



# Gender Study 2010

Gender Study on the Emerging Industrial Bamboo Cluster  
in Selected Districts in North Vietnam and Lao PDR

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## Content

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Research Methods and Tools</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<i>Limitations of the Study</i> .....	6
<b>Overview of Gender Study Locations</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<i>Thanh Hoa</i> .....	6
<i>Houaphanh</i> .....	7
<b>Key Findings</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<i>Thanh Hoa</i> .....	7
Farmers.....	7
Collectors.....	9
Workshops.....	9
Access to Land in Thanh Hoa.....	12
Access to Jobs in Thanh Hoa.....	12
<i>Houaphanh</i> .....	13
Access to Land in Houaphanh.....	13
Access to Jobs in Houaphanh .....	13
<b>Discussion</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<i>Implications of current gender relations on the poverty goals by industrial bamboo cluster development</i> .....	14
Enabling Factors .....	14
Constraining Factors.....	15
<i>Implications of the potential industrial bamboo development on future gender relations</i> .....	15
Potential Benefits .....	15
Potential Risks .....	16
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>20</b>

## ***Abstract***

Bamboo plays a crucial role in the livelihood of people in Thanh Hoa and Houaphanh. Currently, for the majority of bamboo planting farmers, bamboo serves as the primary source of income. Bamboo has the necessary physical properties to serve as a wood substitute. In addition, the range of bamboo products has been significantly diversified, which promises a demand for extensive bamboo supply. The emerging industrial bamboo cluster in Northern Vietnam and Laos has the potential to lift local people out of poverty. The Mekong Bamboo project plans to support this cluster development for the overarching goal of poverty reduction in the area through generation and promotion of high value bamboo usage, which would inevitably drive up prices for bamboo.

Using the gender value chain analysis, this gender study aims to achieve insight on gender situation in the previously mentioned localities within the context of bamboo supply chains. Based on this understanding, analysis is done to explore to what extent current gender roles and gender relationships are likely to affect the implementation and the achievement of the emerging industrial bamboo cluster development. Projections are also made about the potential impact of cluster development on the current gender situation.

Fieldwork interviews and observation show that both men and women participate in bamboo plantation and processing. While labor divisions depend on each household's arrangement, common patterns in bamboo production show that men generally are involved in the "heavy work", while the rest of the work is done by women. This work sharing practice is also found among the families of local traders and workshop owners. Although there is no specific gender preference in employment practice, there are currently more female than male workers. With very few exceptions, traders, collectors and workshop owners are men, although their wives also play a significant role in the businesses.

This study shows that gender equality is an enabling factor for fair distribution of benefits in the bamboo development cluster, both at the household and community levels. Indirectly, the emerging industrial bamboo cluster has the potential to enhance gender equality as a result of rising household incomes, which are often managed by the women in the family. Furthermore, workshops for a diverse range of bamboo products will provide additional job opportunities for local people, particularly for women who currently account for the majority of the labor force in pre-processing workshops.

However, research on non-timber forest products point out that there may be two issues that could prove to harm gender relations with regard to bamboo cluster development in Thanh Hoa. First, rising demand for bamboo may accelerate its exploitation to the extent that there is an inadequate bamboo resource base. The risk of this is highest among poor households that depend heavily on income from selling bamboo. Without an alternative, the loss in income source can severely affect the women (and children) in these households. Currently there are efforts by local agriculture department and Mekong Bamboo's partner to provide farmers with silviculture technique training. Second, over time the modernization of processing technology will require heavy machinery, which makes it more preferable to employ men rather than women to operate the machinery. The growth of this industry will also promise higher salaries for workers. Combined, these two factors could result in an imbalance of job opportunities between men and women.

## ***Introduction***

The emerging Northern Viet Nam cluster is a developing bamboo industry structure supplied from a contiguous group of poor upland districts and provinces in northern Viet Nam and Lao PDR, including Thanh Hoa province and Houaphanh province. There are five major commercial species groups of bamboo growing in the area on both plantations and natural forests. There are currently 95,000 ha of luong plantation, a premium species in the current structure, where the total area of pure bamboo forests of all commercial species is an estimated 550,000 ha and 800,000 ha when including mixed bamboo-timber forest areas. Luong is demonstrated to have the potential to reduce poverty headcounts by more than 75,000 of the 222,000 currently living on less than \$1.25/day and by 80,000 of the 316,000 living on less than \$2/day in the upland luong producing community of 450,000.<sup>1</sup> A sustained price increase would add a further USD \$4.7million/year to those below the \$1.25/day line and \$10.11 million/year to households with family members living on less than \$2/day. The current poverty reach and poverty reduction potential by the other 5 major commercial species groups is expected to further amplify this poverty reduction potential as the bamboo industry develops.

Furthermore, as the industry develops, there is an added effect on gender roles due to the professional opportunities presented by the sector. This report will identify the gender impacts of the development of the emerging industrial bamboo cluster in Northern Vietnam and Lao PDR by employing gender-based value chain analysis. Gender-based value chain analysis helps identify the gains from market imperfections and how the distribution of gains can be altered. Furthermore, the value chain approach strengthens business linkages between producer groups, service providers and other factors, such as processor and importers, rather than focusing exclusively on farm interventions. They vary in complexity and in the range of participants they draw in.

The first section of the report will provide an overview of the research methods and tools used by the research team. An overview of the gender study locations (Thanh Hoa and Houaphanh) and related key findings on gender relations follow. The third section provides a general assessment of the relationship between gender and the bamboo industry. The conclusion provides a forward-looking analysis of the sector within the context of gender.

Below please find the specific objectives that guided the research for this report:

- Conduct a gender analysis of the emerging industrial bamboo sector and how these issues relate to poverty reduction in the industry. The focus of poverty reduction are in income terms as expressed by MDG1 (please refer to footnote 1).
- Carry out an analysis of trends and evidence-based projection of gender dimensions of poverty under different industry development scenarios.

