

Women's participation in REDD+ national decision-making in Vietnam

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SUMMARY

Numerous conceptual and empirical studies have been undertaken on the participation of women in decision-making bodies related to forestry. However, very little of this knowledge and experience has been applied to REDD+ decision-making at the national level. This study uses Vietnam as a case study to analyse factors that influence women's participation in national level REDD+ decision-making processes. Although large numbers of women participate in REDD+ meetings, and women at the national level are less affected by discriminatory cultural and social norms, considerable obstacles remain to the full participation of women. The recruitment protocol of Vietnam's forestry sector is not favourable to women, they are rarely appointed to leadership positions and their participation in REDD+ working groups is often nominal. In addition to weak capacity to implement gender strategies, a lack of concern for gender issues prevails among national organizations working on REDD+ in Vietnam.

Keywords: gender, women, forestry, REDD+, Vietnam

Participation des femmes aux prises de décisions nationales de la REDD+ au Vietnam

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Nombre d'études conceptuelles et empiriques ont été conduites sur la participation des femmes dans les organismes de prises de décisions liées à la foresterie. Cependant, très peu de cette expérience et de cette connaissance a été appliqué aux prises de décisions de la REDD+ au niveau national. Cette enquête utilise le Vietnam comme étude-cas pour examiner les facteurs influençant la participation des femmes dans les processus de prises de décisions de la REDD+ au niveau national. Bien qu'un nombre important de femmes participent aux réunions de la REDD+, et bien que ces premières soient moins affectées par les normes discriminatoires, culturelles et sociales, des obstacles considérables à une pleine participation féminine demeurent. Le protocole de recrutement du secteur forestier vietnamien n'est pas favorable aux femmes. Elles sont rarement appelées aux positions de directrices et leur participation aux groupes de travail de REDD+ n'est souvent que nominale. Il faut ajouter à une faible capacité de mettre en oeuvre des stratégies quant au sexe qu'un manque de souci pour ces questions est de mise dans les organisations nationales travaillant sur la REDD+ au Vietnam.

Participación de las mujeres en la toma de decisiones a nivel nacional de REDD+ en Vietnam

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Son numerosos los estudios teóricos y empíricos que se han llevado a cabo sobre la participación de las mujeres en los órganos de toma de decisiones relacionados con la silvicultura. Sin embargo, muy poco de este conocimiento y experiencia se ha aplicado a la toma de decisiones a nivel nacional de REDD+. Este estudio utiliza Vietnam como estudio de caso para analizar los factores que influyen en la participación de las mujeres en los procesos de toma de decisiones a nivel nacional de REDD+. A pesar de que un gran número de mujeres participan en las reuniones de REDD+, y las mujeres a nivel nacional se ven menos afectadas por normas culturales y sociales discriminatorias, aun existen obstáculos considerables para la plena participación de las mujeres. El protocolo de contratación del sector forestal de Vietnam no favorece a las mujeres, rara vez son designadas para posiciones de liderazgo y su participación en grupos de trabajo REDD+ es frecuentemente simbólica. Además de la escasa capacidad de implementación de estrategias de género, la falta de preocupación por los temas de género prevalece entre las organizaciones nacionales que trabajan en REDD+ en Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

REDD+, a mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation, and enhancing forest carbon stocks in developing countries, was proposed and negotiated as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). National strategies and demonstration activities for the implementation of REDD+ have been initiated in numerous tropical forest countries, and are reflected in countries' intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions. Women are involved in these REDD+ decision-making processes in various ways and to varying degrees.

The implementation of REDD+ may be hindered by a lack of recognition of the importance of gender equity in national decision-making processes. Indigenous people and other local communities have demanded that REDD+ policies and projects fully guarantee their land and forest rights, and have ensured their participation in related decision-making arenas (Gomes *et al.* 2010, Griffiths 2008, Larson *et al.* 2013, Sikor *et al.* 2010). Gender inequalities within these arenas, often further cemented within the institutional history, existing legal frameworks and decision-making procedures, are increasingly seen as a weak link in the effective design and implementation of interventions to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change on forests and people (UN-REDD 2011). Concerns have been raised that the lack of acknowledgement of these dimensions by REDD+ policy-makers and practitioners, namely the inequitable distribution of benefits and the exclusion of women (who represent a large proportion of forest users and managers) from meaningful participation in decision-making, may pose a barrier to the intended outcomes of REDD+ initiatives, or may further impair efforts to reduce poverty and ensure sustainable resource management (Behrman *et al.* 2011, Brown 2011). Thus, this paper argues for the need to consider gender in REDD+ beyond outcome efficiency, and to tackle fundamental questions of contextual, distributional and procedural equity.

Using Vietnam as a case study, this paper highlights the need for REDD+ policy to take full account of the differentiated rights, roles and responsibilities of women and men. It also highlights concerns of gender equality and equity in the design and implementation of REDD+. This paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Vietnam's legal frameworks might enable women's participation in REDD+ policy- and decision-making processes. The degree to which women have been able to participate in the REDD+ policy process is investigated, and the factors influencing their involvement are examined.

