

# A gender analysis of the food system in Northern Vietnam

## Introduction

- Introduce the scale of the problem (i.e. nutrition, and food security in Vietnam)
- Short description of the project
- Description of the project location (describing local agriculture, unique challenges, ethnic minority groups)
- Food system lens – how does gender fit in
- Why gender is critical in this project.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this paper is to explore the gender differences and relations as they aspects of the food system in the three provinces where the project is being implemented. This paper aims to contribute to the knowledge of the various projects and research efforts working to address food security and nutrition.

The use of a food systems approach in examining gender differences and gender roles play can be an important consideration in all aspects of a food system. This paper focuses on the households relationship with the food system as it relates to: agriculture and food production, the marketing of food, and food consumption patterns such as purchasing food products, knowledge about food and decisions about food consumption. With each of these subjects, we will explore: What **constraints and opportunities**, especially those which are gender-based, do households face? How are **decisions** related to food made within the household unit? What are the gender-based **practices** that are a part of households relations to the food system?

## Methods

Qualitative data for the analysis is taken from focus group discussions with household members in the northern provinces, and key informant interviews with stakeholders who have worked within various aspects of the food system in the project area.

### Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held in each of the three provinces, one group of women and another group of men. The focus group discussions took place at a local medical station and participants were selected with the support of local medical staff, for having children under the age of five, and for speaking Vietnamese.

The participants varied widely in age from 18 to 60, including many young parents, and grand parents. The FGDs were completed in the following locations:

- Dao Duc Commune, Vi Xuyen District, Ha Giang (5 men, 11 women) 9/11 hh living in multi-generational households
- Ban Giang Commune, Tam Duong District, Lai Chau (11 men some living, 17 women) 5/19 are multi-generational households
- Trinh Tuu Commune, Bao Dient District, Lao Chai (6 men, 12 women) 8/12 are multi-generational households

[Ethnic groups: this information is incomplete since we don't seem to have this for Ha Giang. Lao Cai: Dao, Hmong .Lai Chau: Hmong, Dao, Day, Thai]

The FGDs were facilitated by project team members who are staff of NIN. A female facilitator, Dr. Phuong Ngothiha, led the women's groups and a male facilitator, Mr. Le Van Chi, facilitated the men's groups.

### **Key informant interviews**

Key informant interviews were conducted to supplement and support the data collected from the FGDs. The participants were selected for their specialized knowledge with some aspect of the food systems in the project area. The following individuals were interviewed:

- Nguyen Thi Gioi (Agricultural extension trainer in Ha Giang)
- Hoang Thi Xuan Hue (Agricultural extension trainer in Ha Giang)
- Tran Thi Thuy Anh (Vietnam Women's Union, and project staff for 'Towards more profitable and sustainable vegetable farming systems in north-western Vietnam')
- Dr. Phuong Ngothiha (Nutrition Information Education Center)
- Le Van Chi (NINFoods)

## **Analysis**

### **Households**

Households are not only the primary economic unit, they also act as a unit within the food system. Decisions such as which crops to plant or what to foods to consume are generally made as a family unit as we will discuss. One researcher noted that "ethnic minority have very close family bonds, and if they seem to do things together if possible" (Ngothiha). The majority of the households who participated in FGDs are multi-generational households, where more than two generations live together (e.g. children, parents, and grandparent), and where the household dynamics and roles are influenced by this structure. In multi-generational households, grandparents will often play a critical role in supporting household labor, but in particular play a

large role in caring for children, especially if the parents are working. In other households, two generations live together (e.g. parents and children). Given Vietnam's rapid social and economic development in the past decades, many discussants have noted that younger generations have better and more opportunities for education, especially learning to speak and read Vietnamese. Parents and grandparents reported challenges supporting children's education, since they often lacked the education opportunities themselves.

### **Ethnic minorities**

Working with a group of diverse ethnic minorities is a critical consideration in northern Vietnam. In addition to practical considerations (such as language barriers) cultural norms and gender roles vary by group. One interviewee noted that "with Nùng people, the women will lead and usually the men will follow...whereas for the Hmong group, the women don't want to engage with outsiders, so if you want to engage with the women, you need to involve the men." (Tran). FGDs were held with people from various ethnic minorities including: Dao, Hmong, Lai Chau: Hmong, Dao, Day, Thai, Giao (Giáy??)

### **Challenges and limitations**

A few challenges were presented during the duration of the study. One of the challenges was the language barrier. For ethnic minority people, Vietnamese is a second language learned in school. This would at times limit the depth of the discussion, or created issues in the transcribing the FGDs. This varied by group, for example in Lao Cai, a local facilitator (not a professional interpreter) was brought in to interpret for Hmong women who could not speak Vietnamese fluently. However, facilitators reported that at times the interpreter would answer on behalf of participants rather than simply interpret. This was especially an issue for the women's FGDs, as the women's group tended to have a more severe language barrier. In Lai Chau and Ha Giang, the group spoke Vietnamese well, and the language barrier was not a significant issue.