## ***Research Methods and Tools***

A literature review of existing documents containing information on gender relations in the industrial bamboo sector and related sectors, as well as significant field work was conducted in order to gather information and data for this report. Once complete, qualitative data was analyzed according to gender-based value chain analysis and supported by quantitative data wherever relevant. Gender-based value chain analysis highlights the different positions and contributions that men and women make across the value chain. This analysis attempts to uncover the economic, organizational, and symmetric relationships among men and women located along different points within the industry. Within the scope of this study, three aspects of gender relations will be specifically investigated:

<sup>1</sup> USD \$1.25/day and USD \$2/day are the MDG1 individual and household indicators for poverty.

- The roles of men and women in each node of the value chain including processing workshops, traders and enterprises.
- Access to land, labor and capital in general and specifically in bamboo production.
- Decision-making and control related to activities in bamboo production.

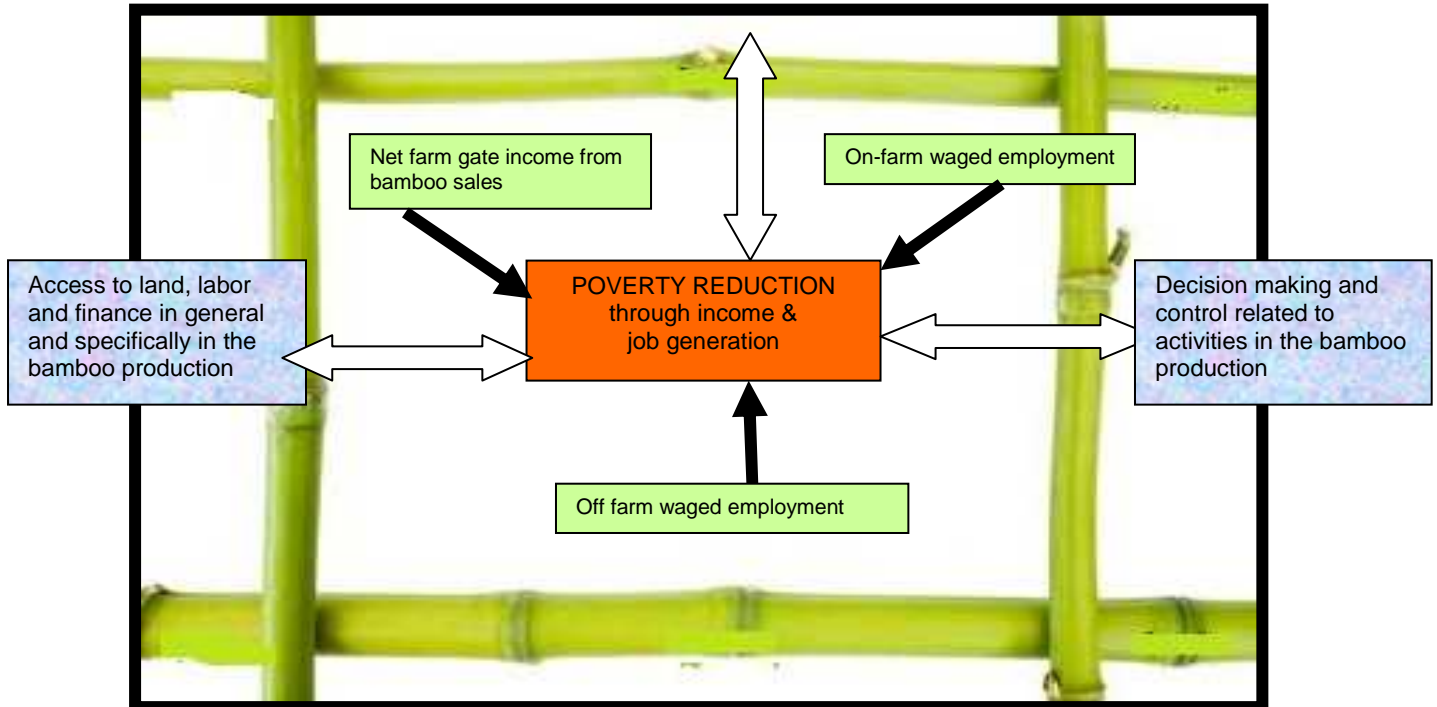


Figure 1: Diagram depicting conceptual model for the report.

Interviews were conducted over the course of two months (October-November 2009). Unless otherwise noted, the interviews were conducted in the four districts of Quan Hoa, Lang Chanh, and Ba Thuoc in Vietnam, as well as Viengxay district in Lao PDR.

- 4 focus group discussions with district authorities
- 4 focus group discussions with commune authorities
- 4 focus group discussions with female farmer
- 4 focus group discussions with male farmer
- 4 in-depth interviews with a male collector
- 1 in-depth interview with a female collector from Quan Hoa
- 7 in-depth interviews with workshop owners (3 – Quan Hoa; 2 - Ba Thuoc; 1- Lang Chanh; 1 - Viengxay)
- 4 in-depth interviews with male workshop workers
- 7 in-depth interviews with female workshop workers
- 3 in-depth interviews with a poor females who are the heads of households

Quantitative data was taken from available baseline and monitoring data provided by the Prosperity Initiative, while secondary was taken from local and national databases. It is important to note that this research aimed to go beyond the traditional use of “head counting” for various activities when evaluating gender relations. Instead qualitative research methods were designed to analyze the stories behind interviewees for common patterns.

### *Limitations of the Study*

In reading through this report, one must acknowledge the following limitations to the study in order to better understand the findings:

- In any given community, gender representations are not uniform. The lives and activities of individual women reflect how they selectively embrace, tolerate, oppose or ignore issues related to gender. In addition, individual women and men, depending on the situation, behave differently under different circumstances. Therefore, given the limited time period for fieldwork in Viengxay in particular, it was challenging to develop a fully comprehensive understanding of gender relations there.
- Given the nature of qualitative research, finds are based on narratives told by people that the research team met. It is important to note that many in the selected sample were chosen according to proximity to field work and other miscellaneous factors. As a result, this may limit the reality of gender relations in a certain area.
- Income was difficult to collect due to the fact that it is a private matter to many interviewees and others do not have a habit of recording such information.