The following section provides a brief literature review on gender dimensions in decision-making on forest issues, and introduces the analytical framework. Next, an outline of the study's methodology is described. The findings section introduces Vietnam's legal framework for gender mainstreaming in the context of REDD+, examines the level of detail provided by implementation guidelines, and shares findings on the representation of women at different levels of decision-making. The next section discusses key factors that need to be

put in place to ensure equal access to, and full participation in, REDD+ leadership and decision-making. The paper ends with a brief conclusion, including the implications of the study's findings for improved gender mainstreaming in Vietnam's REDD+ process, which are of wider relevance to other national contexts.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In the literature on the forestry sector in general and on REDD+ in particular, three aspects of gender analysis were most commonly examined: rights (e.g. rights to land, forests and the carbon held within standing forests), power (to participate in decision-making), and equity (an equitable share in the profits from forest-related products) (Larson *et al.* 2015). This paper also focuses on these three aspects of gender analysis of REDD+ decision-making in Vietnam. The framework developed by Martin *et al.* (2014) and McDermott *et al.* (2013) was applied to analyse questions of gender mainstreaming and to assess equity by examining: contextual equity (e.g. legal frameworks, social norms and social structures); procedural equity (inclusive and participatory decision-making); and distributive equity (allocation of rights and benefits).

Contextual equity

Rights-based approaches, including gender, have increasingly influenced international climate change debates and decision-making, and more specifically have been applied to REDD+ (Pham *et al.* 2014). In Vietnam, gender issues were not raised prior to the late 1980s when the country welcomed numerous development programmes funded by international organizations. Gender roles and gender inequality issues are discussed in a complicated mix of Confucian and Marxist ideology – promoting cultural equilibrium, unity and harmony (Long *et al.* 2010). However, Vietnamese culture is male dominated, and the current social discourse on gender roles and norms in Vietnam is complex and contradictory, hindering gender transformational change. On the one hand, social discourse centres on the important role of females in the family, but on the other hand, the government also encourages women to take a more active role in office work and social development. This complex message has led to a double burden for Vietnamese women. Current policies have so far only concentrated on women's rights and welfare, without examining the dynamics of gender relations in family and work life that would require attitudinal and behavioural changes by men (UN and Oxfam 2009). Even policies perceived as gender-neutral may have important structural consequences for gender relations (Beresford 1994) and only reinforce the existing male-dominated culture and practices (Johnson 1995, Long *et al.* 2010).

In this paper, contextual equity is addressed through an analysis of the legal framework, to assess the extent to which gender issues are addressed in national REDD+ programme policies and strategies.

Procedural equity

Around the world, men and women often have distinct roles in the management of forests, different access to forests and different ways of using forest resources, and their relationship with the forest is constantly changing. As a result of climate change, traditional gender-based roles are becoming more fluid, which has created opportunities for women to engage in activities that not only improve livelihoods, but allow them to better adapt (Djouidi and Brockhaus 2011). However, current climate change policies do not accommodate the changing roles, needs, responsibilities and decision-making powers of women and men. A gender-sensitive approach to REDD+ decision-making is required for REDD+ to efficiently, effectively and equitably contribute to poverty reduction efforts and biodiversity conservation. Despite this, research has shown that women are more likely than men to be absent from decision-making (Agarwal 2001, Benjamin 2010, Buffum *et al.* 2010, Giri and Darnhofer 2010, Gupte 2003, 2004, Saigal 2000, Sunam and McCarthy 2010).

The literature provides a number of arguments (effectiveness- and equity-based) to support the view that women's participation in the REDD+ decision-making process is essential. Empirical studies have shown that involving women in decision-making at all levels has positive effects on many forest management issues, including resource sustainability, forest regeneration and conflict management (Mai *et al.* 2011). Agarwal's studies (2009, 2010a) in Nepal and India suggest that the inclusion of women in forest management executive committees, and their effective participation in decision-making (e.g. in rule development and enforcement), are positively correlated with improved forest governance and resource sustainability. Agarwal argues that the presence of women in the executive committees of community forest management groups (CFGs) helps to ensure improved forest quality and protection. The presence of women helps CFGs to develop more acceptable rules on resource extraction and forest protection, and decreased violations by the community. In addition, forests were better protected, as women were able to identify illegal cuttings missed by male guards, while performing their duties collecting forest products. Acharya and Gentle (2006) noted positive changes in community forest user groups in Nepal when the participation of women was ensured, and when women held key decision-making positions.

This paper focuses on the involvement of women in the REDD+ decision-making process at the national level in Vietnam, and examines how women are represented and their level of participation. Agrawal's work on classifying forms of participation is used to inform this study. Agrawal (2010a, 2010b) classifies participation into six categories: (i) nominal participation – being a member of the group; (ii) passive participation – being informed of decisions, attending meetings and listening in on decision-making without speaking up; (iii) consultative participation – being asked an opinion in specific matters without guarantee of influencing decisions; (iv) activity-specific participation – being asked to (or volunteering to) undertake specific tasks; (v) active participation – expressing

opinions, whether or not solicited, or taking initiative of other sorts; and (vi) interactive (empowering) participation – having a voice and influence in the group's decisions, and holding positions as office bearers. The policy network analysis and the semi-structure interviews were employed to assess the level of participation of female key informants (see more information in the methodology section).

Studies have identified various factors that influence women's participation in decision-making. These include: (i) cultural and social norms (Sunam and McCarthy 2010); (ii) social perceptions that forestry is a male domain (Agrawal 2010b, Mai *et al.* 2011); (iii) laws and regulations that deliberately exclude women; (iv) underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies (Agrawal 2010a); (v) lack of recognition of heterogeneity among women (Agrawal 2010a,b, Colfer 2005).

