



## **Women involvement in village forest management Recommendations for the VPA negotiations**



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**And**

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## **1. Introduction**

As part of its Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan, the European Union (EU) is currently negotiating a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the Lao PDR. The VPA is a legally-binding bilateral trade agreement that aims to address illegal logging by improving forest governance and ensuring that only legal timber is exported to the EU. Improved forest governance requires that all stakeholders, including women, can participate in decisions that affect the management of their forests, and that women have the same opportunities as men to benefit from the VPA agreement, such as improved access to forest resources critical to livelihoods and opportunities for employment within timber processing.

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### **1.1. CSO involvement in FLEGT -VPA in Laos**

Rural Research & Development Promoting Knowledge Association (RRDPA) and Maeying Huamchai Phattana (MHP) are working closely with the FLEGT standing office and Department of Forestry Inspection (DOFI) on developing a Timber Legality Definition (TLD) to support the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) process (FLEGT VPA). RRDPA is focusing on Village Use Forest issues and has completed conducting the research on village use forest in Xayabouly which is focused on the timber supply chain at village level and the results of this research have been used to improve TLD4. MHP has been focussed on the development of women and ethnic groups in Bokeo since 2010, and its Director, Ms Vansy Senyavong, is the Lao CSO representative on the Lao-EU VPA negotiation committee.

### **1.2. Aim of the research**

The research aimed to gather the existing information related to gender issues and women involvement in forest management both local and national level according to the existing legal framework and highlight any gaps, inconsistencies if any; clarify the roles of women in forest management according to legal framework and cultural norms; provide an update on the new law and regulations that support gender involvement.

## **2. The legal framework related to gender and forestry**

Lao PDR has a strong legal framework for promoting gender equality but significant gaps remain. The legal and regulatory framework in Lao PDR – including laws, Government instruction orders and administrative procedures related to business and trade – are gender-neutral. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has also been ratified by Lao PDR, with the 2004 Law on Development and Protection of Women (No 70/PO), being enacted to satisfy Lao's requirements under this convention.

The Forestry Law (2019) is drafted in a gender-neutral manner and does not mention gender or women in any of its articles so that its provisions apply to both men and women, as well as businesses and organizations. It does not include any specific provisions that would assist women to overcome the traditional and other barriers to their engagement and control of economic activities.

The new Land Law – with revisions by the National Assembly (2019) no longer includes the current protection clause for married women. In fact, despite the importance of land to women's livelihoods, the new Land Law does not include the need for dual names (wife and husband) to appear on land titles (LIWG, 2020). However, GIZ (2019:9), suggests that this law does not need to mention gender dimensions explicitly, since other relevant legislation – the Constitution,

the Labour Law, the Family Law, the Law on Women’s Union, and the Law on the Development and Protection of Women – already provide the legal basis for gender equality throughout all sectors.

In 2019, in order to prepare for the 2021-2025 Forestry Action Plan, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) held a workshop to review the work of its Office for the Advancement of Women (OAW) over the previous period. The workshop minutes noted that gender mainstreaming had not been well understood or implemented due to a lack of disaggregated data, a failure to review lessons learnt and a lack of clarity over responsibilities (MAF, 2020). In particular, the OAW was under-resourced, with many donors preferring to channel resources to enhance the role of women via the Lao Women’s Union (or LWU, which is the mass organisation representing women under the Party structure in Lao PDR) instead of OAW. To address these shortcomings, the Draft Forestry Action Plan 2020-2025 and Forest Strategy to 2030 (MAF, 2020) specifies that gender work must be integrated into all actions of forest management.

### 3. Previous studies undertaken in relation to gender and forestry in Lao PDR

#### 3.1 Studies at village level

Forest resources are particularly important for poorer households, who depend upon them for nutrition of their families, for fuelwood and for income. Bamboo shoots, mushrooms, forest vegetables and small fish/crustaceans are mostly gathered by women for home consumption, while Non-timber Forest Products (NTFP’s) provide 50% of the cash income of rural villages (LWU, 2018). Women often take responsibility for collecting firewood, which is then used for cooking and warmth. Along with looking after children and other household chores, the time spent gathering forest resources contribute to “time-poverty”, which limits their opportunities in education or for more rewarding economic opportunities such as employment (LWU, 2018). A loss of forest resources therefore impacts women disproportionately compared to men.