### *Overview of Gender Study Locations*

It is important to note that for organizational purposes the report will be organized in terms of the actors involved at each node of the supply chain. Therefore, a list of actors and associated descriptions accompany each respective study location overview for Thanh Hoa and Houaphanh.

#### *Thanh Hoa*

Thanh Hoa is a province in north central Vietnam with a population of approximately 3.5 million people, ranking third in terms of population in the country. The province has a land area of 11,168 square kilometres. The three chosen study sites in Thanh Hoa for this report (Quan Hoa, Ba Thuoc, and Lang Chanh) are in the north western part of the province with a diverse ethnic composition of Muong, Thai and Kinh, among others. All three districts are among the 61 poorest districts in the country.

Below please find descriptions for the key actors in Thanh Hoa province with whom researchers conducted interviews with in order to extrapolate information on gender relations. Please note that meetings with interviewees largely depended on availability, and that not all of the actors in the bamboo industry are included in this report. For example, truck drivers and processors were unavailable for interviews. Therefore the following information is by no means exhaustive and only meant to serve as a snapshot of gender relations within the industry in Thanh Hoa.

- **Farmers:** Farmers are involved in the tending and harvesting of bamboo plantations. They rely heavily on bamboo as a source of income.
- **Collectors:** Collectors and traders are the people who serve as the bridge between processing workshops and/or trucks drivers and village collectors. They usually cover more than one village and have much financial power than village collectors<sup>2</sup>.
- **Workshops:** Some workshops prepare low-value products, including slats and chopsticks for processors, while others prepare finished products.

<sup>2</sup> People who collect bamboo at the village level.

## Houaphanh

Houaphanh is a province in north eastern Lao PDR that lies on the border with Vietnam with a population of 285,766 people. The province has a land area of 16,500 square kilometres, of which 76% is forest area.

While data concerning the extent of bamboo resources in the Houaphanh province is poor, it is estimated that bamboo forests cover more than 500,000 ha with more than 20 mixed species. Historically, local people have been harvesting them for their daily use, fencing and handicrafts. However, it was not until recently that processing of bamboo has started at two local factories that produce paper pulp and semi-processed products of chopsticks and toothpicks. There is also evidence that there was informal cross-border trade of semi-processed bamboo strips and bamboo culms even before the processors established, although it has not been substantiated. Viengxay district in the province has great potential for poverty reduction<sup>3</sup> through the extraction of the *vau* and *nua* bamboo species.

Given the nascent state of development of Houaphanh's bamboo industry and the fluid nature of roles and responsibilities within the industry, researchers consulted with a combination of "gatherers," "traders," and "processors" who may or may not play one or a combination of these roles. In general, gatherers are village groups that form contracts with processors to collect bamboo from plantations and forests. Traders sell their bamboo to processors. Processors develop primarily low-value bamboo products such as handicrafts.

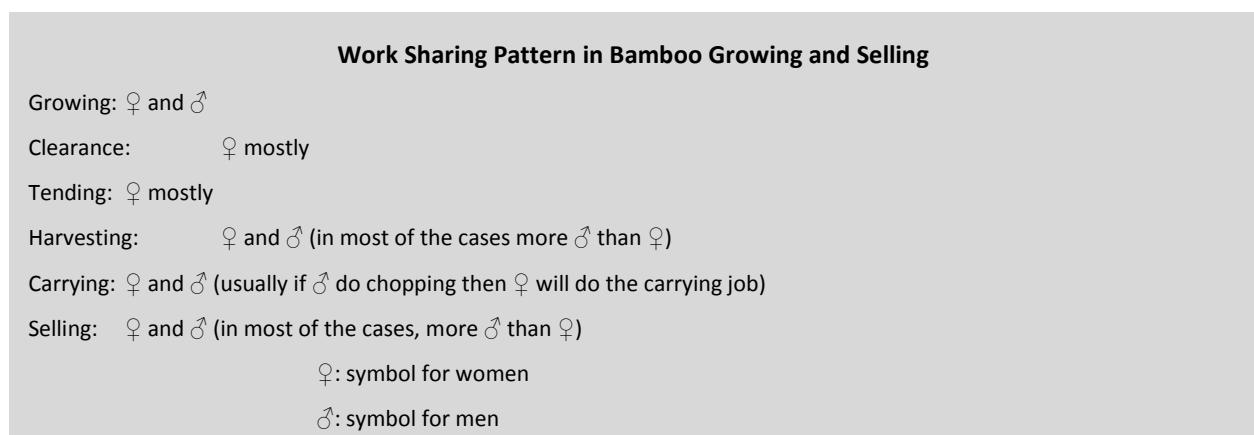
## Key Findings

The following section provides the key findings from this report in terms of selected key actors in the bamboo industry in Thanh Hoa and Houaphanh, respectively. For contextual purposes, this section also provides an analysis of access to land and access to jobs in Thanh Hoa and access to land in Houaphanh.

### Thanh Hoa

#### Farmers

In terms of family labor, generally both male and female farmers are involved in the process of bamboo plantation tending and harvesting in Quan Hoa, Ba Thuoc and Lang Chanh. The labor division in each task depends on the specific household situation over time.



**Figure 2:** Diagram depicting how responsibilities related to bamboo growing and sharing are divided between men and women.

<sup>3</sup> Mekong Bamboo. "Proposal: Houaphanh Bamboo Value Chain Development, Mekong Bamboo Program," Prosperity Initiative (December 2008-June 2010).