For the purpose of this paper, the presence or absence of the above factors in Vietnam is examined, and additional factors are identified. The level of women's participation in decision-making on REDD+ is assessed through the examination of decision-making structures and processes. This allows for the inclusion of procedural equity in the analysis.

Distributive equity

Engaging both men and women in forest management empowers marginalized groups, by providing them with an opportunity to voice, and act on, their preferences and needs (Agrawal 2009, 2010a). Additional benefits associated with the participation of women include: improved financial management, the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and programmes, increased budget allocations for pro-poor programmes, and the adoption of practices to reduce pressure on forests (e.g. managed fodder cultivation, campaigns to reduce forest grazing). Bannon and Correia (2006) highlighted that men are part of the problem – but the degree to which they can be part of the solution also needs attention.

A great range of conceptual and empirical studies have been written on women's participation in decision-making bodies, particularly those related to forestry. However, very little of this knowledge and experience has been applied to REDD+ decision-making at the national level. At this level, different types of organizations (i.e. governmental and non-governmental) are represented in structures and processes that define policies, measures and strategies for sub-national and local level implementation of REDD+. This study uses the case of Vietnam to understand the factors facilitating and preventing the full participation of women in REDD+, and how these can be improved or strengthened. Vietnam provides a particularly suitable case study, as it is one of the first countries to implement the United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD) National Programme. Phase 1 of the programme was completed in October 2012, and a funding agreement for a Phase 2 was signed with Norway in December 2012. In addition, a substantial proportion (49%) of women in Vietnam are employed in agriculture, a climate-sensitive sector (UN

and Oxfam 2009). It is essential that their interests are effectively articulated and reflected in policy and public resource allocation.

To capture distributive equity as outlined above, this paper assesses the rights to and benefits of women participating in REDD+ (distributive equity). It is argued that not only can REDD+ decision-making benefit from greater participation of women, but this – if realized – might ensure a more equal distribution of REDD+ benefits across genders (and across all levels in a more centralized system such as Vietnam).

In order to further investigate distributive equity linked to contextual and procedural equity dimensions, this paper examines the prevalence of women in leadership positions in organizations that influence national REDD+ programmes and strategies, and the extent to which they have been able to incorporate gender issues into REDD+ policies. Finally, opportunities and barriers are identified to women's equal access to leadership roles and full participation in decision-making in Vietnam.

METHODOLOGY

Policies and legal frameworks related to REDD+ were reviewed, to establish how gender has been integrated into current policies (contextual equity). A policy network analysis and key informant interviews were conducted, using structured and semi-structured techniques, to analyse the relative involvement of women and men in REDD+ decision-making processes at the national level (distributive and procedural equity).

Reviews of legal and policy frameworks

This review identified the ways in which REDD+ and other policy processes are structured, provisions for women's involvement within structures (e.g. REDD+ working groups), and the nature of women's involvement and influence in specific decisions (e.g. in determining benefit sharing arrangements).

Policy network analysis

Policy network analysis provides a useful tool for examining the power structures in national REDD+ policy arenas (Newig *et al.* 2010) and was used to assess the representation and participation of women in REDD+ decision-making. The overall purpose was to examine how many key organizations have influence over REDD+ decisions, and how many of these appointed female representatives for major, national REDD+ policy events. The data used in this study is part of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) Global Comparative Study (GCS) on REDD+. The research is based on the GCS Component 1 methodological framework and policy network survey guidelines (Brockhaus and Di Gregorio 2012, Brockhaus *et al.* 2014). In order to assess the participation of actors in the REDD+ policy process in Vietnam, this study identified: (i) key REDD+ actors in

Vietnam, (ii) major REDD+ policy events at the national level, and (iii) who participated in which events. Participation in the three core events was analysed through the construction of a two-mode policy network, featuring policy actors (first-mode nodes) and events (second-mode nodes), in which ties between nodes indicated participation in the event (Borgatti and Everett 1997). This was visualized using UCInet and Netdraw software and required qualitative interpretation (see Figure 2 and Borgatti *et al.* 2002).

Semi-structured interview and structured questionnaire

Data was first collected over a period of 17 months, from July 2011 to December 2012. Interviewees were organizational representatives, who were either assigned by their organization or had some kind of leadership or senior role and were directly responsible for REDD+-related topics within these organizations – as confirmed by experts on the panel and in accordance with the authors' knowledge. Fifty-two organizations were identified as part of the national REDD+ policy domain in Vietnam and participated in this study. These policy actors were classified into five categories: government agencies (15), business sector (e.g. hydropower plants, timber processing companies, construction companies, tourism processing companies) (8), national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (4), international NGOs and donors (20), and media (5). To get an update on both REDD+ and gender policy progress in Vietnam, an additional review of 30% of the 52 stakeholders was conducted in 2015. Two data collection approaches were used in this study for all 52 stakeholders: (i) a structured questionnaire that included questions about opinions on REDD+ issues and participation in key REDD+-related policy events, and (ii) a semi-structured interview that explored actors' perceptions of governance challenges for REDD+ implementation in Vietnam.

