

Gender Assessment

FP307: Mekong Earth Regeneration Fund (MERF)

Lao PDR, Viet Nam | Deutsche Bank AktienGesellschaft AG | B.45/02/Add.08

12 June 2026



Annex 8: Gender Assessment

Introduction	1
Methodology	1
Gender Equality and Climate Impacts in the Lower Mekong Basin	1
<i>Overview of the Gender Equality Situation</i>	1
<i>Composite Indices</i>	2
HDI indicators	2
Gender Inequality Index	3
GDI Score and Ranking	4
Women, Business and the Law Index (WBL)	4
<i>Climate change and gender-related vulnerabilities in the Lower Mekong Basin</i>	5
Agriculture	7
Forestry	9
Aquaculture	11
Programme Overview	12
<i>The Mekong Earth Regeneration Fund (MERF)</i>	12
<i>MERF's Gender Approach</i>	13
Mekong Capital's Gender Approach and Track Record	13
MERF's Gender Investing Strategy	14
Alignment with GCF Gender Policy	16
Alignment and Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	17
MERF Gender Impact Goal	17
Gender Targets	20
<i>Gender Lens Integration into MERF's Investment Process</i>	21
Approach for the Assessment and Mitigation of SEAH and GBVH	24
<i>Gender-related Support at the Portfolio level</i>	25
<i>Monitoring and Reporting Progress towards Gender Equality</i>	25
Country-level Assessments	27
<i>Vietnam</i>	27
Overview of Gender Equality and Gender Gaps in the Country	27
National Policy Environment and Legal Framework for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment	27

Key Policies on Climate, Agricultural, Forestry Sectors and their Mentions of Gender Equality or Women's Economic Empowerment	29
Key Demographic Trends	30
<i>Lao PDR</i>	43
Overview of Gender Equality and Gender Gaps in the Country	43
National Policy Environment and Legal Framework for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment	44
Key policies on Climate, Agricultural, Forestry Sectors and their Mentions of Gender Equality or Women's Economic Empowerment	45
Key Demographic Trends	46
Conclusions	55

MERF Gender Assessment

Introduction

This document provides an assessment of the barriers and opportunities for advancing gender inclusion in the Mekong Earth Regeneration Fund (MERF). The assessment includes an overview of the key gender-related barriers in the sustainable land use sectors. The assessment also discusses the approach for adopting a gender investing lens into the programme to ensure women's participation and to drive inclusiveness in the forestry and sustainable agriculture sectors and alignment with industry standards. This document outlines key entry points for the MERF, followed by in-country assessments for Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The country assessments provide an overview of the gender equality situation in each country with a particular emphasis on labor force participation in agribusiness and forestry sectors, and gender-specific vulnerabilities in the countries.

Methodology

The gender assessment has been prepared based on the guiding questions listed in the GCF gender guidance documents and templates (notably the Mainstreaming Toolkit) and it is based on the Updated GCF Gender Policy. The gender assessment is based on quantitative data and qualitative evidence derived from a desk review of existing literature and secondary resources. Primary data collection has not been conducted in the preparation of this assessment, given the nature of the Fund and the fact that specific downstream investments have not yet been identified. However, the programme implementation will include country-level consultations and stakeholder engagement with women's groups, women's associations as well as research entities working on gender issues.

Gender Equality and Climate Impacts in the Lower Mekong Basin

Overview of the Gender Equality Situation

The proposed project will target two countries - Lao PDR and Viet Nam, as part of the Lower Mekong River Basin or Lower Mekong Basin (LMB). There are notably several differences amongst the two target countries. While Lao PDR remain one of the region's poorest countries, Viet Nam has rapidly developed. There are some similarities with respect to gender roles and gender-related barriers, but differences exist within each country and sub-regions. All countries have made commitments to advance gender equality and human rights at the policy level and in legislative frameworks. However, customary and discriminatory laws, policies and institutional

practices in these countries create structural barriers to women's rights, and their ability to benefit from and participation in climate adaptation and mitigation projects.

Despite economic growth in countries like Viet Nam, challenges remain in ensuring inclusive economic development, particularly with regard to gender equality, and narrowing the income gap between the rich and poor. Women continue to form a large majority of the working poor, earn less income, and are more often affected by under- and un-employment and precarious working conditions than men. Women in Viet Nam are principally found in lower paid occupational sectors or in vulnerable employment. In Lao PDR although almost equal to men in labor force participation, women's average monthly income is just 77% of that of men, are overrepresented in low-skill occupations, and spend a disproportionate amount of time on unpaid family and care work. Nearly half of the workforce is engaged in informal employment, highlighting the significant presence of non-regulated labor activities.

Table 1 Key indicators for the two target countries. Source: World Bank Indicators

	Lao PDR		Vietnam	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Lower secondary completion rate	50.7%	51.4%	94.1%	96.3%
Adult literacy	66.7%	85.1%	95.1%	97.2%
Labor force participation	61.5%	70.7%	69.1%	78.6%
Political participation (seats held in national parliament)	22%		30.6%	

In the agriculture, forestry and aquaculture sectors different patterns of women's participation appear across the two countries. The female labor force participation rate in agriculture in Viet Nam is approximately 23.9% (2023), while in Lao PDR the agricultural sector has been 'feminized' for decades, with women comprising just over 50% of the population economically active in agriculture. Despite their heavy involvement in agricultural work, however, women face significant and persistent barriers to participating fully in the sector as women have less access to productive resources, education, and skills development and labor market opportunities than men.

Composite Indices

HDI indicators

The Human Development Index (HDI)¹ scores presented here is from the 2023/2024 Human Development Report, released on 13 March 2024². The HDI is a summary measure of achievements in three key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to

¹ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>

² <https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2023-24>

knowledge and a decent standard of living. The HDI is the geometric mean of normalized indices for each of the three dimensions. A technical note³ describes the data sources, steps to calculating the HDI, and the methodology used to estimate missing values. The HDI data presented here should be treated as indicative, not conclusive. It provides an overview of the relative degree of development in a particular country but remains a ‘synthetic indicator’. Recent research has shown the need to supplement the HDI with other indicators associated with economic and social cohesion, sound development strategies, and sustainability in growth models⁴.

Country	Latest HDI Score (2022)	Rank	Tier
Laos	0.620	139	Medium Human Development
Viet Nam	0.726	107	High Human Development

Gender Inequality Index

The Gender Inequality Index (GII)⁵ reflects gender-based disadvantage in three dimensions, reproductive health, empowerment and the labor market, for as many countries as data of reasonable quality allow. It shows the loss in potential human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in these dimensions. It ranges from 0, where women and men fare equally, to 1, where one gender fares as poorly as possible in all measured dimensions. GII values are computed using the association-sensitive inequality measure suggested by Seth (2009), which implies that the index is based on the general mean of general means of different orders—the first aggregation is by a geometric mean across dimensions; these means, calculated separately for women and men, are then aggregated using a harmonic mean across genders.

GII, however, should be treated as indicative, not conclusive. Pernmayer finds that the functional form of the index could be unclear, particularly the inclusion of indicators of relative performance of women vis-à-vis men, along with absolute women-specific indicators⁶.

Country	Latest GII Score (2022)	Rank	Tier
Laos	0.467	116	Medium Human Development
Viet Nam	0.378	91	High Human Development

³ https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2023-24_HDR/hdr2023-24_technical_notes.pdf

⁴ See Bilbao-Ubillos, J (2011). “The Limits of HDI” in Sustainable Development, (Vol. 21, No. 6). Journal Article. United Nations Development Programme – UNDP (2018). Human Development Reports, ‘Table I: HDI and its Components’. Website. Accessed online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI>

⁵ <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII>

⁶ See Pernmayer, I. (2013). “A Critical Assessment of UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index” in Feminist Economics, (Vol. 19, No. 2). Journal article. UNDP (2018). Human Development Reports, ‘Table V: Gender Inequality Index’. Website. Accessed online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GII>

GDI Score and Ranking

The Gender Development Index (GDI)⁷ measures gender inequalities in achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: health, measured by female and male life expectancy at birth; education, measured by female and male expected years of schooling for children and female and male mean years of schooling for adults ages 25 years and older; and command over economic resources, measured by female and male estimated earned income. This further reiterates the results of the HDI and GII (also by UNDP), and shows the real gender gap in human development achievements. Geske Dijkstra and Hanmer find that although gender-related development indices have increased attention towards ‘feminization of poverty and underdevelopment’, more robust data needs and indicators are required to create aggregate indices that are sensitive to contemporary trends in gendered privation, particularly with the categorization of ‘women’.⁸

Country	Latest GDI Score (2022)	Group (2022)	Tier
Laos	0.919	4	Medium Human Development
Vietnam	1.007	1	High Human Development

Women, Business and the Law Index (WBL)

According to the World Bank⁹, Women, Business and the Law index (WBL) measures how laws and regulations affect women’s economic opportunity on the scale from 0 to 100, where 100 means equal legal rights for men and women. Overall scores are calculated by taking the average score of each index (Mobility, Workplace, Pay, Marriage, Parenthood, Entrepreneurship, Assets and Pension), with 100 representing the highest possible score.

Country	Latest WBL Index (2023)	Income Group
Laos	85.6/ 100 ¹⁰	Lower Middle Income
Viet Nam	88.1/ 100 ¹¹	Lower Middle Income

⁷ <https://hdr.undp.org/gender-development-index#/indicies/GDI>

⁸ See Geske Dijkstra, A. & Hanmer, L. C. (2000). “Measuring Socio-Economic Gender Inequality: Towards an Alternative to the UNDP Gender Index” in Feminist Economics, (Vol. 6, No. 2). Journal article. UNDP (2018). Human Development Reports, ‘Table IV: Gender Development Index’. Website. Accessed online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/GDI>

⁹ <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/women-business-and-the-law-index>, accessed on 14 July 2024

¹⁰ <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>, accessed on 14 July 2024

¹¹ <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>, accessed on 14 July 2024

Climate change and gender-related vulnerabilities in the Lower Mekong Basin

Over the past decades, changing agricultural land use practices in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) have led to increased exposure to climate hazards, even as they contribute to increased GHG emissions from the agriculture, forestry, and land-use sector.

In the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), women are particularly vulnerable to climate change due to their dependence on natural resources for their livelihoods. Climate change has led to changes in rainfall patterns and water availability, which has affected agriculture and fisheries where women are strongly involved.

Historical climate trends and projections indicate that women and vulnerable groups in the target region will be disproportionately impacted by climate change. The following climate impacts have been identified in the LMB:

- **Increasing extreme weather events** (floods and typhoons): floods continue to be one of the most significant threats across the target countries, causing millions of dollars of damage and losses and affecting thousands of people. Lao PDR is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change impacts, particularly floods.
- **Increasing extreme weather events** (drought): prolonged droughts have been causing crop losses and shortages of domestic water supply, putting the lives of thousands of women and children at risk of water-borne diseases and malnutrition.
- **Increased temperature**: Increased air temperatures are associated with lower productivity for coffee, rice and other crops, while increased ocean surface temperatures affect commercial seaweed production.
- **Rising sea levels**: Viet Nam is at risk of sea level rise which increases flooding from storm surges and results in increased saline intrusion for coastal agriculture, impacting domestic water supplies for millions of people.

In the LMB, women are more affected by land use changes because of their relationship with water, forests and other natural resources, as well as kinship and social networks on which they depend for support.¹² Differences in climate vulnerability between men and women are rooted in social structures and discriminatory norms and institutions that shape gendered patterns in resource access, time use, income opportunities and access to services in rural areas (FAO, 2023). Among other things, these patterns manifest themselves as persistent gaps in terms of the time dedicated to care and domestic responsibilities, in wages and productivity, in the quality of jobs, in access to and ownership of agricultural land, in the use of improved agricultural inputs and technologies, and in access to extension and financial services. Gaps in agricultural productivity, land ownership, access to extension and financial services, have a direct effect on women's climate vulnerability by undermining their adaptive capacity and pushing them into livelihood options that are more sensitive to climate change along multiple intersecting

¹² USAID (2016) Integrating gender considerations into community-based adaptation in agrarian communities in the Lower Mekong Basin. Available at: https://www.climate-links.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/marcc_gender_and_cba_paper_formatted-8.11.2016_usaid_rev.pdf

dimensions.¹³ Compared to men, women are likely to have limited ability to adapt to climate change because they are often excluded from decision-making and are far likelier to lack productive resources such as land. In rural areas of the Lower Mekong Basin, women assume major water related responsibilities. The reduced availability of rice and fish due to water and related developments often has more impact on women as they tend to be responsible for growing and preparing food. During floods and droughts, women are more vulnerable than men due to their higher dependence on natural resources and because of the social barriers that limit their adaptive capacity.