Both men and women play an important role in generating household income through their involvement in growing, chopping, carrying and selling, whereas, men are primarily involved in clearance and tending. Furthermore, interviews show a general pattern that women are more likely to harvest bamboo when they need money for daily expenses as they consider bamboo a “living piggy bank.” Men tend to engage in harvesting in bulk, and therefore, reap larger amounts of money from sales. In both cases, most villagers sell their bamboo to local “secondary collectors” who receive money from bigger collectors. Farmers can also get loans and buy goods with credit from the secondary collectors in exchange for bamboo later on. This structure makes it convenient to do ad-hoc chopping, particularly for women, in order to secure money for daily expenses, including food and children’s tuition fees. It is important to note that gender does not matter to collectors and traders in determining prices for bamboo. It should be noted that some farmers could also bring their bamboo to sell to workshops or other collectors. In all cases, the quality of the bamboo is the most important factor for price-making.

Data from the table provided by Prosperity Initiative below supports information gathered during interviews, particularly with regard to the division of family labor in harvesting and selling bamboo. Just as the diagram indicates above, though both men and women are involved in these activities, the number of men is slightly more than women.

**Division of Bamboo Farming Labor by Gender (Workdays)**

Activity	Family Labor		Hired Labor		Exchange Labor	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
<b>Planting</b>	24	14	8	2	4	2
<b>Weeding/Pruning</b>	151	139	33	22	0	0
<b>Harvesting/Selling</b>	173	137	127	9	8	1
<b>Total</b>	348	290	168	33	12	3

**Figure 4:** Source: Results from Prosperity Initiative’s Thanh Hoa Resurvey 2009

All interviewees emphasized that bamboo is a critical source of income for the family. While the levels of dependence on bamboo vary according to district, it is significant that the lowest level of dependence on bamboo is 41% in the district of Ba Thuoc. This indicates that nearly half or more of all households in the three observed districts rely on bamboo either to break out of or ameliorate poverty. Nevertheless, this trend does carry adverse effects as reliance on bamboo leads to over-exploitation of young bamboo culms before they adequately mature to the age of 3. In turn, this threatens the sustainability of bamboo resources. For instance, Quan Hoa district calculates that the annual extractable rate of luong, a high-value species of bamboo, to be around 10-15 million culms, but at present, only approximately 2 million culms are harvested every year.<sup>4</sup> Interviews with men and women farmers reveal that a lack of training on best practices for bamboo production further exacerbate the issue of over-exploitation. Thanh Hoa province, with support from development agencies is developing a new luong management policy and strategy in response to the issue.

One positive pattern often seen in interviews is that women in these districts tend to handle family finances. This is evidenced by the fact that men report that husbands and children tend to approach their wives and mothers, respectively, for spending money. Assuming the industry continues to develop and incomes continue to rise from the bamboo trade, there will be added benefits to women as they control increasingly significant family finances.

<sup>4</sup> Thanh Hoa Provincial Government official website (2009). <http://www.thanhhoa.gov.vn>

## Collectors

Similar to the situation with bamboo growing farmers, usually both spouses in a household are involved in the buying of bamboo from villagers and selling of bamboo to bigger collectors. Though men are often viewed as the figureheads or points of contact by the farmers, truck drivers and big collectors that they interact with, women also serve as collectors.

When asked whether collectors and traders knew of any women in their area of work, in almost all cases the answer was no. In fact, there is only one female who is the head of her own enterprise in the district of Quan Hoa. Furthermore, the majority of processors involved in this report stated that they were approached by more women farmers than men seeking to sell bamboo.

Despite the fact that women also play significant roles beside their husbands as collectors and traders, the general sentiment among all women interviewees is that it is not an ideal area of work due to the heavy work, the physically demanding labor, long work hours and financial calculations involved. These are areas that they would much rather reserve for men. While men were generally more positive than women about their work as collectors and traders, all interviewees generally agreed that the costs of labor oftentimes outweighed the benefits of the income generated from this trade.



The cuts on this woman's hand depict how physically demanding the labor is in collecting bamboo.

### **The Story of a Female Collector**

*"Women are quicker than men. In particular, when dealing with a female collector, truck drivers would not drive very hard bargains"* Ms Nghiep shared her personal experiences.

Ten years ago, together with her husband, she started collecting bamboo to sell to trucks. Then she confidently took over the job and has been working on her own during the last four years as her husband did not feel like doing it any more. She has a roadside "convenience shop" where she sells a wide range of stuffs. This is also the place she have bamboo piled up ready to load on trucks.

Every day, she gets bamboo price updates on her phone, which makes it easier to check prices than before 2004 when she didn't have telephone and had to take whatever offered by truck drivers. Still, compared with before, it is easier to buy but harder to sell as there are many other collectors.

She rides her motorbike to villages to check the bamboo before buying from farmers. She lends money (without interest) to households in need and then will be paid with bamboo. However, she said would never takes advantage of this to impose low prices as she wants to keep her good reputation and relationships with farmers. Otherwise, she would not be able to buy any bamboo. A list of money borrowers is stuck on the shop door so that she could get it updated easily.

This dynamic Muong ethnic origin woman seems to have everything under control when she said with a smile that now she does not have to think very much doing the business. With all her daily expenses are covered by money from the groceries, money from bamboo trade has been saved for building a new house now. She will stay long in the trade will encourage her daughter to because *"Bamboo business will never stop and there will be more new products over time."*

**Ms Nghiep (Coi Village, Xuan Phu commune, Lang Chanh district)**

## Workshops

**Workshop Owners.** Workshop owners are primarily entrepreneurial men who manage the day-to-day activities at their enterprises. However, there is one woman who is the head of her own workshop located in Quan Hoa district. In addition, accounting is primarily done by a female staff member in these workshops and the wives of the owners are also involved in workshop operations, although their responsibilities vary depending on the company. In all, interviews were conducted at 6 different workshops, including 3 in Quan Hoa, 2 in Ba Thuoc and 1 in Lang Chanh.

Workshop owners made it clear that due to consistently high demand for workers there is no discrimination in hiring practices for men and women. Most workshop owners are concerned about a lack of capital for business development and high worker turnover when people leave for better opportunities. Women are typically assigned to tasks that are repetitive, including positions in production chains and grouping of bamboo, while men primarily carry out heavy work, including the loading and carrying of bamboo and products.