The structured questionnaire asked actors questions on: whether they had ever participated in REDD+ political events, their level of interest, their influence on the final policy outcomes (in particular related to gender issues), the nature of their participation in these events (e.g. formal meetings or lobbying), and their evaluation of the achievements of these core political events.

During the semi-structured interviews, actors were asked to describe: their organization's interest in REDD+; their perception of the policy challenges and opportunities for REDD+ implementation in Vietnam; their evaluation of the role, nature and effectiveness of consultation processes; and their organization's policy assessment of REDD+ outcomes. To establish the relative presence of men and women in REDD+ processes, interviews gathered information on the following factors: (i) organizational mandates and obligations towards gender mainstreaming; (ii) individuals' motivation for involvement in REDD+ processes; (iii) individuals' general perceptions of gender, and specifically the importance of gender in relation to REDD+; (iv) factors that facilitate or constrain participants' ability to mainstream gender into national REDD+ programmes; and (v) factors that enable or hinder the participation of women in decision-making.

Overall, the semi-structured interviews were designed to reveal organizational constraints, individual motivations and actual participation and influence in REDD+ policy decisions.

FINDINGS

Gender in the REDD+ legal frameworks

This review shows that promotion of gender equality is mentioned in many policy documents, such as the National Strategy and Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women and the Viet Nam Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have set specific targets for the participation of women in positions of leadership and management (UN-REDD Vietnam 2013). In 2006, the National Assembly also approved the Law on Gender Equality, which illustrates the importance of gender equality to the Government of Vietnam. This law specifies concrete measures to advance gender equality in politics by implementing a number of gender-specific goals to increase women's participation in decision-making bodies. Decision 2351/2010/QĐ-TTg of the National Strategy on Gender Equality for 2011–2020 outlines clear goals for increasing leadership opportunities for women. The strategy also aims to gradually reduce the gender gap in politics, by setting a target for female representation in the Party committees, National Assembly and all levels of the People's Councils of 30% for the period 2011–2015, and over 35% for the period 2016–2020. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the lead agency for REDD+ in Vietnam, also has its own gender strategy for the period 2011–2015 (UN-REDD Vietnam 2013), which includes measures to ensure gender equality, and clearly defines the roles of the leaders of its units and departments.

The national REDD+ action plan highlights the need to improve the Safeguards Information System (SIS) for REDD+, so that social safeguards, including gender equality (as addressed in Cancun Agreement Para 72), are taken into consideration and are respected and implemented. This is also crucial to accessing performance-based finance, as without SIS, according to the Warsaw Framework for REDD+ (UNFCCC 2013), there can be no payment.

However, the country still faces many challenges putting these policies into practice. First, all local authorities and donors interviewed claimed that the major barrier for local authorities in mainstreaming gender in REDD+ is the lack of guidance from central government on how to implement gender strategies and legislation. An interviewee from a provincial government stated: "As much as we like to mainstream gender into PES [payment for environmental services] and REDD+, we do not know how to translate these concepts on the ground. We need more clear guidance". Female interviewees from MARD also asserted that "the problem is that we have too many policies on paper but no actual law enforcement and implementation of these policies in practice". For example, the National REDD+ Action Programme for the period 2011–2020 (NRAP) is consistent with the Convention

on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and all other agreements related to gender equality. However, this document does not provide specific guidelines for implementation. Similarly, the labour code gives priority to women working in forestry and REDD+ activities, and the retirement age for women in senior personnel positions has been extended. However, there are no clear criteria on how to differentiate between men's and women's quality of work, productivity and their contributions under different working conditions, to secure equal salary rates.

Second, some key forest-related policies still have major shortcomings in ensuring gender equality. For example, the 2013 Land Law grants men and women equal rights to own and benefit from their land; however, women hold only 19% of land use certificates (UN-REDD Vietnam 2013). This law is problematic as it defines land owner and land manager as "heads of household". The use of the term "heads of household" assumes that households are egalitarian units of equal income distribution (Coe 2008). However the unitary model of the household has been refuted by numerous scholars, and studies have shown that, not only do men and women in the same household have different preferences and opportunities, but that households can be the arena of intense competition over resources (Falkingham and Baschieri 2009). Thus, unless the names of both men and women are on the land use right rights and land use right certificate, women will lose out.