Women play a central role in the generation of cash income for the household. In the LMB region, women are predominantly responsible for tasks including collecting water, gathering Non-Timber Forestry Products (NTFPs) for either consumption or sale, specific tasks related to crop cultivation and animal husbandry. They are responsible for selling surplus rice, vegetables, NTFPs and livestock.¹⁴ In such settings where women's opportunities are more constrained than men's and their responsibilities are closely tied to natural resources, their livelihoods are more likely to be negatively affected by climate-related changes in their environment. For example, water shortage during the dry season requires women and girls in Lao PDR's to walk several kilometers and wait in long lines every day to collect water for household use.¹⁵ Women responsible for collecting NTFPs such as mushrooms, bamboo shoots or ant eggs face a similar situation. These prolonged chores take time and energy away from their several other daily responsibilities. Understanding women's share of domestic workload is also key to avoid reinforcing existing inequalities in adaptation and mitigation action as their participation can lead to increase their burdens.

Gender norms and unequal power relations constrain meaningful involvement of women in decision-making. For example, in Viet Nam it was found that while women participate in community water governance meetings, they often do not voice their opinions during the meetings and participate less when senior officers were involved. Poor ethnic women disproportionality experience exclusion from community water decision-making, such as meetings introducing new projects.¹⁶ There is overall consensus among scholars and practitioners that women and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable because their livelihoods are more vulnerable to climate impacts and they lack the resources to adapt. For example, education levels correlate with knowledge about climate change and access to climate-related information. Knowledge of

¹³ FAO (2024) The unjust climate. Measuring the impacts of climate change on rural poor, women, and youth. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/socioeconomic-research-analysis/resources/unjust-climate/the-unjust-climate/en>

¹⁴ Riversweb (N.D) Gender Issues in the Lower Mekong Basin . Available at: https://www.riversweb.org/namton/0420/KIT/1Basics/137CS_Gender_Issues_LMB.pdf

¹⁵ USAID (2016) Integrating gender considerations into community-based adaptation in agrarian communities in the Lower Mekong Basin.

¹⁶ Dang, L. Q. (2017). Water Management through the Lenses of Gender, Ethnicity and Class: A Comparative Case Study of Upstream and Downstream Sites on the Mekong River in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam (ASEAN-Canada Research Partnership Working Paper Series Working Paper No. 6). Singapore: Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies (NTS Centre) RSIS

climate change and adaptation strategies has been found to be lower in women compared to men in the target regions.¹⁷

The increased frequency and intensity of weather events, fueled by the changing climate, has significant impacts on physical and mental health, women's included. A recent study which examined heat-related productivity losses through a gender lens, concluded that estimates of women's heat-related losses increase by 260% when unpaid labor is considered, compared to only 76% increase for men.¹⁸ The study identified extreme heat as placing a disproportionate burden on women's physical health and economic security. With expected rising temperatures, women living in the LMB will be more at risks and their livelihoods will be strongly affected. Disasters impact health outcomes, and poor rural women are more likely to be affected. In Lao PDR outbreaks of diseases such as diarrheal disease, malaria, and typhoid fever are prevalent partly due to these hazards, and the incidence of tuberculosis is the highest in the region. Major disasters—such as typhoon Haima in 2011, or the 2018 floods—worsen health outcomes due to damage to health-care facilities and destruction of livelihoods.¹⁹

Long-term increases in temperatures are an important driver of income inequality between households headed by women and men. From heat stress, female-headed households lose 8% more of their income every year than male-headed households. Thus, there is an urgent need to strengthen the resilience of the agricultural production systems of female producers to rising temperatures.

More frequent and prolonged droughts are some of the climate hazards identified in each of the two target countries, with projected impacts on agricultural production and water availability. Research indicates that women are disproportionately affected by dry spells, impacting their livelihoods. Data reveal that plots managed by women are less likely to be irrigated or enhanced with organic fertilizers. Furthermore, female farmers are less likely to possess formal land documentation or agricultural machinery, making them more reliant on manual labor for agricultural production.

To get an understanding of the specific gender-related vulnerabilities, the assessment delves into women's participation in agriculture, forestry and aquaculture, with a specific focus on gender barriers identified in the two countries.

Agriculture

Investing in climate responsive agriculture requires a better understanding of the constraints women agricultural producers face, including their access to natural resources, such as land and water, and productive resources such as credit, technologies and infrastructure. In the LMB, women are heavily involved in smallholder or small-scale agriculture – often in temporary and/or unpaid activities, with poorer access to productive capital,

¹⁷ USAID (2016) Integrating gender considerations into community-based adaptation in agrarian communities in the Lower Mekong Basin.

¹⁸ Adrienne Arsht-Rockefeller Foundation Resilience Center (2023) The scorching divide: how extreme heat inflames gender inequalities in health and income. Available at <https://onebillionresilient.org/extreme-heat-inflames-gender-inequalities/>

¹⁹ Government of Lao PDR. 2018. Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) 2018 Floods Lao PDR

technology, and other resources. For these reasons, gender considerations need to be integrated into the design and implementation of the proposed project to enhance the efficacy of climate change adaptation interventions and ensure that gender co-benefits are obtained.

The significant vulnerability of the rural poor and women groups to climate change impacts suggests the great need for gender-responsive adaptation interventions based on gender-sensitive vulnerability to manage climate-induced risks in the LMB. In the agriculture sector, gender transformative adaptation can enhance food and nutrition security and bring other benefits such as increased socio-economic well-being and poverty reduction.

Women are an integral part of the agricultural sector across the LMB and they contribute significantly to all parts of agricultural production, but their contribution is undervalued.

Viet Nam's agricultural sector is being restructured to shift away from low value and subsistence agriculture towards more knowledge-based agricultural technology, mechanization and value-added processing to produce and export high-standard food products. Although the proportion of labor in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector is decreasing, it still accounts for 35.9% among employed women and 33.2% among employed men in 2019.²⁰ Employed women are only marginally more likely than men to be working in agriculture, forestry and fishery. However, there is an important difference between the situation of men and women employed in this sector. The majority (85.9%) of women in agricultural employment are primarily involved in subsistence agriculture while the corresponding share in male agricultural employment is 59.2%.²¹ Similarly in Laos, the agricultural sector is shifting from subsistence to market-based models, however women face constraints in accessing markets due to limited mobility, literacy levels and, in the case of ethnic minorities women, Lao language skills.²²

The Vietnamese agricultural sector employment remains characterized by limited earnings and few worker protections, within which women are particularly disadvantaged, making gender-mainstreaming extremely relevant to agricultural restructuring in Viet Nam. In Viet Nam, the agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors are associated with lower technical qualifications than other sectors of the economy and women workers are in an even more disadvantaged position compared to their male counterparts.²³

Across the two countries, women are engaged in a wide range of crop value chains and manage many functions as small-scale farmers and collectors, retailers, and wholesalers. In general, farming is considered as a household activity. However, agricultural activities such as land preparation, irrigation control, fertilizer and pesticide application can be divided as men's or women's work. Mechanization, manual works, and operation of farm equipment are generally

²⁰ GSO (2021a). Gender Statistics in Vietnam 2020, Statistical Publishing House, Hanoi. <https://www.gso.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SACH-GIOI--printed.pdf>.

²¹ UN Women (2021a). Country Gender Equality Profile Viet Nam 2021. https://vietnam.un.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/CGEP_Full%20report_English.pdf.

²² FAO (2018) Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao People's Democratic Republic. Available at <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/213d3b2b-9f00-402c-80d3-5ebaab037302/content>

²³ Vu Thi Hoai Thu & Nguyen Vu Thu Anh (2023) Climate Change and Agriculture in Vietnam: A Gender Perspective. Available at: <https://khoamoitruongdothi.neu.edu.vn/vi/cong-trinh-nckh/climate-change-and-agriculture-in-vietnam-a-gender-perspective>

performed by men, whereas women take care of seed, seedlings, weed control, transplanting, etc.

Equal rights do not guarantee equal access, and in the LMB women face barriers in benefitting from land ownership and access to financing. Viet Nam has enacted provisions to improve the protection of women's land rights. Women's equal land rights are institutionalized in several laws, but rural women's access to and control over land, a direct source of livelihood, remains contingent upon men.²⁴ Women have limited land ownership which constrains their access to credit and secure livelihoods. Bank processes in Laos require land titles and assets as well as the signature of the head of the household, preventing women from easily accessing formal financing. Due to their lack of access to formal financial mechanisms, women are more likely to take out small, informal loans to meet family needs. This debt can be a burden for women when repeated natural disasters occur, as they do not have an income source to repay the loans.

Women and women's groups have less access to the technical training and information across the two countries. Rural women are over-represented in the occupational category of unskilled labor and also less likely than rural men to benefit from agricultural extension services and short-term training in Viet Nam. Women groups have less access to the technical training that is needed as the agricultural economy becomes less labor intensive and more knowledge-based. In Laos men are usually the first choice when it comes to attending village meetings, training, and information sessions because women are busy with housework. Women, therefore, often only receive information through their husbands, if at all. When women do attend meetings and trainings, they do not feel confident enough to speak or ask questions, which means they are not full participants.

The dual burden of agricultural work and household responsibilities negatively impact women's health and nutrition, reducing their productivity and ability to engage in labor-intensive agricultural practices. In Laos the education and literacy gaps between men and women harm women's self-confidence and contribute to perceptions, held by both men and women, that women are less capable than men.²⁵

Forestry

Women play important roles in all forestry activities, including management and utilization of natural resources as well as the practice of traditional knowledge on management and protection of forests and forest resources. Women and men exhibit different patterns in their interactions with forests, particularly in activities related to forest landscape restoration, including:

- Women and men gather different forest products, especially non-timber resources, and derive distinct benefits from them.
- Women often have different levels of access to and control over forest resources compared to men.

²⁴ UN Women (2021b). The State of Gender Equality and Climate Change in Viet Nam. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEA/Docs/Publications/2021/04/publication_vietnam%20report_digital2%20%281%29.pdf

²⁵ FAO (2018)

- Both women and men serve as agents of forest conservation, contributing in diverse ways to sustainable management and activities aimed at restoring forest landscapes.

Women have a diversity of roles in wood-based value chains, but the lack of precise data on how women participate in these value chains constrains efforts to improve gender equity. It is estimated that 2-3 million women in Viet Nam are involved in wood production, processing, and marketing, most of them working in household or micro-enterprises either as owners, members of the household labor force, or hired laborers.²⁶ With regards to non-wood forestry products, women are heavily involved in activities like nursery tending, seedling preparation and non-wood forest product collection.²⁷

In Laos NTFPs play an important role in promoting the livelihood of the rural population and the national economy. About 70% of the total population lives in rural areas, are dependent on upland farming and forest products for their food, cash income, and livelihood. NTFPs are part of their daily subsistence. Women play an active role in harvesting and using NTFPs, but they often do not have direct control of the income derived from commercial NTFPs, and therefore may not directly benefit from increased commercialization. Women are also more likely to be involved in crop cultivation within the actual forests than men even if the latter have been responsible for clearing the forest land in the first instance.²⁸

Despite the lack of discriminatory laws and policies, the regulatory framework's implementation has been weak across countries. In Viet Nam women's names are often omitted on Land Use Certificates which confer ownership of land rights.

The role of women, especially rural and indigenous women, in the conservation of natural resources and protection is largely defined by their traditionally-assigned social roles. Cultural attitudes around women's roles and their engagement in domestic and care activities (including childcare and other domestic duties) are one of the underlying causes of gender inequality in the forestry sector and in wood-based value chains. These attitudes often discourage women from participating in meetings or having stronger decision-making influence, and bias local conflict resolution processes.

Gender disparities in the forestry sector are largely attributable to cultural norms that reinforce that forestry is a male profession and women's work is of secondary importance. Because of these norms, fewer opportunities in forestry planning and capacity development programme for managerial, technical and business skills are offered to women. Hence, women's participation in decision-making and their representation in leadership positions at both national and subnational levels are low (e.g. Viet Nam). Women slightly outnumber men in the agriculture, forestry and fishing workforce in Laos (51.3% of the workforce is women, compared to 48.7 being men), however their involvement in forest value chains is limited to small-scale retail or

²⁶ Forest Policy Trade and Finance Initiative (2019) Gender and wood-based value chains in Vietnam. Available at <https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Vietnam-Gender-SmEs-FINAL.pdf>

²⁷ FAO (2015) Understanding women's participation in forestry in Viet Nam. Policy Brief.