### **The Story of a Female Workshop Owner**

She owns one big chopstick and toothpick workshop and four small ones with a total of more than 100 workers. She has a good reputation within her business and is doing her best to maintain it so as to attract more customers. Her business, which launched in 2003, is doing well and is selling to markets in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. At present, she is still unable to produce finished products due to a lack of capital and also bad debt on the part of her customers. However, she is looking forward to expanding the business soon via loans provided to small and medium enterprises.

When it comes to exporting her products, her plan is to employ more female workers because she believes they are more meticulous in selecting and bunching chopsticks. She also believes female workers are more productive when working long hours. All her processing workshops now have more female workers than males. At her firm, men are typically in charge of saws and loading, while the rest of the work is done by a combination of men and women. All workers have 6-month or one-year labour contracts with detailed agreements.

As a successful business woman, she is also working to her husband's debt from gambling. *"I have to work hard to raise our children and pay for his debts. Life is tough but I have to accept it as it can't be changed. If he would help with the business, I would not let my children stay with their grandparents anymore. I would take care of them myself."*

**Ms. Hao, Xuan Duong Collective, Quan Hoa district**

**Workshop Workers.** Data collected by the Mekong Bamboo project in a business survey confirmed observations that there were more female workers than males workers in workshops that were visited.<sup>5</sup> For example, 73% of total processing workshops have more than 50% of women laborers. When asked why this is the case, the most common explanation from all the interviewees was that women are more open to accepting tedious work and low-paying jobs. This is consistent with information from a group discussion with male workers, of whom the majority agreed that they would rather stay at home than take a low wage. The primary reason that workers seek positions at workshops is due to a lack of alternative professional opportunities.

<sup>5</sup> Vietnam Handicraft and Promotion Center. "Bamboo Business Database," Prosperity Initiative (August 27, 2008).



A young mother bringing her 3 year-old son to work  
(Bamboo woven mat workshop in Lang Chanh)

#### Accounts of Reasons for Taking Jobs at Workshops

- It is easier to work here. I'm too weak to do farming in the mountains. (A female worker in a chopstick workshop in Quan Hoa)
- When I first started looking for jobs, I saw workshops with stable work so I went for it. (A male worker in a chopstick workshop in Quan Hoa)
- I couldn't find another job. (A male worker in Viengxay)
- I got a Medical certificate but couldn't find any work. I live close by so I went to work here (A female worker in Lang Chanh)
- I would like to be a tailor because I love colorful materials but my house is far from the main road so I couldn't dream of having my own shop. I come to work here to make money to help my parents (17 year old female worker)
- I came home after spending 5 months in a timber company in Binh Duong. I quit the job because I didn't have any friends there. My sister works here so I decided to join her. (18 year old male worker in Lang Chanh)
- I was working in a sewing factory in Vientiane but I missed my parents so I went home and started working here. (Female worker in Viengxay)
- I used to work in Yen Bai, Lao Cai and Phu Tho but I moved here because Thanh Hoa has a lot of luong so we can have jobs all year round. (A female worker originated from Yen Bai)
- I couldn't find any work after graduating from high school so I have been working in chopsticks for 11 years. It is easy to learn and to do this job! (A female worker in Quan Hoa)

Bamboo processing is considered a labor intensive profession that does not require a high level of education. As such, it is appropriate for both males and females who have little to no job skills. For these unskilled workers, salary is low and there is little difference in payment. Rather, salary is based on seniority and skillfulness rather than gender. Male workers are believed to be able to perform tasks assigned to women, while females are believed to be incapable of completing tasks assigned to men.

Except for a few senior workers, most of the workers are single and between the ages of 18 and 25. There are also a significant number of workers who have returned home after professional stints with factories in southern Vietnam. Many of these young workers, both female and male, indicate that their jobs are merely temporary and that they would move on if given a better opportunity. Again, the key concern is the low payment for simple manual work.

The situation seems to be different for married workers. Although there are few of them, married women exhibit more of a commitment to their positions at bamboo workshops than their single counterparts. The two primary reasons for this is that they tend to have extended within the nearby area, many of whom moved there from other provinces, and they are allowed to bring their children to work, which provides some measure of flexibility to their professional lives. Many of them started

work at their respective workshops before getting married. They are experienced professionals, and are satisfied with having job security.

Regarding safety and protection, all interviewees indicated that the work is very light and that they are not worried about accidents. In the first few days, newcomers may get minor cuts but as they gain more experience they have problems. However, female workers mention dizziness as a result of sitting for hours on end doing repetitive work. In some workshops, gloves and masks are given to workers but workers are not very keen on wearing them as they are hot and suffocating. Training on labor safety by the District Department of Commerce and Industry was provided free of charge to some processing workshops in Quan Hoa has raised awareness about safety issues with workers.

### Access to Land in Thanh Hoa

All the land in the surveyed areas has been allocated to local people with land certificates. According to Vietnamese tradition, land is only passed on to sons and not to daughters. This is despite the fact that when asked about gender preferences, all interviewees, including local authorities and farmers (both male and female), said that it is no longer a norm to favor sons. Nevertheless, since very few women stay with their biological parents after marriage, land is not split to give them a portion. In some cases where married daughters do not live too far from their parents' home, they may be given the right to extract from land plots, but cannot have ownership over those lands. Daughters are expected to work the land of their in-laws instead. While this phenomenon is not unique to the surveyed location, once again, it reiterates a situation in which married women are dependent on their husband's land inheritance.

Consequently, women are at risk of losing land access in the case of divorces. Land use certificates only contain the name of the head of household, which is usually the husband. According to the Decree 181/2004 CP-CP, it is optional for households with land use certificates (LUC) issued before Jul 2004 to include the names of both spouses. None of the interviewees showed any interest in having their LUCs changed to the new form, since neither local authorities nor the people consider land disputes between spouses as an issue. Currently, intra-household land disputes are rare, but this situation may change in the future. If women's rights to land are not ensured they run the risk of not benefitting from the growth of the bamboo industry when household risks arise.