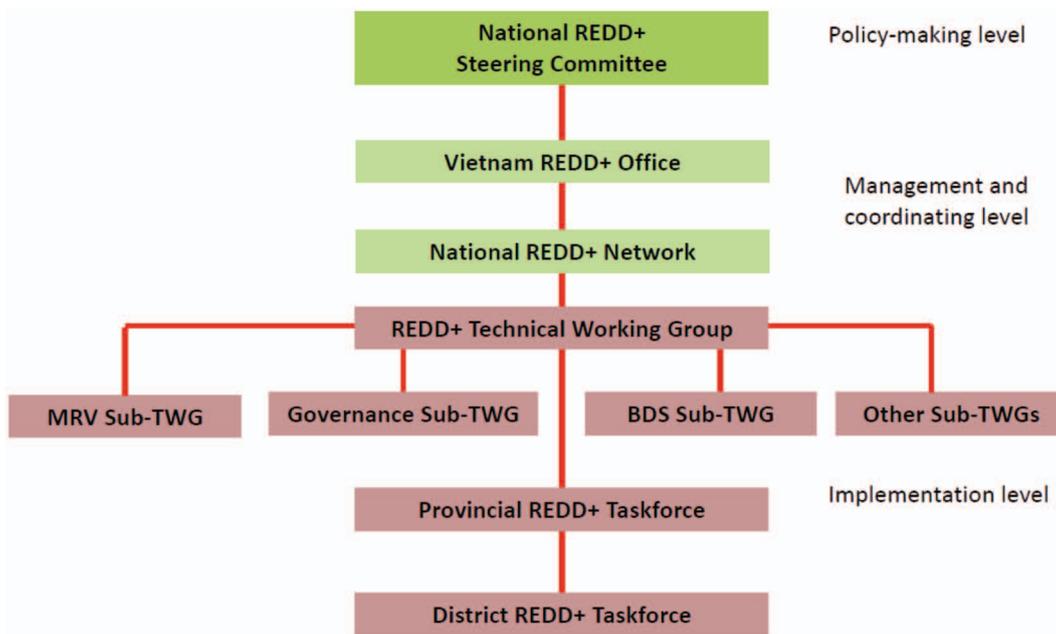
Another weakness of many laws and regulations is that they do not recognize heterogeneity within a community, nor among women. None of the documents identified during this study addressed heterogeneity. When a legal framework fails to take into consideration the differences between men and women, or between groups of men and women, it is likely to broaden inequality gaps and further exclude marginalized groups (Mai *et al.* 2011).

Thirdly, the National Forest Strategy (2006–2020) provides a promising platform for mainstreaming gender, as it acknowledges the need to develop the capacity of forestry officials to address gender issues, establish a full-time gender focal unit to institutionalize gender mainstreaming, and promote gender-sensitive research and monitoring. However, a lack of institutional capacity, including human and financial resources, as well as contradictory institutional procedures and practices, have impeded these efforts. For instance, training is provided to only a few members of the Committee for Advancement of Women, and has not been mainstreamed throughout MARD.

Women's representation in REDD+ bodies and institutions

The Vietnam REDD+ Office, which is part of MARD, and under the authority of the Vietnam Forestry Administration (VNFOREST), is the lead agency responsible for developing and implementing policies and programmes relevant to REDD+. The office is responsible for coordinating international assistance and developing the National REDD+ Strategy.

FIGURE 1 Institutional arrangement for REDD+ implementation in Vietnam



TWG = technical working group.

Source: UN-REDD Vietnam.

Several ad-hoc REDD+ technical working groups (TWG) were created to provide technical support. These TWGs comprise four main groups: the Monitoring, Reporting and Verification (MRV) Sub-TWG; the Governance Sub-TWG; the Benefit Distribution and Sharing (BDS) Sub-TWG; and the Other Sub-TWG (see Figure 1).

Only 20% of MARD's employees are women. While no women hold ministerial positions, 25% of staff at department level are women, and 14% of director-general positions are held by women. VNFOREST has no female leaders, and only three women (25% of the total deputy director) hold deputy-director positions at department level (MARD 2015). This illustrates that the role of women in decision-making is still very limited at both MARD and VNFOREST. In many provinces, the provincial government has set a target of having more than 30% of provincial leaders as women. However, only 5%–10% of these positions are filled by women. This low figure, according to many interviewees, is mainly due to a lack of political commitment to include women in the management group, a biased recruitment and promotion protocol and a lack of confidence among women candidates.

Of the 17 members of the REDD+ Steering Committee established by the Prime Minister via Decision 153/QD-BNN-TCCB (2015), 6 are female (35%), and hold the positions of director-general or deputy director-general. The roles of Chair and Vice Chair of the REDD+ Steering Committee are both held by men. This poses a critical challenge to the involvement of women in discussions on forestry, and on REDD+ in particular. According to several female government leaders, women feel unable to raise their concerns as numbers are so unequal. Thus, their voices often remain unheard despite their active participation.

Many of the representatives of government agencies interviewed for this study believe that the underrepresentation

of women is due to discriminatory policies and a lack of incentives. At the entry level, men are given priority over women. For example, only women that graduate with a distinction (*bang do*) are employed, while men are only required to pass their university course (*bang xanh*). This leaves women at a disadvantage when competing for positions in forestry institutions. In addition, to obtain a higher ranking position, employees must complete training in management, professional and political skills. The maximum entry age for this course is five years lower for women than men (35 for women and 40 for men). Similar discriminatory requirements are also applied to promotions and salary increases. These practices limit women's access to training, education and promotion, as well as their participation in decision-making.