²⁸ World Bank (2019) Lao PDR Gender Integration Development Study Draft Final Report. Available at: <https://www.forestcarbonpartnership.org/system/files/documents/Lao%20PDR%20Gender%20Integration%20Development%20Study%20Final%20Report.pdf>

subsistence harvesting²⁹. Men dominate larger businesses and tend to engage in higher value chains. As processing become more capital-intensive, or as the scale increases, women's participation tends to decrease. Women's participation also diminishes when the distance to the trading location increases, often due to socio-cultural norms.

Aquaculture

Women's involvement in aquaculture varies across the countries and it is shaped by cultural norms and economic situation. Generally speaking, the aquaculture sector remains male-dominated.³⁰ Key barriers drive gender inequalities in the sector: women's lack of access to land pond ownership; lower access to technologies and training or information; lack of control over income. In terms of division of work, the most physically strenuous work such as pond preparation is mainly done by men. Both women and men are engaged in feeding, harvesting and selling fish. Mariculture is often considered as men's occupation, but women are heavily involved in certain aquaculture types such as seaweed and crab culture, and often are involved as workers in shrimp farms. Women are involved more in extensive aquaculture especially in homestead culture and less in commercial and intensive aquaculture.

In Viet Nam women are facing barriers to transition to aquaculture farming due to a lack of expertise and limited access to capital and technical support.

In the LMB women's contributions in aquaculture often extend beyond traditional gender roles. Women may lead production by integrating aquaculture with domestic tasks and owning vertically integrated companies. However, skewed perceptions about gender roles, especially in patriarchal societies, limit women's access to training, policy-making, and decision-making opportunities. Women also receive lower wages than men and their contributions are often undervalued due to a lack of disaggregated data.³¹ In Viet Nam, gender stereotypes and the perception of men as the primary breadwinners and decision-makers of the family also limit women's participation in commercial aquaculture. Income from aquaculture does not come regularly as production cycles last at least 2 months. Thus, small household farms need to engage in non-aquaculture livelihood activities (plant or animal production, off-farm jobs) to provide regular income (and food); and this is where women play a role in filling the income gap.

Industrialization and globalization have displaced women from marine areas as men establish mariculture zones. In Viet Nam, extensive coastal shrimp farming is supported by the conservation of the forest and the cultivation of crabs, shellfish, and mollusks, which allows for natural recruiting of wild shrimp together with stocking of additional seeds from hatcheries.

²⁹ Rural Research & Development Promoting Knowledge Association (RRDPA) And Maeying Huamchai Phattana (MHP) (2021). Women's involvement in village forest management. Available at: <https://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Women-involvement-in-village-forest-management.pdf>

³⁰ FAO (2022). Women and men in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Asia. Available at: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/91054e6a-0d2c-43b3-98ac-289eda0552d4/content>

³¹ Bosma et al. (2018). Gender action plans in the aquaculture value chain: what's missing? Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/raq.12293>

However, men are responsible for decisions on farming techniques, when to dredge and when to stock, whereas women help to harvest and sell the shrimp.³²

Climate change impacts on aquaculture production include direct and indirect effect, including at ecosystem level. Small-scale farmers are expected to be more impacted due to the increased production costs in farm management and lack of support systems to recover from climate impacts compared to large producers. Hence, women and vulnerable communities are expected to experience the negative impacts.

Land-use changes to accommodate aquaculture may also lead to exclusion of the poor households in which women are the most vulnerable. In Vietnam's coastal areas from North to South, poor and women-headed households are often involved in intermittent seasonal salt-rice production demanding little inputs. When the neighboring fields are converted to intensive shrimp farming, the water management of the area is modified and the poor are forced to follow into shrimp farming. However, as the poor households don't have the required capital for intensification to follow, this shift leads to failure and loss of land.³³

Exporting countries benefit significantly from globalization through increased employment, and women's participation has increased but gaps remain to achieve quality employment standards. In 2001, Vietnamese fisheries employed around 45,000 people, with women comprising only 6.7%. A decade later, women represented 90-95% in pangasius and shrimp processing.³⁴ However, women are often paid less for the same tasks and the high percentage of women in seafood processing is driven by lower wages for women and the industry's failure to comply with labor laws and human rights standards.

Programme Overview

The Mekong Earth Regeneration Fund (MERF)

The Mekong Earth Regeneration Fund (MERF) GCF Programme employs an Equity Investment Facility to help investee companies address barriers to low-carbon and climate resilient agricultural production in the Lower Mekong Basin and attract private capital at scale. The programme has a cross-cutting focus of climate mitigation and adaptation in the Lower Mekong Basin.

Through long-term private equity investments for impactful businesses adopting regenerative agriculture and sustainable land use, MERF will demonstrate successful investment models that stimulate action and mobilize necessary investment for GHG mitigation and climate resilience in the AFOLU sector.

³² FAO (2022). Women and men in small-scale fisheries and aquaculture in Asia. Available at: <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/91054e6a-0d2c-43b3-98ac-289eda0552d4/content>

³³ Nguyen TD, Ngo TT, Nguyen TMK (2015) Determinations of woman's contributions to fish and shrimp farms in Vietnam' northern coastal area. World Aquaculture Conference 26-30 May 2015, Jeju, Korea. Available from <http://www.was.org/meetingabstracts/ShowAbstract.aspx?id=35713>.

³⁴ De Silva DAM (2011) Faces of women in global fishery value chains: Female involvement, impact and importance in the fisheries of developed and developing countries. NORAD/FAO Value Chain Project.

The programme will support sustainable and resilient businesses in sustainable land-use sectors – comprising regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, sustainable plantation, sustainable aquaculture, livestock and forestry, agritech solutions etc. The MERF aims to crowd-in foreign and domestic private investment to leverage the significant potential to transform food systems in the Lower Mekong Basin that has so far largely been untapped and will do so in a way that builds climate resilience, contributes to emission reductions and avoids maladaptation.

The MERF will target sustainable land use sectors that promote nature-based solutions to mitigate and adapt to climate change through the preservation and regeneration of forests and soils. The MERF aims to target specific sectors and business models displaying the most potential to optimize the risk-impact-return profile for shareholders, while delivering concrete adaptation measures and emission reductions. The MERF will invest in business models that reduce GHG emissions from the agriculture, forestry, and land-use sectors, and contribute to climate resilience for farmers and ecosystems while generating attractive financial returns. Investments will consider opportunities to stimulate change across the entire value chain – processing, input suppliers, finance entities, pre- and post-harvest. The MERF will focus on de-risking new investments in companies expected to achieve rapid scale-up of impact and growth rates over the period of the Fund's investment. This will mainly be driven by rapid growth in the underlying business, as measured by the measurement indicators which are most relevant to value and impact creation in that industry. This will lead to MERF prioritizing companies and sectors that are at earlier stages of growth, including in highly fragmented sectors.

The proposed programme is structured around one main component, which includes establishing and operationalizing the MERF Investment Facility, and placing capital with investee companies. Key outputs of the program are Output 1.1 – MERF is fully operational in beneficiary countries to mobilize capital for regenerative landscape investment and Output 2 – MERF successfully identifies and finances eligible companies and businesses that support farmers in implementing climate resilience and regenerative agriculture practices. MERF is expected, over a 12-year period, to impact the lives of 369,200 direct and indirect beneficiaries in the LMB, and mitigate approximately 10.9 MtCO₂e by helping regenerate and enhance climate resilience on at least 172,600 ha of forest, agricultural and coastal ecosystems.

GCF support will be instrumental to secure investor confidence and attract capital in underserved sectors, which will support the transition from resource-depleting agricultural practices with low returns to resilient, low-carbon production pathways with higher revenue and return generation potential in two target countries.

MERF's Gender Approach

Mekong Capital's Gender Approach and Track Record

Diversity, equality, and inclusivity (DE&I) are key priorities at Mekong Capital, both as a diverse and inclusive workplace, and as a private equity provider. Mekong Capital believes that inclusive and diverse workplace would lead to better business performance. Mekong Capital upholds local labor laws and best practices by ensuring fair labor practices, fostering a non-discrimination workplace, and actively promoting a diverse, equitable and inclusive working environment.

Specifically, through the MERF, Mekong Capital would like to foster gender equality and women's empowerment by implementing a gender investing strategy, which integrates gender lens into the MERF's investment processes.

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion within Mekong Capital in 2024			
83% of employees are women	33% of partners are women	88% of managers are women	88% of promotions in 2024 were for women

Within the portfolio companies, Mekong Capital has been tracking and monitoring progress of its investees with regards to gender equality, diversity and inclusion. In 2024, their portfolio accounted for over 50% women employees. This track record and experience have been used to build the MERF's gender investing strategy and to shape the MERF's expected impacts to gender equality.

Diversity, Equality and Inclusion at the Portfolio level of the existing Funds advised by Mekong Capital in 2024			
55% of employees are women	7% of companies have a woman CEO	31% of senior management positions are held by women	100% of companies have at least one woman on the board

MERF's Gender Investing Strategy

Considering the disproportional impacts of climate change on women in the Lower Mekong Basin, which amplifies existing gender inequalities and poses unique threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety, MERF has developed a Gender Investing Strategy for the MERF programme. This strategy aims to address gender disparities and make better-informed investment decisions and risk management that can have reputational, operational, and ultimately the performance of portfolio companies.

Evidence shows that gender-smart investment strategies can enhance a company's competitiveness, solidify its supply base, improve human capital, and help build an overall enabling business environment. Incorporating gender analysis into the fund's investment process can highlight opportunities and uncover risks, leading to better financial and social outcomes. During the development of the fund's pipeline portfolio, the investment team has identified several opportunities and engaged with companies founded and led by women. These companies typically have a more diverse and gender-equitable workforce and contribute to a more inclusive value chain where women are empowered to play various roles.

MERF's Gender Investing Strategy closely follows the Gender-Smart Investing Guide for Fund Managers published by International Finance Corporation (IFC) and CDC³⁵. MERF will apply one or more of the following gender-lens investing strategies within each investment deal, and across the portfolio (see Table 1). Covering the entire investment life cycle from origination, due diligence and investment analysis to decision-making, deal structuring, portfolio management and reporting.

³⁵ <https://www.ifc.org/en/insights-reports/2020/gender-smart-investing-guide>

Table 1 - Gender Lens Strategies for the MERF

Strategy (Gender Lens)	Gender-lens Origination (Pre-investment)	Gender-lens Portfolio Management (Post-investment)
<i>Invest in Companies</i>	<i>Identify and consider</i>	<i>Support portfolio companies to</i>
Leadership Companies with women represented in leadership (i.e. founder, cofounder, gender-balanced leadership team)	Companies where women are represented as founders, co-founders, majority owned by women and are committed to increasing gender diversity within their leadership as represented in senior leadership and the Board of Directors.	Increase gender diversity of leadership.
Employees Companies committed to a gender diverse and equitable workforce	Companies that have a gender-diverse workforce or that are committed to increasing diversity throughout the workforce and include other vulnerable groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, youth, elderly) as part of their workforce.	Increase the gender diversity of employee base and enhance workplace equity for both female and male employees. Support portfolio companies to adopt inclusive workplace policies and practices to support women at all levels.
Supply Chain Companies committed to a gender inclusive value chain	Companies that: a) buy goods and services from women owned and led producers and suppliers, or b) distribute and sell products via women-owned and led distributors and retailers	Develop a gender-inclusive supplier base and distribution network. Support existing suppliers to adopt inclusive practices, such as code of conducts, etc.
Community Companies committed to ensuring their operations adopt a “do no harm” approach to women in the community	Consider the representation and needs of women community stakeholders (including from vulnerable groups) that could be impacted by company operations	Develop gender-inclusive community engagement processes and operations and track sex-disaggregated data on their interventions. Support companies to implement community-level grievance mechanisms and ensure that GBVH and SEAH practices for community engagement are up to standards.

During the investment assessment process on a potential deal and in particular during the due diligence phase, MERF will decide which gender-lens investment strategy/ies is the most suitable for the investment. One or more of the strategies can be selected based on the following factors:

- **Relevance of the gender lens** to the investee company business model and the sectors and markets they operate in. To identify the most appropriate lens or lenses, particular emphasis will be placed on the stage of growth of the company, their previous experience with gender-specific activities and their leadership's appetite for deepen the commitment towards gender equality.
- **Existing gender gaps** in the sector of operation and considering where there is the opportunity to make a difference, as well as country-specific gender gaps and barriers. This is often seen in sectors where women are underserved, or in the workforce where changes to recruitment, retention, and promotion can be undertaken to promote gender diversity within the investee company. MERF will seek to find a balance between ambitious action to close gaps and available resources to address existing gaps.
- **Availability of data** to establish a baseline and assess the starting point of the potential investee company. Internal workforce data (workforce composition) will be assessed first, and then compared with national benchmarks and Mekong Capital's track record and experience.