FGD facilitators reported that a cultural barrier also posed challenges, and encouraging discussion was often an issue. The facilitators had to sometimes use personal stories to try to initiate discussions, and in some cases participants were reticent to share their personal views, instead sharing general statements. In most cases, the groups became more open as the FGDs progressed.

Initially a joint session (bringing the group of men and women together) was planned after the separate discussion, in order to validate and dig deeper into the discussions. However, this was not completed due to time and logistics constraints.

### **Food production and agriculture**

According to UN Women, 47% of women and 42% of men worked in agriculture in 2012 and yet the most recent data indicates that women made up only 25% of those receiving agricultural training (page 79)<sup>1</sup>.

A large proportion of population in the project area participate in agricultural activities, as a means for both producing food for consumption and to generate income (through paid labor or through sales of products). Agricultural work plays a significant role in the food security of households, and respondents in the focus groups reported growing the majority of their own food.

### **Agriculture as Household work**

Agriculture is one of the many tasks within the household where men's' and women's' roles are different. Childcare, and cooking, agriculture is seen as primarily a role for women, as it is part of the work done within the, while men are expected to work outside the home to bring in income. This was true, even in groups where women had jobs outside the home (for example, focus groups included women who worked as teachers or in local family businesses). When asked about these household tasks, one woman in a focus group said "All the men can do the women's' tasks but rarely do. Since I do it, they will not do."(Lai Chau) Women reported that men will help in these tasks when they are busy or sick.

### **The labor of agriculture**

Although farming and agricultural work is seen largely as the realm of women, it is difficult to attribute agriculture specifically to one group. Women, are primarily responsible for most of the agricultural work, with the exception of the highly strenuous activities (e.g. plowing or transporting harvests) or filling in for the wife's responsibilities if she is busy or ill. The women will be responsible for planting, weeding, pest control, and harvesting. In rural households, the work of farming has many components, and women and men share multiple roles. Informants reported that women and men have these roles, but when one person is busy or incapacitated, the roles can be interchanged. However, one woman in Lao Cai summed up what many respondents said, "Generally in ethnic groups, women do a lot. But, if [the women] don't have time, our husband will help".

In the project region, agriculture is still very labor-intensive, and mechanization is still very limited. There have been attempts (including government and NGO projects) to bring in equipment, but the efforts have been few and far between, and limited in scale. Such projects will usually give men the control of machinery, rather

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2016/07/making-inclusive-full-en-final.pdf?la=en&vs=4651>

than women. The need for agricultural labor is still a major barrier for increasing agricultural productivity. Any additional agricultural work, is could be an additional burden to the woman. According to the agricultural trainers, “what is difficult here is the lack of human resources, there aren’t enough people or machines to do the work required for more productive agriculture”.

### **The role of transportation**

Transportation plays a key role, since many of the women in the area report that they are unable to drive motorbikes, the primary form of transportation. Activities such trips to the market in neighboring towns, a weekly or monthly activity, would usually be done as a family, but if not everyone is available, the man primarily does it. When asked about women learning to ride motorbikes, a male participant from Lao Cai responded that: “We don’t have bike. And all of our bikes are too high for women.”

### **Knowledge sharing and training**

Women’s role as farmers, means that women often discuss techniques or strategies with other women and share traditional knowledge about agricultural practices. Grandparents and older generations are often key for passing down knowledge. Women reported that they would primarily discuss issues in their lives with friends and family “while working in the fields”. Although knowledge is shared this way, women lag behind men in access to formal agricultural training. Agricultural trainers reported that most women they train have no previous formal agricultural training, which is consistent with country-wide data (UN Women). The gender-gap as it relates to agricultural knowledge also presents itself in how agriculture training is done. According to a study in Lao Cai, although both women and men might have the opportunity to attend training, the trainings are conducted in Vietnamese, making it more accessible to men than women (page 8)<sup>2</sup>. This echoes the state of agricultural extension where women are more likely to be overlooked as candidates for training, while less likely to be able to attend due to longer work hours (ADB page 23)<sup>3</sup>. This gap can be attributed to the lack of local language trainings available (most trainings are held in Vietnamese), and because the women have a high burden of work at home, making attending trainings more difficult, according to study looking this issue in Lao Cai.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://wp.geog.mcgill.ca/sturner/files/2014/09/A-good-wife-stays-home.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/32246/cga-vietnam.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://wp.geog.mcgill.ca/sturner/files/2014/09/A-good-wife-stays-home.pdf>

## **Household income and marketing of agricultural products**

The project in question requires the marketing of crops by women, since one of the goals of our project. However, the idea of marketing crops is not well developed for the project areas for many households. “Aggregating and commercialising is for businesses, not poor farmers,” according to our agricultural trainers in Ha Giang.

### **Agricultural and marketing crops**

Agriculture’s role within the target region for most poor households, is still primarily for food security, and most of the production goes to feeding the family, and whatever is leftover is sold at local market. For example, cardamom is produced by Hmong and Yao households for sale. However, growing sufficient crops for household consumption is seen as more critical, and the risks (e.g. price fluctuations and the risks of untrustworthy intermediaries) mean that growing crops for sale is not seen as favourable.<sup>5</sup> As with the growing of crops, the sale and marketing of crops is seen as the role of women. However, despite this opportunity for women to create extra income, they face some serious constraints.