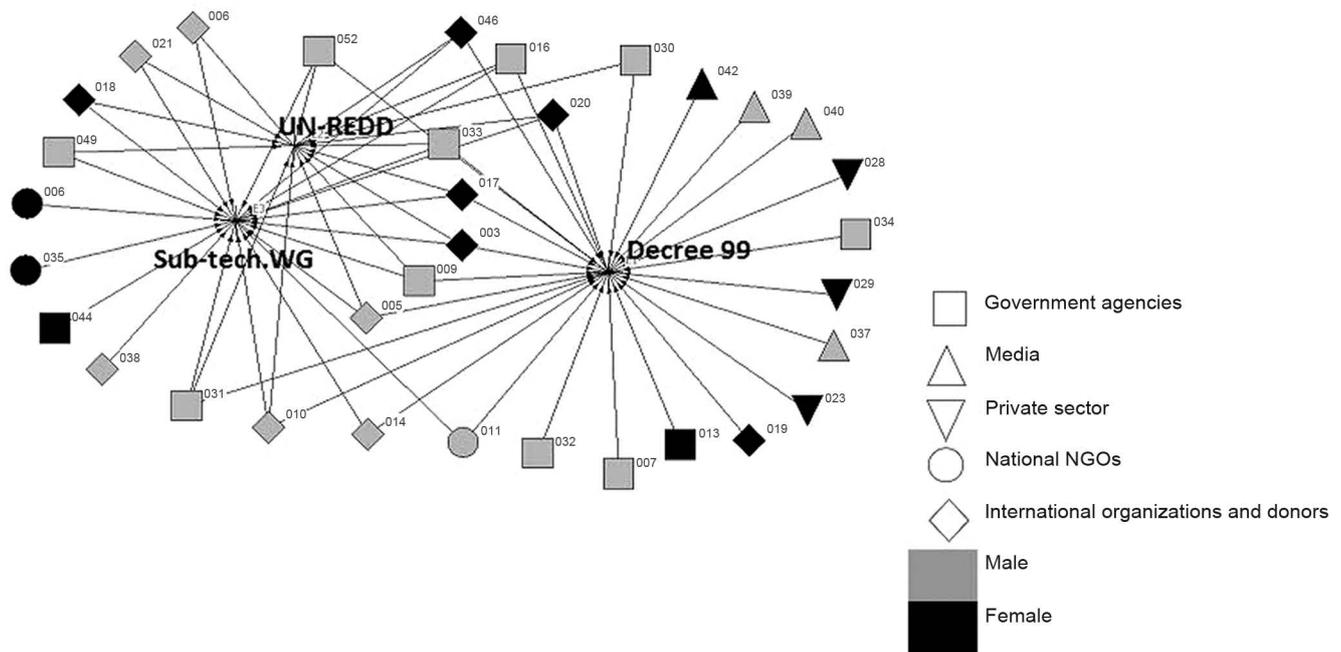
The designated budget for building the capacity of women at MARD is insufficient and changeable. An interviewee from MARD also suggested that research proposals on gender issues submitted to MARD leaders, to gain access to funding opportunities, are often rejected, as MARD leaders do not view gender as an important issue.

Women's representation in REDD+ political events

Although national forestry institutions in Vietnam are male dominated, women are well represented at REDD+ political events (e.g. meetings, conferences). This is largely due to the structure of REDD+ decision-making that allows space for international organizations, national and international NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) to take part.

Our network analysis of three significant REDD+ events (Decision No. 380 and Decree No. 99, the establishment of the UN-REDD program in Vietnam, and the creation of REDD+ subtechnical working groups) (Pham *et al.* 2014),

FIGURE 2 Participation of women and men as organizational representatives in REDD+ political events



CSO = civil society organization, NGO = nongovernmental organization, UN-REDD = United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries. Data source: policy network analysis.

indicates the presence of fourteen women (Figure 2). Of these 14 women, 11 (78.57%) were involved in sub-TWGs, with 5 (45%) acting as chairpersons of the groups. The remaining 55% women joined formal meetings as workshop participants.

Although the analysis reveals that a number of women participated as members of boards, committees or at meetings, this does not guarantee their influence. Interviews indicated that women's involvement tended to be as "consultative participants", which means that they were generally asked their opinion on specific matters, with little certainty of influencing decisions. Interviewees claimed that women have little impact on national decision-making on issues related to REDD+ for two main reasons. Those in positions of authority (e.g. UN-REDD Programme Director, CSO directors, and chairpersons of REDD+ sub-TWGs) are responsible for selecting topics for discussion, chairing meetings and inviting stakeholders to participate. However, according to all interviewees, gender issues are seldom included in these policy debates, as the women in leadership positions are constrained by their organizational missions and gender mainstreaming is not considered a priority. Those female leaders interviewed also admit that they seldom represent the concerns of women at grassroots levels, who are often the most likely to be affected by climate change.

Interest, awareness and understanding of the links between REDD+ and gender

UN-REDD is increasingly addressing issues related to women and gender equality, as part of the second phase of REDD+

readiness preparations. UN-REDD's strategic document includes activities to mainstream gender into REDD+, such as social and gender impact assessments at national, provincial, commune and household level (UN-REDD Vietnam 2013), which include criteria related to disadvantaged groups. Communities who commit to the advancement of these disadvantaged groups will receive priority when applying to become REDD+ sites. This represents an opportunity to promote gender equality and engage women in a meaningful way. Interviews with MARD and SNV (Netherlands development organisation) also highlighted MARD's current efforts to incorporate gender into the fund disbursement protocols and monitoring practices for REDD+ and payment for environmental services (PES). However, all interviewees emphasized the difficulty of ensuring that gender mainstreaming treated as more than an administrative requirement. The findings show that the lower the level of government, the weaker their interest and capacity to mainstream gender into REDD+ and PES. Amongst 10 provincial government actors interviewed, only 1 actor indicated their willingness to mainstream gender into their socioeconomic development plan and provincial REDD+ action plan. According to an interviewee from the provincial government: "The central government requested us to mainstream gender into REDD+, but it is unclear how this mainstreaming should be done. We do not know how to do this. Moreover, gender has to come in second place as we have more important issues to take care of such as MRV and improving the legal framework on institutional setting".