Alignment with GCF Gender Policy

The MERF aligns with GCF Gender Policy³⁶ which aims to address and reduce gender inequalities, deepen stakeholder engagement and deliver better accountability to both men and women to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities, health and well-being, and resilience against climate-induced shocks and risks.

The Fund's gender approach is also aligned with international standards, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the International Labor Organization's core conventions, by recognizing the equal rights of women and men to access opportunities.

Mekong Capital is responsible for supporting the implementation of the Fund-level gender action plan and for reporting on results, including the generation and use of sex-disaggregated data.

In line with GCF project-level requirements, Mekong Capital will:

- Prepare a gender assessment and gender action plan for the Fund (i.e. this document) and integrate the analysis of context and sociocultural factors underlying climate changes-exacerbated gender inequality.
- During the MERF's implementation, Mekong Capital will refine as necessary the gender-related baseline, indicators and targets.
- The MERF will monitor progress and report on the progress made in implementing the fund-level gender action plan.

³⁶ Gender Policy adopted by the Board in decision B.24/12

As part of the contribution to the enabling environment, the MERF will ensure that each investee's gender action plan is aligned with national policies and priorities on gender and that these are reflected in the contextual analysis conducted during the due diligence phase.

Alignment and Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The MERF will contribute to SDG5 – to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The MERF will aim at contributing to the achievement of Target 5.5: “Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” by tracking the proportion of women in managerial positions.

The project will also indirectly contribute to end forms of discrimination against women through the support provided to investee companies and their application of inclusive workplace policies and practices (Target 5.1 of SDG 5).

Companies will be required to track diversity in their workforce and track women participating in their value chains, and to adapt their policies and practices so that they can meet workforce's diversity targets, as well as they will be benefited from the Fund's technical support to increase women's participation and empower women at all levels.

Further, in alignment with the MERF's approach to SEAH and GBVH prevention, the Fund will also strive to contribute to the elimination of violence against women by supporting companies to develop and implement strong GBVH prevention and SEAH prevention mechanisms (Target 5.2).

MERF Gender Impact Goal

MERF sets an ambitious gender impact goal of reaching **50% of MERF's investments to be 2X Criteria-aligned at the end of the Fund's lifetime**. Given that investments are not identified at this stage, this target is aspirational. Mekong Capital will monitor progress against this impact goal on an annual basis and refine it as needed. This target is ambitious and is a testament of the MERF's commitment to gender equality, while also reflecting the barriers and challenges still existing in the two target countries.

The MERF impact goes beyond simply tracking inclusion within their portfolio companies and aims at achieving long-lasting transformations of women and vulnerable' s groups livelihoods. This goal is achieved through integration of gender equality considerations across all stages of the investment process and through support to companies to achieve gender targets. Gender equality is embedded in the MERF's Theory of Change and gender-related outcomes include the improved adaptative capacity of farmers (% of beneficiaries who are women), as well as increased financial and social inclusion for women and vulnerable groups (co-benefit). The MERF's Theory of Change is presented in the following Figure 1.

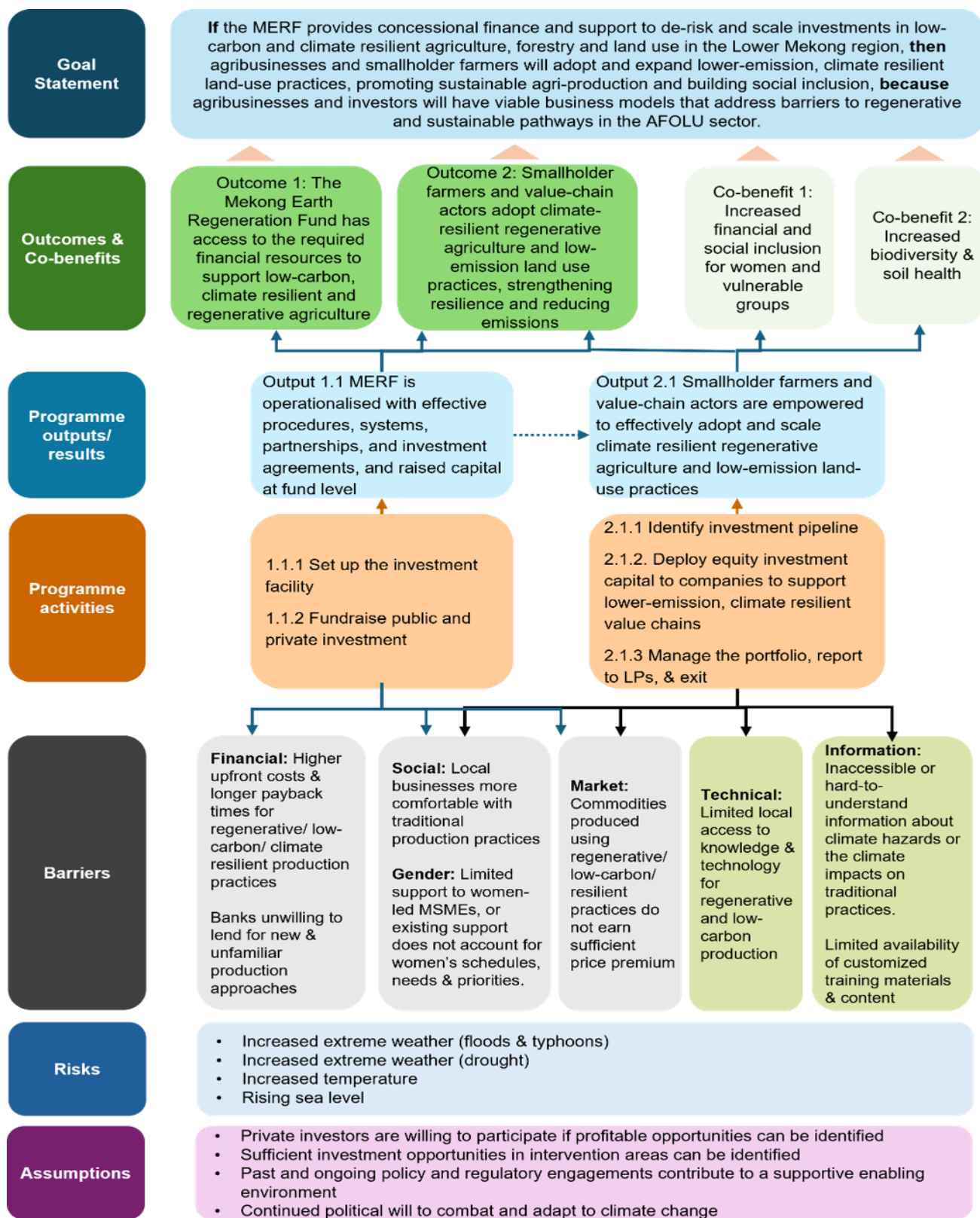


Figure 1 MERF's Theory of Change

The Fund aims to establish a clear pathway with annual key performance indicators (KPIs) and milestones for each portfolio company, while also regularly monitoring to ensure that this goal is achieved within the designated timeline.

2X Criteria is a set of assessment criteria developed by 2X Global for the “2X Challenge” - a call to action to shift more capital towards investments that empower women in developing countries to have access to entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities, quality jobs, and products and services that enhance their economic participation. Investments align with the 2X Criteria if they meet³⁷:

- Basic 2X ESG,
- Minimum Governance & Accountability requirements,
- Two Criteria or **ONE** Criteria and provide a **time-bound commitment** to meet a second Criteria.

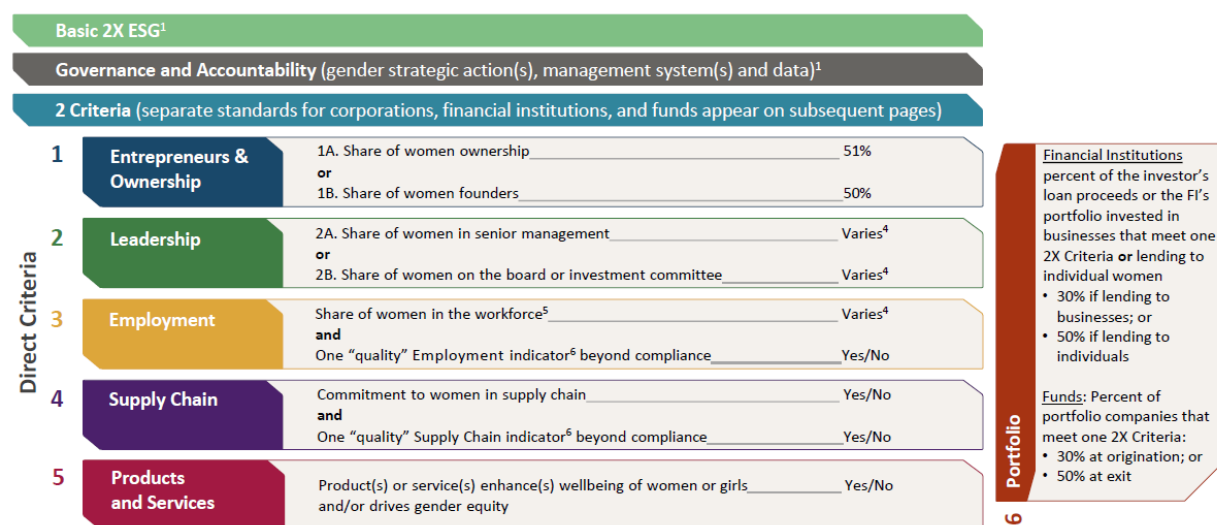


Figure 2 An Overview of the 2X Criteria

*The 6th criterion is only applicable to Financial Institutions and Funds, not for companies.

The Fund will focus on alignment with the following 2X Criteria:

- **Entrepreneur & Ownership**
- **Leadership**
- **Employment;** and
- **Supply Chain**

These 2X Criteria align with the Fund's Gender Investing Strategy and are straightforward for portfolio companies to report on with minimal effort. Portfolio companies are expected to comply with the “Basic ESG” criteria and the “Governance and Accountability” as these are assessed during the due diligence phase. Given the specific sectors of MERF's investments (e.g.,

³⁷ <https://www.2xchallenge.org/2xcriteria>. Accessed 22 Dec 2025

agriculture, aquaculture and forestry), and the identified climate hazards and climate impacts in the target region, investee companies are expected to implement actions that:

- Improve the livelihoods of women by reaching women in the workforce and in agricultural commodity value chains. This will be achieved by providing safe and attractive job opportunities, ensuring inclusive workplace policies and practices, and engaging women and small-holder farmers in high-value supply chains. Income generation and livelihood diversification will contribute to reducing women's vulnerability to climate change.
- Improve the adaptive capacity of farmers, particularly women, by strengthening their ability to anticipate, absorb, and respond to climate-related shocks while sustaining or improving livelihoods.

Gender Targets

The country assessment (see page 27) indicates gender gaps still exist with regards to women's participation in sustainable land-use sectors, and barriers prevent them to access leadership positions. Nevertheless, the programme aims at ensuring that equal opportunities and fair participation are provided to men and women in the contexts of the investments. The MERF strives to support women by supporting women-led/ women-owned businesses, providing access to leadership opportunities, quality employment, and an inclusive value chain, enhancing their economic participation and inclusion. Aligning with the 2X Criteria allows the Fund to drive significant social impact, promote gender equality, achieve economic benefits, improve operations, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable economy.

MERF and its investee companies will align on the targets linked with the selected 2X Criteria, with reference to the country-specific target of the 2X Criteria, and corresponding action plans to achieve the targets within a set timeframe. These targets are further reflected in the Gender Action Plan for this project, and in the Funding Proposal.

Table 2 Country-specific targets for relevant 2X Criteria

Country	Targets for Entrepreneurship and Ownership Criteria	Targets for Leadership Criteria	Targets for Employment Criteria	Targets for Supply Chain Criteria
Viet Nam	50% founders are women; or 51% of shares owned by women	30% of senior management are women; or 30% of board members are women	45% of employees and at least one quality employment indicator	Commitment to women in supply chain and at least one supply chain quality indicator
Lao PDR	50% founders are women; or 51% of shares owned by women	45% of senior management are women; or 30% of board members are women	45% of employees and at least one quality employment indicator	Commitment to women in supply chain and at least one supply chain quality indicator

Based on the analysis of the existing pipeline (see Annex 2 Feasibility Study) and the estimated reach of 369,207 beneficiaries (direct and indirect, see Annex 23 Beneficiary Calculations), sector and country-specific participation rates have been used to identify MERF's targets. Based on national labour and agricultural participation statistics, we estimate that approximately 50% of smallholders in Laos and 47% in Vietnam engaged in agricultural, forestry and aquaculture value chains are women. Applying these proxies to the MERF's anticipated reach yields an estimated ~45% of the total smallholder beneficiaries as women. These figures will be refined through investee-level gender diagnostics during implementation and will inform gender action plans and monitoring frameworks.

