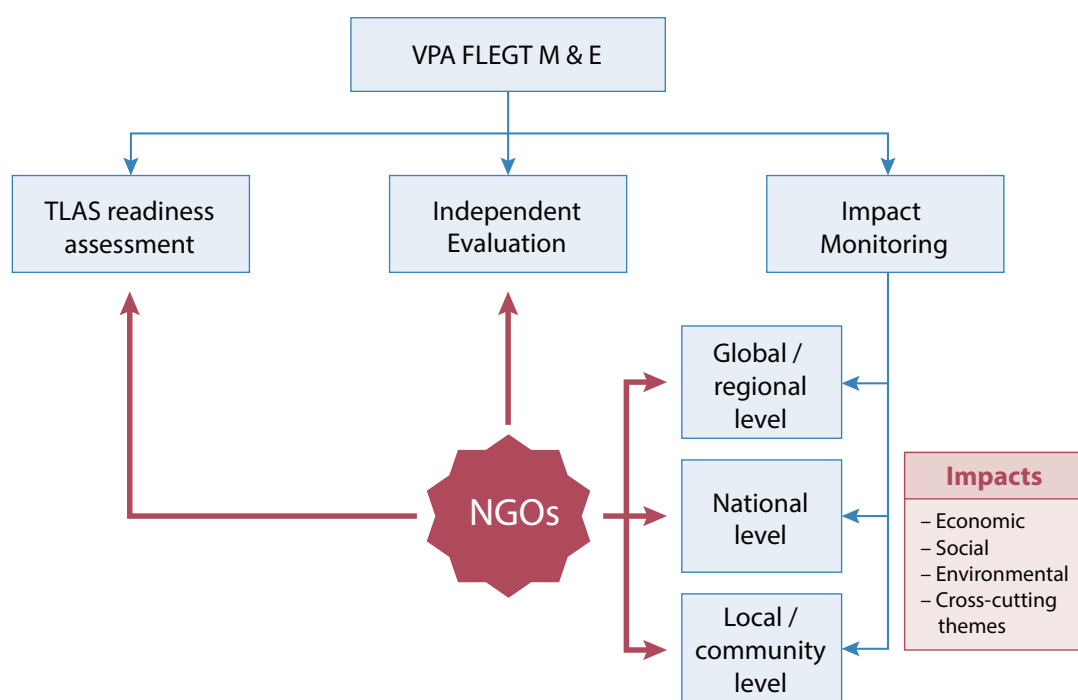
Active participation of civil society contributes to better policies serving the needs of vulnerable groups including women. When the VPA was signed, both sides agreed on the important role of civil society and the need for an effective mechanism to ensure engagement. In 2017, the Joint Preparation Committee (JPC) of the VPA established a shared forum called the Core Group. The Core Group includes various stakeholders such as timber associations, non-government organisations, research institutions and timber enterprises. The main functions of the Core Group are to exchange information; to promote coordination and synergy between VPA related actions; and to provide feedback and recommendations about the VPA and the TLAS to the interdisciplinary technical working group and Joint Implementation Committee (JIC).¹²

¹¹ Giri, 2018

¹² EU FLEGT, 2019

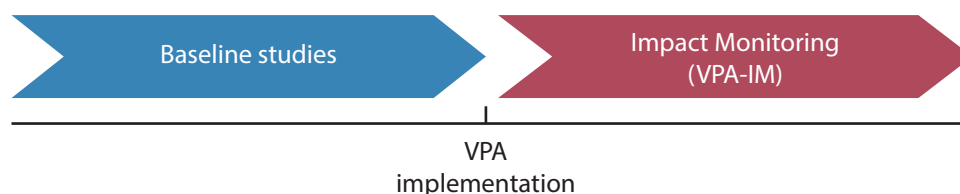
Findings and recommendations on gender issues are presented in Core Group meetings. Article 16 of the VPA specifies a mechanism for monitoring the economic, social, and environmental impacts of VPA implementation. The structure of this mechanism is in the development stage. It is expected that all stakeholders will be able to participate in and contribute to monitoring VPA implementation.

Figure 7: VPA monitoring and enforcement mechanism



The proposed structure of M & E includes three components, as indicated in Figure 7. NGOs can participate in all the components: TLAS readiness assessment (prior to the VPA implementation), and Independent Evaluation and Impact Monitoring (after implementing the VPA and issuing FLEGT licenses). While Impact Monitoring is conducted after VPA implementation, preparatory work and baseline studies should be done in advance.

Figure 8: Timeline of the Impact Monitoring of the VPA



Surveys and assessments on gender issues conducted by NGOs may feed into the M & E mechanism currently being developed by VNForest. As previously stated, the VNGO-FLEGT network has undertaken baseline studies¹³ for the purpose of contributing to VPA Independent Monitoring (VPA-IM). The baseline includes gender indicators that may be used in monitoring the impacts of VPA on women. This is crucial given the lack of gender-disaggregated data in the forestry sector.