Many of the bodies involved in REDD+ have limited capacity for and interest in addressing issues related to

women and gender. In 2012, only 2 out of 52 organizations (3.8%) interviewed had appointed a gender expert to join their REDD+ team. By 2015, this number had increased to three (5.7%). Two thirds of the organizations (67%) working on REDD+ in Vietnam that were interviewed expressed low or moderate concern for gender issues, and demonstrated low or medium capacity to address such matters. “Moderate” means that these organizations are aware of gender issues and take actions to mainstream gender in their projects and programmes, but do not fully understand what gender is. “Low” means they do not have the capacity to work on gender topics and are not aware and not willing to incorporate gender in their work. In general, gender is not prioritized by these organisations, and where it is explicitly mandated, efforts are limited to take stock of the number of female employees, or involve women in stakeholder discussions. Thus far, only one NGO has developed a detailed manual on integrating gender into their projects, and allocated sufficient funding and personnel to ensure that gender is adequately addressed.

Even the FPIC (free, prior and informed consent) process only superficially addresses gender (UN-REDD Vietnam 2013). For example, when FPIC was applied in Vietnam, little consideration was given to the heterogeneity of communities (often comprising several ethnic groups), and even less to heterogeneity among women. During consultations, discussions were dominated by outspoken, older men; participants were persuaded to consent without fully understanding REDD+; and the meeting locations and timings were not suitable for many women. Although Vietnam’s benefit distribution system mandates non-discrimination towards women, indigenous people and other marginalized groups, it failed to ensure a critical mass of women to accurately represent their views and interests.

Interviews revealed that the term “gender” is often synonymized with “women”. Many respondents expressed the importance of involving local women in the management of forests and the allocation of REDD+ funding, but none commented on the role of women in national decision-making. A few respondents objected to the term “gender mainstreaming”, expressing that its adoption would just create another layer of commitments, without effecting meaningful change. Some also raised concerns that gender mainstreaming only focuses on women.

A range of organizations, including the Women’s Union, UN Women, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), have carried out studies on the linkage between gender and REDD+, but as yet, according to all government interviewees, these have had no visible impact on the process of mainstreaming gender.

DISCUSSION

Women’s participation in decision-making processes and the extent to which they can influence policy outcomes depend on numerous, complex and interlinked factors. This requires a holistic approach, not simply addressing a single factor alone.

This sections discusses several key factors that need to be put in place to ensure women’s equitable participation in decision-making.

Factor 1. A clear and well-enforced legal framework that supports women’s participation in decision-making

The participation of women in decision-making is supported by most national laws and strategies in Vietnam. The government has made provisions to acknowledge the roles and status of women (which is somewhat ambiguous), and targets and goals have been established to engage more women in decision-making. However, the legal framework supporting REDD+ fails to acknowledge gender differences, and provides little guidance on how to incorporate gender to ensure that women are not marginalized. Although Vietnam’s national REDD+ strategies address gender equity and equality, and pilot activities have been planned to integrate gender into benefit-sharing mechanisms, no specific written guidance or operational plan has been produced to ensure effective implementation. Specifically, no concrete strategic plan exists that accounts for the differentiated roles of men and women in REDD+, or the gender-differentiated aspects of benefit-sharing mechanisms at household level. This is a common pattern found in most Asian countries, where few institutions have incorporated gender into their activities, plans and research priorities (Gurung and Setyowati 2012). The REDD+ policy process often fails to account for underlying power dynamics, and is thus unable to effectively promote equity. It is insufficient to redress gender imbalances related to forest management simply by including women in discussions on the payment criteria and policies of REDD+ programmes (Khadka *et al.* 2014).

One way forward could be to ensure that REDD+-related (and other) legal frameworks are gender sensitive, and hence enable women to effectively and efficiently engage in REDD+ decision-making and facilitating change. REDD+ policies and practices (e.g. national REDD+ strategies, SIS and FPIC) could then be evaluated against the degree to which they take account of the differentiated rights, roles and responsibilities of women and men. Current policies and laws related to forestry and REDD+ could be reviewed and updated to identify opportunities for gender mainstreaming. In such a context, research could play a role by providing REDD+ policy-makers and practitioner communities with comparative and country-specific case studies that reflect the multiple roles, identities and interests of men and women. Such an effort across multiple actor groups would strengthen the agency of women and enhance gender issues beyond the simplified male/female divide.

Adequate budgetary support and increased skills and knowledge are required to: promote the advantages of involving both men and women in forestry and REDD+, support gender-sensitive policy development and implementation, and develop gender-differentiated policies and processes at national and local levels. Gender issues are primarily related to power structures, differences in the availability of development opportunities for men and women, and unequal access,

use and control of benefits (Brown 2011). Understanding these factors is essential to ensuring the success of REDD+ programmes and projects. A national monitoring and evaluation mechanism, with a specific set of criteria and indicators on gender mainstreaming in forestry and REDD+, should be established. While such monitoring tools often do not capture complexities, it will be important to ensure procedural equity so that what is measured and monitored is defined by those actually affected.