Indicator for tracking gender inclusion in MERF	Targets	Assumptions
Share of women beneficiaries reached by the MERF	45% of total MERF beneficiaries to be women	The percentage of women beneficiaries represents an ex-ante portfolio-level estimate, to be refined during implementation through investee-level gender assessments.
Share of women in the workforce	45% of jobs created under MERF that will go to women	Lao PDR has higher % of female workforce participation in agriculture, forestry and fishery sectors compared to Viet Nam. However, across the two countries, despite high workforce participation rates, women tend to be employed on family farms and in subsistence agriculture. The MERF will require and support investee companies to ensure that they have the necessary policies, practices and strategies to recruit women across all levels of the workforce, and that each investee is equipped to reach the envisaged target.

Gender Lens Integration into MERF's Investment Process

To implement the Fund's Gender Investing Strategy and deliver the gender impact goal, the Fund applies gender lens approach throughout the Fund's investment process, from deal sourcing, screening, due diligence, investment decision making, post-investment portfolio management, monitoring and reporting and exits. The approach is integrated as a part of the Fund's Environmental and Social Management System (ESMS) and Impact Measurement and Management (IMM) as summarized below:

Stage	Description
-------	-------------

Deal Sourcing	Identify deal using a gender lens: in order to avoid conscious or unconscious bias when identifying new pipelines. MERF's sourcing strategies are designed to be • Sourcing strategies: in alignment with the Fund's Gender Investing Strategy, Deal team will proactively attend and present at women-focused entrepreneurship events, women business groups, women entrepreneurship support organizations and alike to establish relationship and build a network for pipeline development. Meanwhile, the MERF's deal team comprises of both female and male members, which could enable gender diverse view to source diverse pipeline companies.
Screening	Early screening of the potential investments to ensure they fit the investment, it will cover both negative screens and positive screens: • Negative screens: ○ Screen pipelines against MERF's Exclusion List ○ Preliminarily screen sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) risks and identify whether any potential gender issues, such as non-compliance issues, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) cases, as well as any potential risks of exacerbating gender inequalities post investment due to the sector and context of implementation. • Positive screen: screen pipeline companies to identify whether they are already demonstrating alignment with or have a willingness to commit to a gender lens or the Fund's Gender Investing Strategy, with a particular focus on their potential alignment with the 2X Criteria. The screening will be done through review of publicly available resources, and also information from early engagement with pipeline companies with reference to the 2X Criteria.
Due Diligence	Gender due diligence will be conducted as parts of the Environmental and Social Due Diligence (ESDD) and the Impact Due Diligence (IDD) to evaluate whether there are any GBVH/ SEAH risks that may affect a company's operations, financials and reputations, as well as identify gender gaps and related opportunities associated with the company's operations and determine if there is capacity and commitment from the company leadership to a gender lens. The due diligence phase will confirm that the investee is not involved in activities on the exclusion list, that the company respects human rights across the value chain and that is aligned with international standards, and that GBVH and SEAH safeguarding measures are in place. During the due diligence, gender-related data (e.g., sex-disaggregated data) and information, e.g. strategies, policies, procedures, programs, goals and key performance indicators (KPIs) etc., will be requested by MERF and provided by pipeline companies for the Fund's review. Interviews with the companies' leadership, employees, and relevant stakeholders (e.g. contractors, suppliers, local communities, etc.) as necessary and physical visits to pipeline companies and the surrounding areas will also be conducted to gather and verify companies' practices, and information. Where relevant during this phase, an intersectional lens will be applied to assess whether other dimensions of vulnerability (e.g. indigenous women, ethnic minorities or migrant and informal workers) affect the potential investment's outcomes. Emphasis will be placed to understand the policies and practices in place for the company to recognise and address

	intersection gender considerations relevant for their operations (e.g. supply chain, community engagement, workers conditions etc.). MERF will consider whether the due diligence could be conducted internally or externally by a gender specialist, depending on the Fund's resources and capacity, as well as pipeline companies' scale and nature of operations. A gender due diligence checklist and gender-related indicators, aligned with 2X Criteria, IRIS+, IFC and CDC's guide, and/or other relevant international practices are integrated into the ESDD and Impact DD questionnaire. These will include questions with an intersectional lens. Based on results of the due diligence, the MERF will define which gender-lens investment strategy/ies is the most suitable for the investment and prepare an investment-level gender assessment where material gender gaps are identified and discussed with the pipeline company. The potential investee will then agree on a gender action plan to close the identified gaps, as well as gender-based milestones and outcomes, committed by the company. Gender-based milestones and outcomes committed by the pipeline company shall align with the Fund's Gender Investing Strategy and contribute to the Fund's gender outcomes, goals and targets.
Contracting	Upon the investment is approved by the Investment Committee, a legal agreement/ investment document will be prepared and signed by both parties. The legal agreement will include E&S clauses/covenants, and other general and specific conditions for investment by MERF, impact KPIs, and the agreed gender action plans and gender-based milestones and outcomes, data collection and reporting requirements. This is to ensure alignment on gender outcomes between the investee company and the Fund and achievement of the Fund's gender outcomes and goals. The key output of the contracting stage is an investment-level Gender Action Plan (GAP).
Portfolio monitoring and Engagement	Post-investment, MERF is responsible for monitoring and supporting the portfolio company in implementing the GAP and achieving gender outcomes agreed upon in the legal agreements/ investment documents. The portfolio company is responsible for the design and delivery of gender activities, and reporting on a regular basis, as mutually agreed. MERF will require portfolio companies to track and report on gender indicators, monitor whether gender-based milestones are being met and determine the gender outcomes have been achieved; or conduct supervision visits to the portfolio companies to assess the progress.
Exit	The exit phase is critical in ensuring that investments made by the Fund have a lasting positive impact for the portfolio companies even after the Fund's investment. As such, MERF will adopt six principles recommended by IFC and CDC⁶, to ensure the exits are aligned with the Fund's gender-lens investment strategies, maximize gender outcomes and mitigate the risk of losing progress on gender equality with buyers that may not be as committed.

Approach for the Assessment and Mitigation of SEAH and GBVH

In the Lower Mekong Basin, women's access to financial resources, land, education, health, and other opportunities is restricted by structural and cultural barriers, such as inadequate legal representation, unequal property rights, ineligibility for credit, and cultural and gender norms. These obstacles hinder women's ability to adapt to climate change, preventing them from fully participating in and benefiting from MERF's investments and climate-related interventions. Additionally, these barriers increase the risk of sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH), making women more vulnerable and less able to report incidents or access support and justice, thereby reducing deterrents for perpetrators who act with impunity.

The country-level gender assessments identified SEAH-specific risks and the MERF will adopt a systematic approach to identify, reduce and mitigate risks for SEAH and Gender Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH). Where relevant, an intersectional lens will be applied to identify how other considerations (e.g. migration, presence of ethnic minorities or indigenous people) interact with SEAH and GBV risks.

In line with international best practices³⁸, the MERF commits a “do-no-harm” approach in all activities and the integration of E&S risk considerations into each stage of the Fund's investment process to:

- avoid, and where avoidance is not possible, minimize or reduce adverse impacts through abatement measures; where residual impacts remain, mitigate any residual risks and impacts and where avoidance, minimization or mitigation measures are not available or sufficient; and where there is sufficient evidence to justify and support viability, design and implement measures that provide remedy and restoration before adequate and equitable compensation of any residual risks and impacts
- avoid, and where avoidance is not possible, mitigate the risks of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH)/ sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, sexual harassment (SEAH) to people impacted by MERF's funded activities
- give due consideration to, and where adverse impacts are unavoidable, do not allow adverse impact to fall disproportionately on, persons in vulnerable positions and situations and marginalized populations, groups, and individuals, including women and girls, local communities, ethnic minority groups/ indigenous peoples, and other marginalized groups of people and individuals that are affected or potentially affected by MERF-financed activities and are especially vulnerable to exploitation or other potentially harmful unintended project impacts
- enhance equitable access to development benefits
- prioritize our efforts for opportunities to maximize positive impacts to drive value creation.

MERF requires all its portfolio companies to take measures to safeguard its employees and relevant communities from GVBH/ SEAH risks. MERF considers the risks associated with GBVH/ SEAH at all stages of the investment process, through assessing the potential risks during the pre-investment due diligence, aligning actions to avoid cases of GBVH/ SEAH, measures to mitigate GVBH/ SEAH risks, and adopting measures to respond to and address reported or

³⁸ Further information is provided in the ESMS (Annex 6).

suspected cases. MERF requires that a worker grievance mechanism and an external grievance mechanism with specific provisions for cases of GBVH/ SEAH, to be developed and implemented by all portfolio companies, in accordance with international best practices. Portfolio companies will also receive training on safeguarding and GBVH prevention and they will be offered technical assistance for updating or revising their policies in accordance with best practices, as appropriate. The provisions will ensure that the mechanism is survivor-centred and gender-responsive and provides timely access to redress, and ensures appropriate safeguards and support provided to witnesses, as well as other stakeholders, e.g. whistleblowers. MERF also requires that those who are involved in handling GBVH/ SEAH cases are well trained in accordance with international practices.

Gender-related Support at the Portfolio level

The scope and approach for the gender-related support has been designed to ensure that the whole MERF portfolio complies with the MERF's environmental and social requirements, as well as GCF Gender Policy, and the GCF guidelines on SEAH risks and being in line with MERF's gender investing strategy and contributing to the intended gender goals. Gender-focused support therefore will be instrumental in supporting investees in managing gender-related risks, maximizing their gender impacts and achieving their gender objectives, which ultimately contributes to the program's objectives.

As outcomes of the pre-investment screening and due diligence process, the MERF has an understand of the investee companies' capacity and commitment, potential risks and opportunities for gender mainstreaming. The MERF and investee companies will then align on a gender action plan, which is to address gender issues, mitigate gender-related risks, as well as promote gender mainstreaming within the context of the investment. Based on that, the MERF will consider tailored package of support to be provided to portfolio companies.

In particular, the focus of the gender-related support will be on:

- Implementation of the investees' GAPs.
- Continuous compliance with social and gender safeguarding standards.
- Developing and strengthening gender-related strategies, policies and procedures. Particular emphasis will be placed on key workplace policies and practices, including SEAH and GBVH prevention.
- Capacity building to improve the investees' practices, in which all investee companies will be able to benefit from support in the form of webinars and thematic trainings, for instance.
- Gender data collection and reporting: ensuring that all companies regularly and appropriately track their gender data so that MERF can assess the alignment with the 2X Criteria.

Monitoring and Reporting Progress towards Gender Equality

All investee companies will be required to submit gender-related metrics as part of the ongoing monitoring and reporting. All investees report:

- On a regular basis on the GAP implementation progress, annually at a minimum or at the agreed frequency

- MERF reviews gender milestones on an annual basis, at a minimum
- On an annual basis, investees report the impact metrics, including gender data within 45 days of the end of each calendar year.

During due diligence and contracting phases, the investment-specific gender assessment and the development of the GAP will inform the identification of specific indicators and metrics to measure success and to assess alignment with 2X criteria. The 2X Criteria [reference guide](#) will be used as a basis to determine quality indicators at the investment level (e.g., related to health and well-being, equal care, equal pay opportunities, supply chain commitments etc.) that will be used to track progress towards the achievement of gender goals.

A Sample of Gender-related KPIs collected on the MERF investee companies (for more details, see Annex 6)			
Full-time employees	Total:	Female:	Male:
Part-time employees	Total:	Female:	Male:
Probation/ Trainee	Total:	Female:	Male:
Third party workers	Total:	Female:	Male:
# of employees who are underrepresented groups			
# of founders	Total:	Female:	
Shares owned by female (%)			
# of Board members	Total:	Female:	
# of employees in Senior Management roles	Total:	Female:	
# of employees received professional trainings	Total:	Female:	
# of suppliers	Total:	Female:	
# of customers	Total:	Female:	
CSR activities and initiatives aimed at increasing the gender diversity, gender balance, reaching women customers etc.			
Incidents occurred in the reporting period (disaggregated by sex)	# of cases, # of people affected and gender of people affected		

Country-level Assessments

Vietnam

Overview of Gender Equality and Gender Gaps in the Country

Like many countries, gender equality remains an ongoing challenge across various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, and land-use management. In 2024, Vietnam ranked 72th place out of 146 countries with a score of 0.715 for the Global Gender Gap Index. Despite progress in recent years, significant gender gaps persist, influencing access to resources, decision-making power, and overall economic opportunities.

