



Interaction between gender and customary tenure practices in village forest management

Info brief



Ban Khok Luang Village, Houayxay District and Houay Village, Paktha District, Lao PDR

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Context

Forest resources are particularly important for rural households in Lao PDR. Poorer households in particular depend upon them for nutrition, fuelwood and income. Women spend more time than men do gathering food and firewood, meaning that a loss of forest resources impacts women disproportionately and increases social inequality.

Ethnic women often participate in land use decision-making at the household level. However, they are underrepresented in community-level decision-making structures, such as the Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit. Women then find it difficult to express their needs and interests related to forest and land decisions.

This study aimed to contribute to an enhanced understanding of forest management policies when interpreted and implemented at the village level. It also identifies areas in which the government can use its influence to improve the position of women in community forestry.

Research questions

- What roles do women from ethnic majority and minority groups play in village forestry? What rights and benefits do women receive from village forestry? Are these roles, rights and benefits similar to or different than that of ethnic majority and minority men?

- What is the existing representation of women in the Village Forest Management Plan and other decision-making spaces? What is the role that women representatives play in decision-making spaces? What challenges do they face? Are these similar or different to that of ethnic majority and minority men?
- How do women from ethnic majority and minority groups take part in village forestry and express their needs and interests related to forest and land decisions? Are these similar to or different from the engagement of ethnic majority and minority men?
- Which gender gaps are there in terms of roles, rights and benefits in village forestry? How do these gaps interact with customary practices and institutions in the villages?
- What can be improved in implementing the forest and land laws and policies at the village level with respect to gender and customary tenure rights?

Methodology

The study was undertaken in two villages in Bokeo Province. Ban Khok Luang, with 95 households, is an ethnic majority Lao Loum village located in Houayxay District, where the dominant livelihoods are paddy rice and trading. Houay Palam, with 100 households, is an ethnic minority Khmu village in a mountainous area of Paktha District. The residents rely on shifting cultivation of rice, raising cattle and collecting non-timber forest products.

The MHP research team used semi-structured interviews with district

officials, village officials including the Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit, and members of the community, including young people, women and men.

Findings and conclusions

- It was apparent in this study that the Houay Palam Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit was performing much better than the sub unit in Khok Luang. This is likely due to the higher involvement of women in Houay Palam.
- The roles, representation and participation of women in village forestry are determined by a range of factors not directly related to ethnicity. This includes age, proportion of income derived from forests, area of forest, opportunity to access outside wage income, presence of women in the Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit and reliance on swidden agriculture.
- An important difference between the two villages in attitudes to village forestry is related to source of income. In Khok Luang, the Lao Loum farmers have privately owned paddy fields and gardens that provide the source of most of their rice and income. Lao Loum women receive a greater proportion of household income from activities unrelated to the forest and so spent less time in the forest. In Houay Palam, which is more mountainous and privately-owned land is limited, people still depend heavily on community-owned forest, non-timber forest products and swidden agricultural land for their livelihoods.

Khmu women, the ethnic minority in Houay Palam, have a greater interest in village forestry than Lao Loum women. This is due to their greater reliance on forests for the livelihoods of their families.

- Under the law, both Lao Loum and Khmu women have equal rights of access to all types of forest products. All subgroups at village level reported that this was the case in practice as well. Both villages in this study reported that women are able to use and benefit from their customary land, including transfer rights.
- In considering roles, representation and participation, there are differences across age groups as well as gender. Young people, especially girls, of both majority and minority ethnic groups hardly participate at all in village forest planning and management. This exclusion is not necessarily deliberate on the part of older people, but reflects the different roles that young people play in the village. Many are required to work or study at times when meetings are being held. Women and girls also lack confidence to speak out, and may feel that when they do speak up their opinion is not valued. Many young people need to leave the village in order to study and find work in order to support their families. More research is needed to understand how they could be engaged with village forestry.
- The representation of women within the village authority and Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit is particularly important if the voices of women are to be heard and their concerns addressed. In this sense, the Khmu were better represented than the Lao Loum in this particular study.

Recommendations

- The District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) and other involved agencies should encourage all community members, and particularly women and young people, to be aware of the forest regulations and participate in the Village Agriculture and Forestry Sub Unit.
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and its line agencies need to continue to support professional women in forestry.
- There need to be particular incentives actively targeting women at village level for training, study tours, and other actions to build their confidence, capacity, and management skills, which will benefit village forestry management in the long term. Some particular incentives may be needed to allow suitable women to participate because of their greater household responsibilities.
- Recognize the difficulties faced by women-headed households to secure customary land, and establish an easily accessible community garden, protected from livestock, and with sufficient water for growing vegetables, for vulnerable households.

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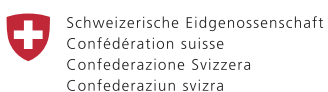
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