13 http://vnngo-cc.vn/upload/Bao_cao_Baseline_xuat_ban.pdf

Thus, NGOs engagement in monitoring VPA impacts will contribute to the goal of improving gender equality in Vietnam. It ensures that VPA implementation improves women's rights and opportunities, as stipulated in the law. Data on gender from baseline studies and periodic monitoring may feed into the M & E system. Findings and recommendations from NGOs may be communicated to the JIC via the Core Group and other policy forums. In addition, it contributes to the development of a gender component in the forestry database, through possible linkage to FORMIS.

Recommendations to address gender issues through the VPA-IM mechanism:

- Advocate for the integration of cross-cutting themes such as gender in the VPA-IM.
- Engage in the development of the VPA M & E mechanism. There needs to be strong cooperation between VN-Forest and civil society in order to implement the VPA-IM.
- NGOs with grassroots experiences should regularly conduct community surveys to monitor gender issues. The purpose of monitoring is to identify areas where women play a stronger or weaker role in the timber value chain, and to develop training for women on technical and business skills to enable them to meaningfully participate in the modernised timber value chain.
- NGOs should integrate awareness-raising components into their community surveys. The purpose is to educate women in rural areas about their rights and build positive attitudes towards women's land ownership among the local people. Stakeholders may collaborate through local mass organisations such as the Women's Union in Training of Trainers (TOT) and awareness campaigns to effectively reach the local audience.
- Review the current forest sector legal framework and policy from a gender perspective through using multi-stakeholder mechanisms such as the Core Group to undertake national and provincial level dialogue and consultation. Particular attention should be given to regulations on enterprise, labour, health, safety and land use rights.
- NGOs should use the VPA-IM mechanism to collect gender-disaggregated data in the forestry sector. There must be good coordination between VN-Forest and civil society to develop a gender-disaggregated database in FORMIS. This is important because inadequate gender-disaggregated statistics compounded by limited technical capacity on gender analysis hinder informed policy making.
- NGOs should improve the gender balance of its targeted member organisations such as forestry associations and forest user groups, and support women to participate in decision-making.
- Encourage the development of female worker associations within timber processing enterprises.

5. Conclusion

The VPA presents a challenge for vulnerable groups to be able to meet strictly enforced standards and respond to stringent regulatory environment. It also offers them the opportunity to design effective mechanisms to address their issues. Among the vulnerable groups, women are expected to be particularly impacted as they often have limited involvement in and access to career development, education and training, technologies, health care, decision-making and leadership positions.

Women's roles in the forestry sector are often confined to low-value activities and they typically work as short-term unskilled workers in small timber processing businesses. Many work without labour contracts, which mean they are excluded from all employment benefits, including maternity leave. They often endure bias in recruitment policy, have few opportunities for training and professional advancement, and end up in low-paid, tedious labour tasks.

When the VPA is implemented, many small businesses will likely undergo a restructuring process. Unskilled labourers are at most risk of being laid off. Few women have managed to become business owners in timber processing, and even then many of these women-owned enterprises could be shut down due to non-compliance with high standards. On the positive side, businesses that continue will need to upgrade their facilities and operation standards. Women that 'remain' after the restructuring process may benefit from the enterprise fully complying with regulations on labour, health, safety, and the environment.

Another prominent gender issue relevant to the VPA is the registration of names on LURC. In rural forest areas, LURCs are usually registered under the husband's name only. Women are neither fully aware of the right to be named on LURCs nor understand the benefits that come with it. In order to harvest timber, women need proof of land ownership. When the VPA is implemented, it may restrain these women from making decisions about timber harvests.

In order to address the potential impacts of the VPA on vulnerable groups, the signatory parties have established a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation of the VPA. The detailed M & E structure is currently in development, nevertheless the VPA text stipulates that all stakeholders can participate in this monitoring mechanism. NGOs can act as an independent third party in monitoring the impacts of VPA. Their track record of supporting vulnerable stakeholders demonstrates their capacity and willingness to engage in safeguarding women's rights through monitoring mechanisms that meet VPA guidelines.

In conclusion, the VPA implementation will induce significant changes in the Vietnamese forestry sector. Vulnerable workers (of whom women account for considerable portion) are likely to bear the brunt of initial shocks. It is therefore important that the VPA is implemented in a way that takes account of the difficulties small and medium-sized enterprises may face. In the longer term, women are likely to benefit from increasing awareness of their needs, from improved worker rights and being part of the M & E framework. It is important however not to just expect these benefits to arise, but to constantly monitor the effects of the VPA to ensure women's needs are being fully recognised.

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It is crucial to use the opportunity of the VPA to address women's social and economic issues and to promote gender equality in the forestry sector.



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