Figure 1: Women use of forest resources is usually centered on management and use of firewood, forest food, medicinal plants, etc.

#### 3.2 Studies of women’s employment in the timber industry

Despite their important role within the rural household, many women have been able to transition to fulltime employment where there are opportunities, including in the wood processing industry. In Paklay District, Sayaboury, the Huamchai Teak Processing Factory employs 230 people, of which 130 are women (Ling et al., 2021). Mill management reported that they preferred to employ women for finishing jobs (such as gluing, sanding, assembly) since they “pay attention to detail, are more patient and less wasteful of wood.” By contrast, men do the jobs that require heavy lifting and operating machinery. The ‘defeminization of agriculture’ is reflected in the finding that despite

women owning suitable land, agriculture was not considered to provide a meaningful alternative to mill employment, because the work is more difficult and the income is lower and more irregular.

Burapha Agroforestry is constructing a new plywood mill in Hin Heup District, Vientiane Province, which will have over 300 employees, of which 65% are expected to be women, when it starts operations in the first quarter of 2021 (Adam Redman, personal communication, 7/1/2021). Female graduates from the Wood Technology school of the Faculty of Forestry (FoF), National University of Lao PDR (NUoL) are being actively employed in management and supervisory positions with the company (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Newly recruited graduates, of which half are women, at a company training session, 7/1/2021

#### 4. Opportunities for women involvement in timber supply chain

Women’s participation in supply chains is usually limited to harvesting and small-scale retail trade, while men dominate larger businesses and tend to engage in higher value chains. As processing become more capital-intensive, or as the scale increases, women’s participation tends to decrease. Women’s participation also diminishes when the distance to the trading location increases, often due to socio-cultural norms.

Table 1: the opportunities for women involvement in timber supply value chain based on literature review, interview with informants at central, provincial, district and village level.

Activities	Opportunities for women
<b>Forest land allocation and demarcation</b>	Women covered in great numbers in forest restoration, conservation, in providing comments and fully participate in decision making and own land. Women should also be entitled to benefit from timber sale if the timber is cut on private land
<b>Forest management plan</b>	In the Forest Strategy, there is a call for gender equality, in the Village Forest Management Plan (VFMP), women can participate as members of Mass Organizations: LYU, LFNC, etc.
<b>Forest harvesting</b>	Women can be involved in inventory, recording to timber harvested, yearly planning and harvesting, participate in monitoring forest harvesting to ensure that harvests are in line with management plans.
<b>Tree marking</b>	Women has high responsible for reforestation, some with knowledge of trees, could be involved in Women are responsible for reforestation, some with knowledge of trees, they can be involved in tree felling and tree monitoring assessments to ensure transparency
<b>Selling timbers</b>	Women could be appointed members of the timber auction committee and be involved in the negotiation about the timber bidding and sale



<b>Fund management</b>	Women should be among the committee who decide about the use of the fund Follow up to ensure that 50% of the fund goes to women, they could also act as treasurer/accountant
<b>Other activities</b>	Women are encouraged and able to participate as needed

## 5. Findings from the interviews and field survey

### 5.1 Phieng & Thongmixay district, Xayabouly Province

#### Women representation in district offices

In both Phieng and Thongmixay districts, DAFO displays the lowest proportion of female staff with only 16% all units combined in Phieng and 25% in Thongmixay. The rate is even lower for forestry division with only one woman out of a staff of eight. Fortunately, DAFO compensate for the lack of female staff by relying on the LWU to raise awareness about gender issues and related laws at community level. DAFO director in Thongmixay admit that there are not that many women that choose to become a forester.