According to interviewees, land shortage is also problem with each household only having an average of 0.5-1 ha. Consequently, newly-weds face major difficulties acquiring productive land in general and bamboo land in particular. This is a serious problem for the local agriculture-based economy. The implications for married women with small children are that there are fewer options for them to have independent sources of income for much needed money. At the same time, the land shortage stresses the importance of off-farm job opportunities for both men and women.

### Access to Jobs in Thanh Hoa

Not many job opportunities are available in the localities in this report. Migration for work in southern Vietnam is very common, especially among people who have just graduated from high school. Girls and boys are both allowed, and in some cases, encouraged to go. However, few of these migrant workers are successful in securing jobs and consequently have to go home. Apart from farming, young people go for hired labor.

One more alternative is to work overseas as "exported laborers", primarily to Malaysia under a government assisted program. Although exact figures could not be found, villagers claim that more males than females participate in these programs. Still, there are stories about husbands who let their wives go. Some interviewees see it as a reasonable arrangement for the wives who go and husband stay

at home because women have a “higher tolerance for hardship.” Therefore, they are more willing to work until the termination of their contracts.

Access to jobs is also dependent on mobility, which oftentimes depends on marital status. Since Vietnamese women get married at a very young age (18-22), their opportunities to travel diminish very early on in life.

### *Houaphanh*

Since the bamboo industry in Houaphanh is at a nascent stage of development, this section will provide a brief description of the general gender situation in Laos regarding access to land and a cursory projection of the potential benefits of bamboo to gender in the province.

#### Access to Land in Houaphanh

The Laos Constitution and associated land decrees recognizes women’s rights to hold land by stating that the names of the husband and wife should be recorded in official Land Register Books. With regard to customary land laws, both daughters and sons can inherit land and there are no cultural restrictions on women landing such situations. Inheritance practices are not rigid and parents usually decide which one of their children will inherit family property. The traditional practice is for the youngest daughter to remain in her parents’ home after marriage in order to provide care for the parents in old age. Thus, the daughter oftentimes inherits the family homestead. However, implementation of legal decrees are often difficult to carry out in practice, especially among ethnic minorities, such as the Khmu and the Hmong where according to customary laws, land is transferred from one generation to another through sons only.<sup>6</sup> This issue is pronounced Houaphanh where ethnic minorities account for the majority of the population and there are 22 different ethnic groups.

It has been pointed out in many studies that the names on land documents do not always reflect the actual landholder: while more women inherited land than men, land use certificates and titles typically list their husband’s name. In addition, spouses usually jointly acquire land parcels, yet only a small percentage of the certificates and titles for these purchases list both the husband and wife. There are three main reasons<sup>7</sup> for this discrepancy:

1. Only men take part in informational meetings for certification/titling. Women are not aware of the legal and economic significance of having their names on land use certificates.
2. The form for collecting landholder information only asks for the name of head of the household, traditionally the oldest man in the family. Despite the Constitution, no provision was made on the forms for joint land ownership.
3. Given patriarchal norms, wives feel that it is appropriate for their husbands’ names on land use certificates and titles.

#### Access to Jobs in Houaphanh

Houaphanh is home to 22 different ethnic groups, including H’Mong communities. Gender situations vary significantly depending on the culture and circumstances. It is worth noting that all ethnic minority cultures assign women heavier workloads than men for food production, income generation, domestic work and maintenance of cultural traditions. Ethnic minority women living in traditional communities do have access to land for food, livestock production and collection of forest produce.

<sup>6</sup> Lastarria, Susana. “Who benefits from land titling? Lessons from Bolivia and Laos,” IIED (2007).

<sup>7</sup> “Study on Gender and Property Rights: Project Best Practices,” USAID (2006).

Fieldwork in Houaphanh shows that in households, women and men share the housework together with heavy work done by men and light work by women. Similar to Thanh Hoa, women primarily handle family finances. It is interesting to note that interviewees report that while fishing and fuel collecting is done by both spouses, bamboo shoot and vegetable collecting is done only by women as they are only for consumption primarily in the household.

The women that the research team met with are proud that they can carry out tasks traditionally assigned to men but men are incapable of doing the same, especially in the case of brocading. This handicraft contributes important income to the household economy for families that have women with this skill set and the money to buy quality thread. In addition, sons and daughters enjoy equal educational opportunities. An interview with one household indicated that the family had enough money to a son and two daughters to colleges in Vientiane with loans from the government.

Assuming a market develops for bamboo in Houaphanh, households will benefit from the added income, in addition to the income they already have from rice farming and the selling of other non-timber forest products. This alternative source will help to reduce poverty in the locality. In addition, the cluster growth could drive the establishment of more processing workshops near bamboo source which would bring more off-farm income sources to local people, including both men and women.

## ***Discussion***

Mekong Bamboo study<sup>8</sup> points out that development of the bamboo industry in Thanh Hoa and Houaphanh can potentially reduce poverty through the following mechanisms:

- Net farm-gate income from bamboo sales.
- On-farm waged employment.
- Off-farm waged employment.

The following sub-sections explain how gender relations can influence the development of the bamboo industry, in terms of enabling factors and constraining factors, and vice-versa.

### *Implications of current gender relations on the poverty goals by industrial bamboo cluster development*

#### Enabling Factors

It is very likely that poverty reduction will continue to have a positive effect on both men and women as gender relations are generally good in the surveyed areas. Stakeholders have shown good understanding of work sharing in labor. Work at processing workshops is considered particularly appropriate for women as it is light. Although women are still expected to do most of the housework, increasingly they are also expected to contribute to household incomes. Given the shortage of agricultural and forestry land, even the married are expected to find jobs in workshops and factories. This mobility will enable both women and men to have access to off-farm employment.