Viet Nam has made certain efforts to ensure the full and equal participation of women in political and economic fields, which was reflected in the growing proportion of female deputies of the People's Councils at all levels; higher percentage of female members of the National Assembly; and increased percentage of female owners of businesses, etc. In addition, there have been positive improvements in sexual and reproductive health care for women. However, certain limitations still persist such as: the remarkably high and rising imbalance in sex ratio at birth resulting from a strong preference for male children; the relatively high rate of child marriage and early childbearing among ethnic minority women; the persistence of violence against women and children. Despite the improvements, women are still disproportionately bearing the weight of unpaid care and domestic work. All the while, the infrastructures to support the care for children, the sick, people with disabilities and the elderly are largely limited. These factors contribute to women's ability to participate in the labor market.³⁹

Despite legislative advancements, challenges remain in achieving full gender equality in Vietnam. Gender stereotypes and traditional cultural norms continue to influence societal attitudes towards women's roles and opportunities. Women are underrepresented in leadership positions in both the public and private sectors, reflecting persistent barriers to women's advancement. Violence against women, including domestic violence and trafficking, remains a concern. While Vietnam has laws criminalizing domestic violence and human trafficking, implementation and enforcement gaps persist. Cultural and social stigma often deter victims from seeking legal recourse or support services.

National Policy Environment and Legal Framework for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

In Vietnam, the legal status of women has undergone significant evolution over the years, reflecting broader societal changes and efforts towards gender equality. Vietnam has made commendable progress in enhancing the legal status and rights of women, anchored in its constitutional commitment to gender equality. Legislative reforms, supported by policy initiatives

³⁹ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

and civil society efforts, have contributed to improving women's access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Despite these achievements, challenges such as gender stereotypes, violence against women, and underrepresentation persist, requiring continued commitment from all stakeholders to achieve full gender equality.

The Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, adopted in 1992 and amended in 2013, lays the foundation for gender equality. Article 26 explicitly states that "men and women have equal rights in all fields," establishing a constitutional guarantee of gender equality. This constitutional provision serves as the basis for subsequent legislative and policy measures aimed at promoting women's rights and combating gender-based discrimination.

Text box 1: Extract from Constitution

Article 26:

1. Male and female citizens have equal rights in all fields. The State shall adopt policies to guarantee the right to and opportunities for gender equality.
2. The State, society and family shall create the conditions for women to develop comprehensively and to advance their role in society.
3. Gender discrimination is prohibited.

Viet Nam was the second country in the Asia Pacific region to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, the "Platform for Action" agreed at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, several International Labor Convention (ILO), including Convention No. 100 and No. 111, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000, including MDG 3 which focuses on promoting gender equality and empowering women, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal No. 5 which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030.

Furthermore, the government has implemented legal reforms to promote gender equality across sectors. For instance, the Law on Gender Equality approved in 2006 and amended in 2015 mandates equal opportunities for men and women in political, economic, cultural, and social fields. The law prohibits discrimination based on gender and promotes gender mainstreaming in all policies and programs. The Law on Marriage and Family, last amended in 2014, addresses various aspects of family life, including marriage, divorce, parental rights and inheritance. Amendments have aimed to enhance gender equality within the family unit, such as equal rights in property ownership and inheritance. The Land Law of 2023 emphasizes equal access to land rights and opportunities for women and men, aiming to address historical disparities and ensure equitable land tenure security. The Law on Vietnamese Nationality (2014) ensures equal rights for Vietnamese women and men in matters of nationality acquisition, retention, and transmission.

In the employment relationship, Vietnam's Labor Code ensures equal rights and opportunities for men and women in the workplace. It prohibits discrimination in hiring, promotion, and remuneration based on gender. Maternity rights are also well-protected under Vietnamese law. Pregnant employees are entitled to paid maternity leave, with provisions for up to six months, ensuring job security and income during this period.

The Vietnamese government has developed a National Strategy for Gender Equality and Action Plans that set out specific goals and measures to advance gender equality. This strategy aim to address key issues such as women's economic empowerment, access to education and healthcare, and participation in decision-making processes. The country's gender equality

strategy 2021 – 2023 targets the share of the female workforce engaged in agriculture sectors reduces to below 30% in 2025 and below 25% in 2030 of the total female workforces.

Key Policies on Climate, Agricultural, Forestry Sectors and their Mentions of Gender Equality or Women’s Economic Empowerment

Gender appears to be most integrated into climate policies in the agriculture sector. The clear and obvious impact of climate change to agriculture has led to the development of several measures to reduce the climate impact to agricultural production; in the process, gender issues have received more attention than in other sectors.⁴⁰

The following key policies reflect Vietnam's commitment to integrating gender equality and women's economic empowerment into environmental and rural development agendas, ensuring that women benefit equitably from sustainable development initiatives.

Policies/ Regulations	Summary
National Strategy on Gender Equality	This strategy aims to promote gender equality across all sectors, including climate, agriculture, and forestry. It emphasizes mainstreaming gender perspectives into policies, programs, and projects related to environmental sustainability and rural development, ensuring women's empowerment and equal participation
National Target Program on Climate Change Response (NTP-RCC), according to Decision No 158/2008/QĐ-TTg, dated 2 December 2008	The NTP-RCC aims to strengthen Vietnam's resilience to climate change impacts through various initiatives, the NTP-RCC mentions that response to climate change should be carried out following the principle of sustainable development, encompassing sectors and inter-sector links, regions and inter-regional links, gender equality, and hunger eradication and poverty alleviation. It emphasizes gender mainstreaming in climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts to ensure women's active participation and benefit from related programs
National Climate Change Adaptation Plan for the 2021-2030 period with a vision by 2050	The National Climate Change Adaptation Plan aims to improve the effectiveness of climate change adaptation, improve the resilience and adaptation capacity of communities, economic sectors and ecosystems, and reduce disaster risks and minimize damage in order to be ready to cope with disasters and extreme climate events increased due to climate change. The Plan emphasizes the importance of improving capacity, empowering women and promoting gender equality in climate change adaptation.
National Target Program on New Rural Development and National Target Program for	This program promotes sustainable agricultural practices, rural infrastructure development, and poverty reduction in rural areas. It includes provisions to enhance women's

⁴⁰ UN Environment Programme, UN Women and ISPONRE, the State of Gender Equality and Climate Change Assessment Report in Vietnam, 2021

Policies/ Regulations	Summary
Sustainable Rural Development (SPR)	participation in agricultural cooperatives and access to resources, aiming to empower rural women economically
Forest Sector Development Strategy 2021-2030	This strategy outlines Vietnam's approach to sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation, and community livelihood improvement. It integrates gender considerations by promoting women's participation in community forest management committees and ensuring equitable access to forest resources and benefits

Key Demographic Trends

Population

According to Viet Nam's General Statistics Office⁴¹, in 2023, Viet Nam has approximately 100.3 million people, in which women comprised of 50.1% and men comprised of 49.9%. In Southeast Asia, Viet Nam is the third most populous country in Southeast Asia (after Indonesia and the Philippines) and the fifteenth most populous country in the world⁴². As of 2023, the vast majority of the population (61%) still lives in rural areas.⁴³

Poverty and Income

SDG 1	Chosen Indicators	Values ⁴⁴
	• % of population at international poverty line • % of population at national poverty line • % of population at lower middle income class poverty line • % of population at upper middle income class poverty line • % of population at severe multidimensional poverty • Annualized GDP per capital growth • Annualized consumption growth per capita from household survey • Growth of the annual median income/ consumption per capita	• 1.0% (2022) • 4.3% (2022) • 4.2% (2022) • 19.7% (2022) • 1.3% (2022) • 4.91% (2016 – 2022) • 2.78% (2016 – 2022) • 2.56% (2016 – 2022)

Today Viet Nam is one of the fastest growing economies, transforming from high poverty post war to a vibrant and modern economy. According to the Voluntary National Review 2023⁴⁵, Vietnam continues to be on track for SDG1. Viet Nam's multidimensional poverty rate tends to decrease

⁴¹ <https://www.gso.gov.vn/du-lieu-va-so-lieu-thong-ke/2023/12/thong-cao-bao-chi-ve-tinh-hinh-dan-so-lao-dong-viec-lam-quy-iv-va-nam-2023/>, accessed on 12 July 2024

⁴² United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and the Population Reference Bureau (PRB)

⁴³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=VN>, access on 14 July 2024

⁴⁴ The World Bank Group, April 2024, Poverty and Equity Brief, East Asia and Pacific, Vietnam

⁴⁵ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

sharply, from 9.2% in 2016 to 4.3% in 2022. The multidimensional poverty rate among children declined from 19.1% in 2016 to 11.7% in 2020.

Despite impressive economic growth, however, challenges remain in ensuring inclusive economic development, particularly with regard to gender equality, and narrowing the income gap between the rich and poor. The income of population groups increased from 3.1 million VND/month/person in 2016 to 4.2 million in 2020, but the income growth rate of the poorest group is always lower than that of the richest group, so the gap between rich and poor increasingly increasing. Income inequality among classes of the population is decreasing as the GINI coefficient, which is a measure of income inequality, has shown varying trends over the years but generally indicates moderate income inequality in Vietnam, decreases from 0.393 in 2010 to 0.368 in 2020 and 0.361 in 2022⁴⁶. In urban areas, people are more equal and easier to access development opportunities in terms of education and work skills through education, so income inequality is always lower than in rural areas. In 2016, the GINI coefficient in urban areas was 0.391, decreasing to 0.325 in 2020, this index in rural areas was 0.408 and 0.373 respectively, according to the General Statistic Office.

By geography, households in communes located in high mountainous areas are dramatically poorer.⁴⁷ While there has been a longstanding association between geography and poverty, it may still be surprising just how significantly higher poverty is in high mountains compared to other geographic areas. The poverty rate in high mountains is almost 36 percent, compared to 7.6 percent in the low mountains

According to the World Bank⁴⁸, poverty rates are high among households who receive the majority of their agriculture income from forestry, and households most engaged in crop cultivation and that rely on staples. For 84% of poor households in agriculture, the main agricultural income sources are rice, staples, livestock, and forestry. Among agricultural households, poverty rates are lowest among those who receive the majority of their incomes from land leasing, fruit, or aquaculture.

Health

SDG 3	Chosen Indicators	Values
	- Life Expectancy, both sexes - Life Expectancy, Male - Life Expectancy, Female - Maternal Mortality Rate - Under-five Mortality Rate - Disability, Total - Disability, Male - Disability, Female	75 (2022)⁴⁹ 70 (2022)⁵⁰

⁴⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=VN>, accessed on 14 July 2024

⁴⁷ The World Bank, 2022, Vietnam Poverty and Equity Assessment, from the Last Mile to the Next Mile

⁴⁸ The World Bank, 2022, Vietnam Poverty and Equity Assessment, from the Last Mile to the Next Mile

⁴⁹ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Vietnam. Accessed 14 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=VN>

⁵⁰ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Vietnam. Accessed 14 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=VN>

SDG 3	Chosen Indicators	Values
		• 79 (2022)⁵¹ • 46 (2020)⁵² • 22 (2022)⁵³ • 3.7% (2019)⁵⁴ • 11.1 (2016)⁵⁵ • 13.4 (2016)⁵⁶

According to the Voluntary National Review 2023⁵⁷, Viet Nam has been continuously improving its policy system to ensure healthy lives and enhance welfare for people at all ages from infants to children, the elderly, women and men, and the general public. The Government of Viet Nam has demonstrated its commitment to promoting gender equality in healthcare through the enactment and implementation of several national policies. For example, Article 17 of the Gender Equality Law (2006) explicitly provides for equality between women and men in participation and decision making related to health care. This has been reinforced through the 2011-2020 National Strategy on Gender Equality, and then the 2021 – 2030 National Strategy on Gender Equality, with the fourth objective dedicated to ensuring gender equality both in access to and benefitting from healthcare services. Furthermore, other policies, including the Strategy for Protection, Care and Improvement of People's Health for the period 2011-2020 with a vision to 2030, the Strategy for Population and Reproductive Health period 2011-2020, the National Plan for Safe Motherhood (NPSM) 2003-2010, and the ongoing Family Planning Programme have been enacted to ensure people's and especially women's access to health care services, Reproductive Health Law, enacted in 2003 and revised in 2009, emphasizes reproductive rights, access to contraception, and maternal healthcare services, aiming to reduce maternal mortality rates and improve women's overall health.