Table 2: Percentage of female staff in district offices

District	DAFO		DONRE		LWU	
	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women
Phieng	49	8 (16%)	24	10 (42%)	7	7 (100%)
Thongmixay	28	7 (25%)	17	6 (35%)	9	9 (100%)

### 5.2. Navene & Napeuy villages

Navene and Napeuy villages are predominantly Lao, Hmong and Khmu, with women in both villages involved in many forest management activities. However, the women of both villages have faced the challenges as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Opportunities and challenges for women involvement in timber supply chain at village level

	Navene village	Napeuy village
Women involvement in timber supply chain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women have been involved in forest planting and also in controlling or emergency issues with forest.</li> <li>• Women are not suitable for the fieldwork can participate in meeting in decision making altogether with LYU, LFNC, LWU, etc. regarding VFMP.</li> <li>• Women could join the timber listing on log landing 1 or 2 given that its located in the village surrounding.</li> <li>• Women should also know how to mark the trees and calculate the number of m3 to ensure transparency.</li> <li>• Women should be involved in the negotiation about the timber sale as women trader are involved.</li> <li>• Women should be among the committee who decide about the use of the fund</li> <li>• Follow up to ensure that 50% of the fund goes to women</li> <li>• Women could also act as treasurer/accountant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women could be member of the VFC but they have little knowledge</li> <li>• VFMP: women can be fully empowered in decision making process</li> <li>• Planting: actually, women are the one who are the most active in planting trees</li> <li>• Inventory: women could eventually join the timber inventory team and of course the land owner if the timber is cut on private land.</li> </ul>

Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnic Lao women said that they have low motivation in getting involved in forest management as they are located from the forest.</li> <li>• Men mostly enters the forest while the wife are involved in gardening and animal husbandry.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No target requirements for women participation</li> <li>• Lack opportunities to increase their capacity</li> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Husband would not let the women participate</li> <li>• Lack of interest</li> <li>• Women don't know their rights</li> <li>• Women are not formally appointed in any committees so they are not empowered in decision making</li> </ul>
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### 5.3. The situation of women in Bokeo, based on the experience of MHP

#### 5.3.1 MHP and gender mainstreaming at community level

Bokeo province is located in the north-west of the country, and is characterised by a high proportion (about 60%) of non-Lao/Tai ethnic groups (including Hmong, Khmu, Lamet, Akha and Lahu) that largely rely upon upland agriculture for their livelihoods. These ethnic villages are patrilineal, and MHP has a number of projects to develop this community. A key facet of MHP's activities is Gender Action Learning (GAL), originally developed by Oxfam and defined as follows:

GAL is a community-led empowerment methodology for i) individual life and livelihood planning; ii) collective action and gender advocacy for change; and iii) institutional awareness raising and changing power relationship with service providers, private sector stakeholders and government bodies (MHP, 2015:1).

MHP has been using GAL's tools in rural ethnic communities in Bokeo since 2013, and has since become a model for the use of these tools throughout the country, with requests for training from a range of government and non-government organizations. Evaluations have shown that the use of GALs tools (such as that shown in Figure 3) has been able to bring about positive changes in relationships between men and women, including a redistribution of household workload, a reduction in domestic violence against women and increased participation and decision making for women at village level (EU and Oxfam, 2019).



Figure 3: Example of the Journey Road Tool, which can be used by individuals, communities or organizations to plot the pathway to positive changes in livelihoods due to better gender relations

MHP has extended the use of GALS tools to forest management, by developing a training program for the capacity building of forest management committees at village level. By ensuring that the voices of women are respected (and represented) in these committees, they are better able to implement forest use regulations with villagers.

### 5.3.3 Women in forestry within local government

Table 4 shows the women employed at the Bokeo Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (PAFO) in forestry related activities. Less than 20% are women, even though women make up half of all forestry graduates at the National University of Lao PDR (Dr Khamtan Phonethip, 7/1/2020)<sup>1</sup>. All are based in administrative, rather than field positions.