There are numerous barriers to the marketing of agricultural products. The agricultural trainers in Ha Giang noted that there is little to sell, because usually local markets will have lower prices when farmers have had a good season in a particular crop, while higher prices in times when yield was low. Another significant limitation is the labour available, since women are the primary ones to grow crops, and mechanisation is still limited, yield is constrained by the amount of labour in the household.

### **Intermediaries for marketing**

Finding intermediaries who are effective is also a challenge. According to an informant at the Women’s Union, who created a collective marketing program for indigenous vegetables in Lao Cai, it is very difficult because there needs to be a very strong intermediary who has the ability to both gain the trust and willingness of farmers, but also who has the means to collect products in a timely manner. It takes a lot of time to build the trust and practices in order to create a collective marketing system. Households are also producing small amounts, and collective marketing would be critical to effective sale of products, although collective marketing is not a culturally familiar or accepted practice.

### **Role of women and men**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://wp.geog.mcgill.ca/sturner/files/2014/09/Turner-2012-Annals.-Hmong-in-Vietnam-PUB-ONLINE.pdf>

While women's role is seen as within the house, including growing food, the men's role is seen as primarily to make money outside the home. This was universally agreed by all focus groups, even in the cases where the men had limited work (e.g. men working seasonally) and in groups where several households had women who worked outside the home and earned an income. The labour market is changing in these regions, and rural households are diversifying their incomes through new market opportunities (e.g. trekking paper) and attitudes are changing about women in the labour market, that go against gender roles<sup>6</sup>.

### **Marketing and finances**

Although the overwhelming majority of participants reported that spending money was decided jointly, men were seen as the ones who would lead the decision-making. For example, when it comes to bank loans one male participant from Lai Chau noted that "The husband plays the main role here, but usually discusses with his wife." Women are seen as financially illiterate, especially in Lao Cai, where one man told us that "Most of women here are illiterate...If we give them 100.000đ, they will spend 100.000đ. If we give them 1 million, they use 1 million. They can not save money."

Financial decisions around agriculture, such as buying inputs such as seeds or fertilizer is seen as an important task, and is seen as the domain of the man, although the purchase would be discussed with wives, as would be the decision of which crops to plant. When asked about roles related to household purchases, one participant responded: "He buys important things like seeds" (Lao Cai). As government programs and other initiatives are encouraging the purchase of seed (such as hybrid seed which need to be purchased unlike their traditional counterparts which can be saved from the previous years), the role financial decisions within agriculture are becoming more important.

Since the yield can fluctuate from season to season, and since incomes in these areas also fluctuate, especially for vulnerable households, the sales of crops needs to be considered against other needs. As sale of crops is a secondary concern, after food security for the household, one of the issues with marketing any crop tends to be the price. In general, years where any specific crop has sufficient yield to allow marketing, the prices for those tend to be low, since others would have likely experienced similar conditions. Price fluctuations is one of the reasons that disincentives marketing of crops.

### **Food decisions**

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<sup>6</sup> <http://wp.geog.mcgill.ca/sturner/files/2014/09/A-good-wife-stays-home.pdf>

One of the key links for this project, and in general for a food system will be the decisions that go into food selection. Since in the project area, the aim is to market a food product, it is important to understand the habits, roles, and factors that affect how decisions about food are made.

### **Food sources**

For most households, food comes from their own fields, so for the majority of their food, it comes from what they grow. Food sources and food safety is a concern in Vietnam, but for the most part, the communities who participated grow much of their own food and know the sources of their food intimately. There are of course specialty items bought in the market, such as salt, fish sauce, and beer) The main exception, where food tends to be purchased, rather than grown is food for children. This is with intention of giving children more nutritious and diverse foods. Foods for weaning include seafood, beef, and milk.

### **Food preferences and decisions**

The decisions about foods are different in each household, but generally more families discuss these things together, and decide together what to buy and what to prepare. However, these decisions do fall slightly more on women than men. For all three project areas, more weight is given to the needs of the children and the grandparents. As one woman in the Ha Giang FGD put it “we often eat according to [the grandparents]”.

### **Access to food and information about nutrition**

Access to food and markets plays an important role in how food decisions are made. Generally speaking, participants reported that food decisions are made together. However, some participants reported that since the local market is far, and trips are infrequent, and therefore purchases need to be discussed jointly. For example, in Ha Giang, the consensus was that women take more responsibility for food purchasing and decisions with less consultation, but here the market is more accessible compared to other locations. In Lai Chau and Lao Cai, these activities are done together with the family, since the markets are further and travel is done together.

### **Conclusions, recommendations and next steps (2)**

- Different people in the family have different roles, but there is a special place for “food for children”
- The multiple cultural contexts (there is no one culture) and there is social diversity.
- Need to be more careful about selecting representative groups as we go on since there are different make-ups of ethnic minorities. I think it would be worthwhile to do case studies and go deeper to