Viet Nam was one of the few nations to meet the health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, and there has been remarkable improvements over the last decade⁵⁸. However, Viet Nam still faces difficulties and challenges in achieving SDG 3, especially the targets of

⁵¹ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Vietnam. Accessed 14 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=VN>

⁵² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.MORT?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&view=map>. Accessed 14 July 2024

⁵³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.MORT?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&view=map>. Accessed 14 July 2024

⁵⁴ General Statistic Office, 2019, National Census Survey (The proportion of people aged 5 years and over with disabilities)

⁵⁵ National Survey on People with Disabilities, 2016, Some difficulty in one of the six domains in the population aged 18 and above

⁵⁶ National Survey on People with Disabilities, 2016, Some difficulty in one of the six domains in the population aged 18 and above

⁵⁷ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

⁵⁸ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

maternal and child health care in ethnic minority and mountainous areas; the high unmet need for contraceptives, especially among young female migrants⁵⁹.

Average life expectancy at birth has risen steadily from 74 in 2012 to 75 in 2022, with women's life expectancy an estimated 9 years longer than that of men's⁶⁰.

Disparities in maternal and child health are prevalent. As of 2019, the under-five mortality rate in rural settings was more than double that in urban areas, at 25.1 and 12.3 per 1,000 live births, respectively. Moreover, the rate of under-five mortality for boys at 27.3 per 1,000 live births is significantly higher than that of girls, at 14.2 per 1,000 nationwide⁶¹. The disparities in maternal and child health status are highest in mountainous regions where a larger proportion of ethnic minority groups reside, and these are areas with economic disadvantages and limited access to quality healthcare facilities.

In 2019, the total fertility rate was 2.09, with rural areas being higher at 2.26 children and urban settings at 1.83 children per woman. The rate decreased to 1.9 children per woman in 2022⁶². The Prime Ministerial Decision issued in 2020 was to promote the national birth rate, in regions where it is low. A range of incentives were prescribed for men and women to marry before the age of 30 years and for women to have their second child before the age of 35 years⁶³. These include income tax reductions, support for rent or the purchase of social housing, and children will be given priority in admission to public schools. This program would have a discriminatory impact on people who opted not to marry or marry young or have two children. With women's culturally ascribed caregiving role, the effect of this decision would also impact on their life choices and economic participation.

Education

SDG 4	Chosen Indicators	Values
	• Literacy rate, adult total (% of population) • Literacy rate, adult female (% of population) • Literacy rate, adult male (% of population) • Primary completion rate, male • Primary completion rate, female • Lower secondary completion rate, male • Lower secondary completion rate, female	• 96% (2022)⁶⁴ • 95% (2022)⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

⁶⁰ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Vietnam. Accessed 14 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=VN>

⁶¹ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

⁶² The World Bank, <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&country=VNM>, accessed on 14 July 2024

⁶³ Prime Minister Decision 588/QĐ-TTg Approving the Programme on adjusting the fertility rate suitably with subjects and regions until 2030, dated 28 April 2020

⁶⁴

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2022&locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&start=1979&view=chart>. Accessed 14 July 2024

⁶⁵

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2022&locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&start=1979&view=chart>. Accessed 14 July 2024

SDG 4	Chosen Indicators	Values
	- Upper secondary completion rate, male - Upper secondary completion rate, female	97% (2022)⁶⁶ 98% (2022)⁶⁷ 99% (2022)⁶⁸ 84% (2022)⁶⁹ 90% (2022)⁷⁰ 51% (2022)⁷¹ 65% (2022)⁷²

According to the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021⁷³, having an educated population has been an enduring, high priority of the Government of Viet Nam. This was reaffirmed in the National Strategy for Education to 2023 with vision to 2045 and the Law on Education (2019), whereby the Government committed to an open, fair and equitable education system, serving lifelong learning, moving towards standardization, modernization and international integration. Vietnam also has numerous policies that aim to ensure equal participation in the education and training between men and women, such as the 2011 – 2020 National Strategy on Gender Equality, then the 2021 – 2030 National Strategy on Gender Equality. As a result, Viet Nam has achieved positive results in the implementation of SDG4, as reported in the Voluntary National Review 2023.⁷⁴

According to Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Vietnam has a high primary completion rate, completion rates decline somewhat for lower secondary education, and then quite steeply for upper secondary education. Girls have higher completion rate across all levels. According to the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021, the Gender Parity Index for enrolment and the Net Enrolment Rate reveals the higher rate of girl's enrolment at primary and upper secondary levels. It has been explained that boys are more likely to drop out of upper secondary school in Viet Nam because of gendered expectations around male wage earning and the family.

Table 3 - Net enrolment rate, by education level and sex. Source: Viet Nam household living standard survey, 2018

	Female	Male
--	--------	------

⁶⁶

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?end=2022&locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&start=1979&view=chart>. Accessed 14 July 2024

⁶⁷ UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁶⁸ UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁶⁹ UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁷⁰ UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁷¹ UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁷² UNICEF, GPE KIX, VNIES, 2022, Vietnam Education Fact Sheet 2022, Analyses for learning and equity using Vietnam SDGCW Survey Data

⁷³ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

⁷⁴ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

	2016	2018	2016	2018
Primary	97.0	97.4	97.1	97.2
Lower Secondary	91.6	92.7	89.3	91.6
Upper Secondary	73.6	76.7	63.7	67.7

Behind gender parity at an aggregate level, there was a notable difference in the rate of school-aged children failing to attend school across urban and rural areas, as well as between socio-economic regions. In 2019, the rate in rural areas was 1.7 times higher than that of urban areas at 9.5% and 5.7%, respectively⁷⁵. Women in the poorest households have the lowest literacy rate, at 84.2%⁷⁶. Gender gaps at postgraduate level are pronounced⁷⁷ because women face obstacles in the pursuit of further study such as marriage, childbirth and the fulfilment of family responsibilities. Gender inequalities in educational outcomes exist for children and youth from ethnic minority groups, and for those with disabilities, according to the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021. The lowest literacy rate in Viet Nam is found among ethnic minority women (83.2%)⁷⁸.

According to the Information Technology Human Resources Market 2020 Report of VietnamWorks InTECH, women accounted for only 11% of people studying information technology in Việt Nam.⁷⁹ At the Hanoi University of Science and Technology, a leading educational institution in STEM, girls make up for only 22% of total students. This is reflective of the traditional expectations and stereotypes impressed upon girls and boys when it comes to choices regarding course of study. Women constitute about 26% of the workforce in the technology sector in Vietnam. This indicates a strong presence, though challenges remain in achieving parity.⁸⁰

There continue to be several issues that impact gender equality in education sector. These include gender norms and stereotypes and the streaming of girls and boys into 'suitable' fields of study. The absence or lack of a comprehensive gender mainstreaming approach throughout the education system restricts efforts within the system to promote gender equality. Finally, a systematic collection and use of sex-disaggregated data in education and training is hindering progress in this area.

⁷⁵ General Statistic Office, 2019, Vietnam Population and Housing Survey 2018

⁷⁶ United Nations, 2016, Vietnam Gender Briefing Kit

⁷⁷ In 2019, women held 28% of doctoral degrees. General Statistic Office, 2019, Vietnam population and Housing Survey

⁷⁸ United Nations, 2016, Vietnam Gender Briefing Kit

⁷⁹ Information Technology Human Resources Market 2020 Report of VietnamWorks InTECH. VIETNAMWORKS publishes the report on: It human resource of the 2010s and 2020 & launching Vietnamworks Intech - Navigos Group. (n.d.). <https://www.navigosgroup.com/vietnamworks-publishes-the-report-on-it-human-resource-of-the-2010s-and-2020-launching-vietnamworks-intech-n34.html>

⁸⁰ STEM Education for Women and Girls. Kenan Foundation Asia. (2023, July 7). <https://www.kenan-asia.org/vietnam/stem-women-and-girls/>

Political Participation

For more than a decade now, Viet Nam has issued normative documents and policies to promote gender equality in political participation. The country has achieved significant progress in increasing women's participation in leadership and management within the political system and state administration. Women currently make up 30.26 percent of the deputies in the National Assembly - the highest proportion in more than two decades.

Article 26 of the Constitution clearly recognizes that men and women enjoy equal rights in all fields. This has been reinforced in Article 11 of the Law on Gender Equality (2006), which includes recognition of gender equality in the field of politics, at all administrative levels, and to ensure an 'appropriate proportion...in accordance with national gender equality goals' (Article 11).⁸¹ At the same time, Viet Nam has other ambitious goals on women's empowerment and women's leadership. The Resolution 26-NQ/TW in 2018 of the Communist Party of Vietnam sets targets for women's representation by 2030 for Party Committees at all levels (25 percent), and for National Assembly and People's Councils at all levels (35 percent). The country's Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2030 set targets that by 2025, 60% of state agencies and local governments must have women in key leader positions, rising to 75% by 2030. Lastly, the Law on Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and People's Councils (2015) introduced the quota that at least 35% of total official candidates for the National Assembly and People's Council are women (Articles 8(1) and 9(1)(2)).

In the recent 2021 elections, the proportion of women National Assembly deputies increased to 30.26%, the first time that Viet Nam crossed the critical threshold identified as necessary for women to have a visible impact on decision-making process. Women's participation is extremely low in the more powerful committees, such as Security and Defense (6.25%), Economic (8.8%), Finance and Budget committees (15.2%)

According to the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021, women account for 33% of Party members. Women's representation within the Executive Committee of the Communist Party is lower, with women accounting for less than 20% and 10% at the local and central committee levels, respectively. For the term 2020-2025, among 63 provinces, nine women were selected as provincial Party Secretaries (14.3%)⁸². Women's representation in executive government remains very low, with only 3 of 22 ministries and ministerial-level agencies, headed by a woman⁸³. As of May 2024, women were no longer present in the top four highest leadership positions of the country. The Report on the Implementation of the National Strategy of Gender Equality 2011-2020 by UN Women⁸⁴, the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and Australia Aid found that all three targets on women's political leadership were not achieved.

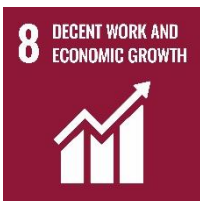
⁸¹Ramla Khalidi, Resident Representative UNDP in Viet Nam. (2022, October 20). The path toward gender parity in politics in Viet Nam. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/vietnam/blog/path-toward-gender-parity-politics-viet-nam>

⁸² UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

⁸³ Current data on the Government members, <https://chinhphu.vn/chinh-phu-duong-nhiem-68345>. Accessed on 14 July 2024

⁸⁴ UN Women, MOLISA, Australia Aid, Report on the Implementation of the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011 - 2020

Women's Economic Participation and Entrepreneurship

SDG 8	Chosen Indicators	Values
	• Number of labor force, total • Labor force participation rate (%), total • Labor force participation rate (%), male • Labor force participation rate (%), female • % employment in agriculture, female • % employment in agriculture, male • Vulnerable employment (%), female • Vulnerable employment (%), male • Wage and salaried workers (%), female • Wage and salaried workers (%), male	• 56,149,382 (2023)⁸⁵ • 73% (2023)⁸⁶ • 78% (2023)⁸⁷ • 68% (2023)⁸⁸ • Not available • 32% (2022)⁸⁹ • 57% (2022)⁹⁰ • 47% (2022)⁹¹ • 41.7% (2022)⁹² • 50.4% (2022)⁹³

According to the Voluntary National Review 2023⁹⁴, Vietnam has made certain efforts to ensure the full and equal participation of women in political and economic fields, which was reflected in the growing proportion of female deputies of the People's Council at all levels, increased percentage of female owners of businesses, etc.