Table 4: Summary of employees in forestry related activities at PAFO Bokeo

Section	Total Staff	Women
Forestry	19	3 (15%)
Forest Inspection	11	2 (18%)
Protected Forest	19	4 (21%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>9 (18%)</b>

When asked about the challenges facing women within the government forest service in Bokeo, a PAFO representative reported that although women have the same opportunities as men in theory, it is challenging to apply these in practice. Most women are reluctant to undertake forest survey fieldwork because it involves a lot of walking and may require camping out overnight.

### 4.3.3 Women in timber processing

There are no large wood processing factories in Bokeo at present, although this situation may change from 2030 when the approximately 25,000 hectares of rubber, planted from 2005, will begin to reduce its latex production and need to be harvested for its timber. There are a few small wood and furniture factories run as family businesses, which rely upon on privately owned wood for their operations.

## 6. Summary of issues related to gender

This Gender Brief demonstrates that Lao PDR does have the legal framework and strategies in place to ensure that there is gender mainstreaming in the forestry sector in Lao PDR. There has been past donor support to promote gender equality in forestry, including with the OAW within MAF. However, it remains difficult in practice for women to fully participate and achieve their potential. These are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of issues related to gender and forest management

Issues
1. Despite a positive legal framework and strategy, gender has not yet been properly integrated in the government forest service in practice, and the majority of forestry staff are male and ethnically Lao/Tai (unable to speak ethnic languages).
2. Female forestry employees at all levels, but particularly at province and district level, find it difficult to go to the field

<sup>1</sup> There are currently 646 students studying forestry at the FoF, NUoL, of which 338 are women (52%). There are four schools in the faculty, being Forest Economics and Wood Technology; Forest management; Watershed Management and Land Use Planning; and Conservation and Ecotourism. More men than women prefer Forest Economics and Wood Technology, while more women than men prefer Conservation and Ecotourism.

3. While women are the main users of forest resources and possess vast botanical knowledge, they rarely participate in forest management due to a lack of education and traditional norms. They find it difficult to participate in exchange visits which would boost their knowledge and provide ideas for change.

4. Social norms, the gendered division of labor and gendered behavioral norms, as well as gendered spaces and species, all limit women's participation in decision making and participation in forest management.

5. Language can also be a barrier if only Lao is spoken in meetings since some women from certain ethnic groups do not or not sufficiently understand. Ethnic women remain the most socially-disadvantaged group in Laos.

6. The supply chains are male dominated at every node, with men having more power than women, more knowledge about markets, prices, timber species and policies. The wood processing sector is considered to be a 'male' sector unfit for women



## 7. Recommendations for integrating gender in Village Forest management and the FLEGT-VPA Process

1. Government and CSOs should mainstream gender in the VFMP training manual to ensure to involve women in each key step of the process upstream. Gender mainstreaming through programs such as GALS needs to be scaled up at village level when implementing FLEGT related issues.
2. Donors and the government should provide incentives and opportunities for women and ethnic minorities to contribute to forest management by increasing the number of qualified and motivated female and ethnic staff in forest sector.
3. The Lao Women's Union (LWU) should be involved in drafting Timber Legality definitions (TLDs) and Timber Legality Assurance (TLAS), as well as improving forest regulations to ensure that gender is included in FLEGT-VPA implementation.
4. NGOs and CSOs should regularly conduct community surveys to monitor gender issues 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 modernized timber value chain.
5. Government, NGOs and CSOs conduct awareness raising activities at community level about gender equality and rights, relevant regulations and laws relevant to TLDs and TLD4 and the rights to sell timber from Village Use Forest (VUF).
6. FLEGT standing office and CSOs have to work together to support capacity development for government and forestry officials, decision-makers, policy formulation and development committee members and task teams on gender and FLEGT-VPA including gender sensitization, gender analysis and gender mainstreaming to promote understanding on the heterogeneity of forest-dependent communities and inclusion of women's concerns in forest policies and programs.
7. Although the relevant laws do not explicitly address gender roles, the government can support women's participation in forest management and the FLEGT VPA by improving regulations for mainstreaming gender in forest sector.

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