Women farmers are also contributing to household incomes by selling bamboo. In addition, they are also the primary handlers of family finances. In light of numerous studies indicating that spending of household incomes by women tend to be on nutrition and education for children, this practice will surely have a positive long-term effect on household investments. The existence of bamboo as a “living piggy bank” for women allows them to continue to resort to bamboo to meet demands for cash.

<sup>8</sup> John Marsh & Ngo Viet Hung, The emerging industrial bamboo cluster in Northern Vietnam: Impact on upland poverty reduction,” Prosperity Initiative (2008).

### Constraining Factors

One downside of the current practice of bamboo harvesting is the harm of over-exploitation. The primary reason for this lies with the women who cut and sell bamboo in order to pay for daily expenses. This form of harvesting has a negative impact on the sustainable growth of bamboo and its quality, and over time, could destroy the very bamboo resources that women rely on for daily expenses. Over-exploitation is particularly bad among poor households with little bamboo land area. It is important to note that extraction is not so intensive in Quan Hoa where Mekong Bamboo and other organizations, such as GRET, have provided technical training, and as a result, people have refrained from chopping bamboo during the shoot season.

Another issue is that if current average salaries for workshop workers do not increase, there will be a disproportionate number of women working at workshops compared to men due to the low wages. According to PI figures, although other waged opportunities generated by bamboo are disproportionately done by men, in the processing segment, around 4,700 of the jobs are held by women and only 2,800 by men in northern Vietnam. Among 56 workshops/enterprises in Thanh Hoa, 33 have more than 50% in female workers. If workshops are not able to upgrade and expand their production, salaries will not increase enough to attract male workers.

### *Implications of the potential industrial bamboo development on future gender relations*

#### Potential Benefits

Increased net farm-gate prices of bamboo will increase the income source currently managed by women. As previously mentioned, with family finances controlled by women, more money will likely be spent on children's education and nutrition, which will contribute to long-term familial stability. Both sons and daughters also have equal opportunity to education. Increased income can only improve the current situation.

Local job creation through industrial bamboo development is very important for married women. According to the FAO, "Women's confinement to home-based and reproductive work reduces family incomes and overall economic growth. Tapping into this reserve promises important development effects for rural economies<sup>9</sup> because rural wage employment can help women escape from poverty by increasing their income and strengthening their household bargaining power."<sup>10</sup> For married couples, it is the mother who will go away to search for jobs, which is detrimental to the young children they leave behind. In cases where the children leave with their mothers, the dislocation is equally detrimental. Local job generation solves this problem and helps to ensure the integrity of the family unit.

Pre-processing workshops create jobs not only for local people but also people from other provinces. While some job competition may be anticipated, this influx of outsiders can be seen as a new source of knowledge that may enrich local life. This may be particularly beneficial to married women who would otherwise not be able to leave their provinces.

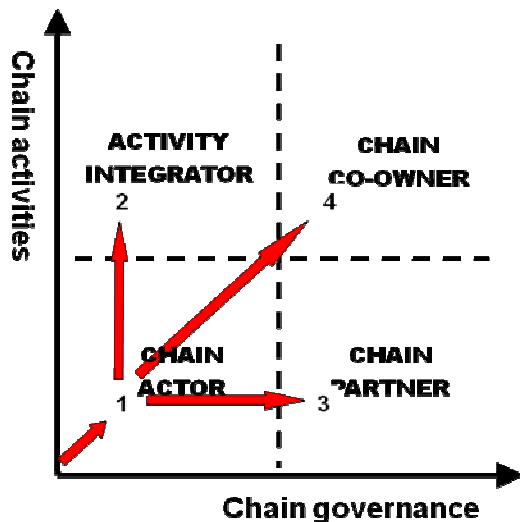
Increased opportunities in the bamboo industry can also produce opportunities for farmers and women to move into other areas of the bamboo sector. The chain empowerment dimension matrix<sup>11</sup> below illustrates the potential mobility for men and women farmers in different areas of chain activities<sup>12</sup> and chain management.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> FAO. "Women and Rural Employment: Fighting Poverty by Redefining Gender Roles," Policy Brief 5 (2009).

<sup>10</sup> "Gender Equity in Agriculture and Rural Development," FAO (2009).

<sup>11</sup> "KIT's Organic and Fair Trade Value Chain Trajectory," Royal Tropical Institute (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Chain activities refer to input procurement, farming, grading and bulking, trading and distribution, processing/warehousing, retailing.



**Chain actor:** a farmer is a chain actor when he/she only engages in farming and has no influence over the other dimensions of the chain.

**Chain activity integrator:** a farmer is an integrator if he/she moves into other activities in the chain, yet without exerting more influence on the management of the chain.

**Chain partner:** a farmer is a chain partner if he/she specializes in farming (e.g., through membership of a farmer group, has influence over management issues in the chain).

**Chain co-owner:** a farmer is a co-owner if he/she has moved upstream in the chain and he/she has influence over the management of the chain.

Currently, the majority of bamboo farmers are in the left two quadrants. The growth of the industrial bamboo clustering will create an enabling environment for an increasing number of dynamic and entrepreneurial farmers to move into the lower right quadrant to become “activity partners”. Although fieldwork findings show that men and women are not moving along the two axes at the same rate, there is significant potential for women to catch up with men in occupying the position of “activity partners.” The examples of the successful female collector and successful female workshop owner will inspire other local women to follow suit and make their roles in the value chain more significant. This will likely take place as more women take over bamboo business operations from their husbands, they become increasingly confident in their new roles and daughters are encouraged take over business operations when they grow older. The empowerment process occurring in this value chain will have influence on the socio- economic status of bamboo growing female and male farmers in their communities. It is the power gained along the process that will ensure the sustainability of poverty reduction.