Factor 2. Organizational capacity and interest in gender equity

Gender inequity cannot be addressed if the organization itself is not interested in it. This study has shown that the organizations employing female participants in REDD+ are often characterized by limited capacity and interest in gender issues. This can be explained, in part, by the organizational backgrounds of female participants, which is often characterized by very limited capacity and interest in gender issues. For example, female interviewees from Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) stated that the ministry itself has very limited interest in gender and hinders the participation of women in decision-making. As the role of participants in REDD+ discussions is to represent the interests of their organizations, it can be difficult to raise issues relating to gender or vulnerable groups, even if participants take a personal interest.

Laws and regulations on gender and forests appear to be relatively comprehensive when considered separately, but significant gaps remain at all levels. Forest-related policies and projects rarely consider women or gender issues, and policies and projects that focus on women rarely consider forests. This study found a general lack of ability among national organisations to implement gender mainstreaming policies in the REDD+ process. Forestry decision-makers, whose backgrounds are mainly biophysical, often lack understanding of the intricacies and implications of gender mainstreaming. Yet, these decision-makers have made very few consultations with gender focal groups.

This study also found an absence of government focal points on gender equality, such as the Vietnam Women's Union and Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in REDD+ decision making. This research highlights the need for greater coordination between gender task forces (i.e. the Vietnam Women's Union, gender and indigenous committees, MOLISA and UN Women) and REDD+ working groups, to facilitate the inclusion of gender in REDD+. Most female interviewees claimed that progress on gender mainstreaming at MARD and in provincial governments is slow and ineffective. These interviewees also highlight the need to have gender champions to drive the agenda. This could be achieved through the establishment of a coordination unit on gender equality (led by MARD) – with clear functions, tasks, obligations, rights and resources – responsible for coordinating with partners at different levels to promote gender mainstreaming in forestry. In addition to this, each relevant ministry or sector should also have a gender

focal point to work with the coordination unit on gender issues.

Interviewees also asserted the need to remove biased policies and encourage the participation of women in forestry institutions. For example, discriminatory selection and recruitment processes should be reviewed and revised to promote greater gender balance, both within the forestry sector and among CSOs and NGOs involved in forestry and REDD+. Detailed work plans should be developed to ensure enabling conditions for the full participation of women in decision-making processes. Agencies such as the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Centre, in coordination with MARD and MOLISA, have already started to identify and promote female candidates in the forestry sector, guided by the government's female leadership quota policy. These agencies could be instrumental in strengthening the skills and capabilities of women at different levels to enable them to take up leadership roles and become directly involved in forest-related planning and decision-making – and hence empower women within the bureaucratic apparatus.

Factor 3. Women need to be well-represented in decision-making bodies and more importantly, structures need to be in place to allow and capture women's voices

The more women are involved in forest management, the more likely it is that women's issues are tackled (Agarwal 2010a, Mai *et al.* 2011). However, as this study has found, and Gurung and Setyowati (2012) have shown, current REDD+ programmes in Asia, including Vietnam, lack tailor-made approaches to empower women through recognition, assimilation, capacity-building and leadership opportunities. At the ministerial level (MARD), the limited number of women that have a leadership role, contributes to an environment in which women are reluctant to express themselves openly. Moreover, although a significant number of women have participated in REDD+ processes in Vietnam, their participation seems to be limited to consultation, and often fails to influence policy outputs. The presence of women alone does not necessarily lead to transformational change. The involvement of women should be thoughtfully promoted, rather than a matter of meeting quotas. Research suggests that some women have been assigned to forestry resource management positions to meet gender targets when they have little interest in the post (Jewit 2000, Resurreccion 2006). Furthermore, casual attempts at inclusion and participation have, in some cases, inadvertently increased time burdens on women, who already have significant workloads including housework, childcare and husbandry (Akerkar 2001). Viewing participation as an ongoing and open-ended process of social change, rather than as a predefined outcome, can provide greater understanding of how women renegotiate their social roles and status (Giri and Darnhofer 2010). As Vietnam already has a critical mass of women working on forest issues at the national level, there is now a need to support their empowerment and build their capacity, so that they might become office bearers and instigators of change.

CONCLUSION

This study uses the case of Vietnam to analyse factors that influence women's participation in REDD+ decision-making processes at the national level, and the effect of their participation on gender mainstreaming. The study shows a number of opportunities to enhance the bargaining power of women in the decision-making process, including: legal frameworks that incorporate gender issues in REDD+, the significant number of female participants at REDD+ political events, and a decrease in discriminatory cultural and social norms affecting women at the national level. However, the country still faces numerous challenges. In Vietnam, the forestry sector and REDD+ policy process are dominated by men, which is reflective of a patriarchal society. Recruitment procedures and career opportunities favour men, and women are rarely appointed to leadership positions. As a consequence, the participation of women in REDD+ working groups is often nominal. Other constraints to women's full participation include an inability to successfully implement policies to mainstream gender in the REDD+ policy process. National organizations working on REDD+ in Vietnam lack the capacity and concern to adequately address gender issues. Furthermore, few consultations have been held with gender focal groups, and the heterogeneity of communities and women is little recognised. A more gender-sensitive legal framework is required, which mandates the reform of current recruitment and career development criteria. Finally, further coordination is required between established gender bodies, REDD+ agencies and other forestry organizations. Such a collaboration could provide visibility to gender bodies, promote the meaningful participation of women, and build on the available knowledge and expertise on gender issues in Vietnam.

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