### Potential Risks

Apart from the potential benefits to the communities, there are a number of risks that should be taken into account when considering the strategy of increasing the volume of high value products as a driver for initially increased volumes and jobs creation, and ultimately increased raw material prices with associated poverty impact for bamboo producing communities. For non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as bamboo, these risks include:

1. The displacement of women from the industry as mechanization and commercialization occurs.<sup>14</sup>
2. Low returns on yield when NTFPs are not produced locally,
3. When forest dwellers do not have access to important and therefore do not benefit from all potential benefits, and
4. Overexploitation leading to a loss of access to the resource base.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Chain governance refers to information, quality assurance, learning and innovation, chain cooperation, market intelligence, finance, logistics.

<sup>14</sup>“Commercialisation of Non-Timber Forest Products: Review and Analysis of Research,” CIFOR and FAO (2000).

<sup>15</sup>“Gender and Non-timber Forest Products: Promoting Food Security and Economic Empowerment,” (IFAD) 2008.

The risk of over-extraction is particularly serious because it is linked to a demand for bamboo supplies in order to produce a wide range of bamboo products. This demand will likely grow. Data from Prosperity Initiative points out that one of the main issues with bamboo forest and farmer production is that poor silvicultural practices result in damaged bamboo and low yields. Furthermore, collectors buy raw bamboo at any age and quality, leading to unsustainable exploitation rates. While processing workshops and traders are relatively selective in buying bamboo, pulp paper factories will accept even diseased and very young bamboo.

It is important to investigate how over-exploitation could potentially negatively affect poor women farmers. The narratives collected during the previously mentioned survey by Prosperity Initiative confirm the risk of degraded bamboo supplies that are not qualified for medium and high value processing workshops. At that rate of extraction and without proper tending due to the fact that farmers are too poor to buy fertilizers, bamboo resources will deteriorate. There is growing evidence of this in Lang Chanh where the district has lost its reputation for having the best bamboo compared to Quan Hoa and Ba Thuoc. Although there are select few wealthy people who are aware of the premiums for medium- and high-value bamboo, it is the poor that harvest young bamboo to earn money for urgent needs. The implication is that wealthy households will continue to benefit from higher prices for good bamboo while the poor will fail to reap the benefits. In other words, the growth of the development of the bamboo industry targeted at low-value products such as pulp and handicrafts could lead to the loss of bamboo resources. Given the reliance on bamboo almost as a source of income for the poor, this issue is becoming increasingly urgent. The general consensus in development literature is that when household economies deteriorate, women (and small children), share a disproportionate amount of the burden from such an occurrence.

While both men and women currently play important roles at workshops, over the long-term if technological innovation and investment does not account for gender roles the current nature of female dominated workshops could swing in the opposite direction. The primary reason for this is that companies tend to hire men to operate machinery rather than women. In order to prevent this from happening, perceptions must change and companies that are primarily managed by men must acknowledge that women can also operate machinery.

## **Conclusion**

In Vietnam, study findings shows that men and women actively participate in bamboo plantations and processing. While labor division depends on each household arrangement, there is a consistent pattern in work-sharing that indicates men primarily do what is considered “heavy work” and most other activities are carried out by women. This work sharing practice is also found among local traders and workshop workers. Hiring practices between genders largely depends on the specific responsibility in consideration, and there are currently more female than male workers in workshops. Male workers are viewed as able to perform women’s tasks and therefore are able to replace women in the bamboo processing line. Machinery fixing/maintenance is almost exclusively done by male workers. For workers, salary is paid based on seniority and the specific responsibility rather than gender. With very few exceptions, traders, collectors and workshop owners are men, while their wives also play important supporting roles.

Current understanding and practice of gender equality as indicated by interviewees is an enabling factor for fair distribution of benefits from the bamboo industry both at the household and community levels. Decision-making is not exclusive to male members, therefore bamboo-related activities are done via consultations between spouses, especially when a large number of bamboo is being harvested for sale. Both men and women are encouraged to search for employment so mobility is not an issue for women. A critical gender issue identified in this study is the fact that the majority of land use certificates issued before 2004 bear only the names of the male head of households. This is disconcerting for many women as it leaves them susceptible to losing access to land following a divorce.

Indirectly, the development of the bamboo industry can potentially enhance the level gender of equality through rising household incomes which are primarily managed by women. Given the fact that women tend to spend more on their children’s education and health, the industry could also contribute to familial well-being. Processing workshops for a diverse range of bamboo products will provide additional job opportunities for local people, particularly women who currently account for the majority of the labor force in pre-processing workshops. More profitable enterprises will pay higher salaries to workers, providing good off-farm income, which is especially important for households with little to no fertile land. Equally important, paid jobs outside of the family will give women more self-confidence as they attain a wider professional skill set and contribute to household incomes. Over the long-term, development of the bamboo industry may also motivate more women to take on different roles in the industry, including governance over industry activities. Already there is evidence of this in the successful female collector and female workshop owner, and women will continue to play a more active role as they take over bamboo business operations from their husbands, they become increasingly confident in their new roles and daughters are encouraged to over business operations when they grow older.

However, two risks related to gender are of particular concern in the industry. First, rising demand for bamboo may accelerate its extraction to the extent that this resource deteriorates. This issue would be even more pronounced among poor households that depend heavily on income from bamboo sources. Without any alternatives, the loss of this income source will severely affect these families. Literature on poverty points out that women and small children in particular are most vulnerable to poverty hardships. It is important to note that in Vietnam and China many women are engaged in the new high value processes such as pressed bamboo and construction boards. For example, 63% of jobs in processing in northern Vietnam are done by women. As the bamboo industry continues to develop in Vietnam and Laos, further research is necessary to determine the implications of mechanization and commercialization on gender in the workplace. Second, over time the modernization of processing technologies for bamboo implies more advanced technologies, which would make companies give preference to hiring men rather than women. This change in the industry would also promise higher

salaries for workers. Combined, these two factors could prove to hurt gender equality for those who are involved.

In Houaphanh, as the industry remains in its infancy, it is difficult to envision any impact the industry will have on gender. However, given the rich stock of un-harvested bamboo in Laos, there is great potential for poverty reduction. Given the promising state of gender equality in Houaphanh, it is reasonable to expect that the fruits of poverty reduction would be beneficial to both women and men.

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