The unemployment rate in the female population is slightly higher than in male populations, with some differences across regions. Labor force participation rate is 79.1% female and 86.4% male. Every year only 48% of women entering the labor force find jobs, and gender gaps remain when it comes to compensation (in 2015, the average income of a man was at least 10.1% higher than

⁸⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?locations=VN>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁸⁶ Labor force participation rate, total (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Viet Nam, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=VN&name_desc=true. Accessed on 16 July 2024

⁸⁷ Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Viet Nam, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=VN&name_desc=true. Accessed on 16 July 2024

⁸⁸ Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) - Viet Nam, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.NE.ZS?locations=VN&name_desc=true. Accessed on 16 July 2024

⁸⁹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.MA.ZS?end=2022&locations=VN&skipRedirection=true&start=1991&view=chart>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁹⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.VULN.FE.ZS?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁹¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.VULN.MA.ZS?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁹² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.WORK.FE.ZS?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁹³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.WORK.MA.ZS?locations=VN&skipRedirection=true>. Accessed 16 July 2024

⁹⁴ Vietnam, 2023, Voluntary National Review 2023 on the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Summary Report)

that of a woman with the same qualifications). Furthermore, the salary of men with vocational training is 15% higher than those of women with the same level of education.⁹⁵

The unemployment rate in 2024 was 1.43%, with female unemployment at 1.28% and male unemployment at 1.57% (General Statistics Office of Vietnam).

Rural women in the labor force are less likely to be paid workers than urban women (32% for rural women compared to 54% for urban women) and more likely to be engaged in unpaid labor (32% compared to 12%). Rural women are almost three times more likely than rural men to be engaged in unpaid labor (11% for rural men). A large segment of this unpaid labor involves contributing to small farm enterprises.⁹⁶

According to the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021, while the gender gap in labor force participation is narrower in Viet Nam than the global and regional average, it does still exist. Despite high labor force participation (70.9% of Vietnam's working-age women were in the labor force), women in Vietnam still face unequal opportunity to engage in economic activities compared to men. According to ILO⁹⁷, women continue to form a large majority of the working poor, earn less income, and are more often affected by under- and un-employment and precarious working conditions than men. Women in Viet Nam are principally found in lower paid occupational sectors or in vulnerable employment. Women's position in the labor market is largely affected by socio-economic disadvantages caused by gender-based discrimination. Vietnamese women often have less access to productive resources, education, and skills development and labor market opportunities than men. In great part, this is because society assigns both a lower status and most of the unpaid care work to Vietnamese women, and expects them to engage in productive work in subsistence agriculture and the market economy

In Vietnam as elsewhere, the economy remains 'a gendered structure'⁹⁸. According to the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021⁹⁹, gender stereotypes affect women's economic participation, and women face formal and societal barriers for participating on a par with men. Factors such as care responsibilities and being disproportionately represented in more flexible but lower paid, 'lower skilled' segments of the labor market undermines women's position in the economy and resilience in the future. Data confirms that intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage compound the difficulties faced by certain groups of women, such as women living with disability, migrant women, ethnic minority women and those living in rural areas, single mothers, as well as older and elderly women. These groups of women typically face greater barriers to opportunities, and lower returns on their labor and market engagement.

⁹⁵ UN Women (2021). The state of gender equality and climate change in Viet Nam. Available at https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ESEAAsia/Docs/Publications/2021/04/publication_vietnam%20report_digital2%20%281%29.pdf

⁹⁶ General Statistic Office, 2019, Labor Force Statistics Quarter 1 2018, cited in the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021

⁹⁷ ILO, <https://www.ilo.org/regions-and-countries/asia-and-pacific-deprecated/viet-nam/areas-work/equality-and-discrimination-viet-nam>. Access 16 July 2024

⁹⁸ UN Women, 2016, Towards Gender Equality in Viet Nam: Making Inclusive Growth Work for Women

⁹⁹ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

Access to Finance

In terms of access to commercial finance, the IFC (2017)¹⁰⁰ estimated that the financing gap for women-owned enterprises in Viet Nam was USD 1.12 billion. This represents a significant shortfall of capital, hampering the growth of women-owned enterprises. The IFC also found that commercial banks themselves do not consider women-owned SMEs as principal customers but rather as potential customers. There is, therefore, no significant immediate incentive to assist women-owned SMEs. The IFC study (2017) highlighted and dispelled myths attached to women entrepreneurs, including financial preferences, including: (i) women are more risk averse than men in seeking finance; (ii) women have other priorities and are less likely to pay back loans; (iii) women have lower financial management skills than men and require more education. The CEDAW Committee has raised concerns about the limited access to financial resources faced by most women in the agricultural and informal sectors, as well as by older women and women from ethnic minorities.

Social and Gender Norms

In Vietnam, traditional social-cultural norms have historically dictated distinct roles for men and women. Rooted in Confucian values and reinforced through generations, these norms placed men as the primary providers and decision-makers within the family and society. Women, on the other hand, were expected to prioritize domestic duties and uphold virtues such as modesty and obedience. Gender stereotypes influence what types of career paths women can or cannot engage in. For example, The Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs' decree (2013) lists 77 jobs that are legally prohibited to women to "protect women from jobs that are considered dangerous". Additionally, young girls are often discouraged from pursuing STEM education because it is considered more "appropriate" for boys and men. This division was reflected in educational opportunities, employment prospects, and leadership positions, where men were typically favored. Research has found that gendered social norms limit the extent to which Vietnamese women seek promotion, take on leadership roles or negotiate their share of unpaid caring work.¹⁰¹ For instance, on average, women spend 314 minutes and men spend 190 minutes per day on unpaid care and domestic work. A study on the social determinants of gender inequality in Viet Nam (ISDS, 2015) found that while progress has been made in many areas, the value of the role of family caregiver assigned to women is still firmly sustained in the minds and behavior of Vietnamese men and women across all social strata. The burden of unpaid care work as a barrier for women's participation in the labor market. These findings have been validated in recent research that shows that the caregiving norm interacts also with the gendered attitudes towards women and the roles they are expected to play. Not only women are expected to be primarily responsible for caring children and elderly, but men are more suitable leaders in the workplace and they are more suitable for technical jobs than women.

¹⁰⁰ International Finance Organisation (IFC). 2017 Women-owned enterprises in Vietnam: Perceptions and Potential

¹⁰¹ CARE (2020) Investigating gendered social norms affecting women's economic participation related to recruitment and promotion in Vietnam . Available at <https://www.care.org.vn/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Investing-in-Women-2020-final.pdf>

Access to Land

As reported in the Viet Nam Household Living Standards Survey (VHLSS) 2014, in particular, the proportion of jointly titled cropland rose from 11.6 to 38.3% while the rate of jointly titled residential land increased from 15.7 to 55.6%. Nonetheless, even though the rate of Land Use Right Certificates (LURCs) titled solely to men dropped significantly in the ten-year period from 2004 to 2014, men are still more likely to be the sole land/ house owner when compared with women. In 2014 regarding LURCs for cropland, the rate of sole female owners was a third of that of male owners, constituting 46% per cent and 15.7%, respectively. Additionally, women are more likely to be the sole holders of LURCs in female-headed households (e.g. unmarried, widowed, or divorced women). Of married couples, only 6.2% of LURCs were registered solely in the woman's name, as compared with 39% registered in the man's name.

A 2020 study with 2,567 Vietnamese men, found lower rates of sole land ownership overall, but a six-fold chasm between the proportion of female and male sole owners of land and/or residence, at 4.5% and 28.2%, respectively¹⁰².

Reasons for gender gaps in land use rights lie in the persistence of traditional socio-cultural practice regarding land division and succession; the local practice of reconciliation which focuses on resolving a couple's disputes, to maintain peace; low educational levels and limited familiarity with legal procedures can also undermine women's entitlement to land and property even in matrilineal groups; insufficient availability of legal aid for women to access justice, in general, and their land rights, particularly in rural settings.¹⁰³

Women's Participation in the Agricultural and Forestry Sectors

With 65% of the population living in rural areas, the agricultural, forestry and fishery sector remains vital to the country's economy and Sustainable Development Goals, representing 15% of the country's GDP in 2019¹⁰⁴. According to ADB¹⁰⁵, Vietnam's agriculture and natural resource sector produces 20% of merchandise exports and the country is now the world's second largest exporter of rice and coffee. In Vietnam, agriculture provides a socially stabilizing role in face of volatile macroeconomic conditions, providing the country a reliable, affordable, and increasingly diversified source of food. While the sector is dominated by rice, there is increased diversification into perennial tree crops and other industrial crops, which provide raw materials for a growing agro-processing sector for domestic consumption and export markets.

¹⁰² ISDS. 2020. Men and Masculinities in a Globalising Viet Nam. Cited in the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021

¹⁰³ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

¹⁰⁴ General Statistic Office, 2019, Statistical Data: National Accounts. Cited in the Country Gender Equality Profile Vietnam 2021

¹⁰⁵ ADB (Asian Development Bank), 2022, Agriculture, Natural Resources and Rural Development Sector Assessment, Strategy and Road Map – Vietnam 2021 – 2025

Particularly in agricultural activities, from crop cultivation to livestock management, the female labor force participation rate in agriculture in Vietnam is approximately 23.9% in 2023¹⁰⁶. According to the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021, ethnic minority men and women are predominantly employed in agriculture, with 81% employed in agriculture, as compared to 38% for the majority Kinh population. For 33 out of 53 ethnic minority groups surveyed in 2015, over 90 to 100% of people were employed in agriculture. Employment in agriculture is particularly high for ethnic minority women, with 84% employed in agriculture, compared to 79% for ethnic minority men.¹⁰⁷ Meanwhile, the poorest income groups, particularly ethnic minority groups, are the most likely to depend on forest-based livelihoods¹⁰⁸.

Agricultural sector employment remains characterized by limited earnings and few worker protections, within which women and ethnic minority groups are particularly disadvantaged¹⁰⁹. Both women and men in agriculture earn less than in other sectors of the economy. However, the gap between women and men's earnings is highest for agriculture with women earning only 70% of what men earn, as compared to women earning 90% of what men earn in industry and construction and 84% in services.

Women and ethnic minority groups have less access to the technical training that is needed as the agricultural economy becomes less labor intensive and more knowledge-based. Only 5% of men and 3% of women agricultural workers were trained with technical qualifications¹¹⁰. Close to 90% of rural women in the workforce have no qualification compared to just over 80% of rural men.¹¹¹ Only 6.1% of ethnic minority workers complete programs to acquire technical qualifications, just a third of the rate for the majority Kinh population. The rate of skilled ethnic minority women is even lower at 5.7%.

Women's contribution to agricultural labor is often undervalued because the household is regarded as the main unit of production and women's control over land, the main unit of production, is not officially recognized¹¹². Women have less information to be able to participate in decisions about production investments, quality control and their link to price and marketing decisions.¹¹³

In terms of forestry, forestry land is more often registered to male household family members which further undermines women's role in the sector. A study by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) highlights that women are often involved in non-timber forest product collection, such as gathering fuelwood and medicinal plants, which are essential for household

¹⁰⁶ International Labor Organization. "ILO modelled estimates database" ILOSTAT. https://ilostat ilo.org/data/country-profiles/?ref_area=VNM. Accessed July 2024

¹⁰⁷ UN Women, 2015, Figures on Ethnic Minority Women and Men in Viet Nam: Based on the Socio-economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minority in Viet Nam 2015

¹⁰⁸ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

¹⁰⁹ UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

¹¹⁰ General Statistic Office, 2018, Gender Statistic, cited in the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021

¹¹¹ General Statistic Office, 2018, Gender Statistic, cited in the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021

¹¹² UN Women, Australia Aid, ADB, ILP, 2021, Country Gender Equality Profile, Vietnam

¹¹³ Oxfam, 2016, Identifying Gender Inequalities and Possibilities for Change in Shrimp Value Chains in Indonesia and Viet Nam

livelihoods but are rarely monetarily compensated or recognized in official statistics. Due to their gender differentiated roles, women and men have different types of forest-based knowledge. However, women's participation in decision making and leadership positions in forestry is low at both national, local and community level.¹¹⁴

Relevant Programs and Initiatives in Vietnam Aimed at Strengthening Women Farmers' Resilience

1. Vietnam Women's Union (VWU): The VWU has been active in promoting gender equality and empowering women through various programs. One such initiative includes providing microfinance and training to women farmers to enhance their agricultural productivity and financial independence. VWU also focuses on improving women's knowledge and skills in sustainable agricultural practices and entrepreneurial activities.
2. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD): IFAD's projects in Vietnam emphasize enhancing the resilience of rural women through climate-smart agriculture. These projects provide women with access to resources, training, and technologies to adapt to climate change and improve their livelihoods. IFAD's initiatives also include promoting women's involvement in value chains by improving their access to markets and financial services.
3. Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR): ACIAR supports several projects aimed at empowering women in agriculture and forestry. These projects focus on providing women with training in sustainable agricultural practices, agroforestry, and aquaculture.

ACIAR's programs also aim to improve women's access to value chains and enhance their participation in decision-making processes within their communities.

4. CIFOR-ICRAF (Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry): CIFOR-ICRAF's projects in Vietnam emphasize the role of women in agroforestry systems. They provide training to women farmers on integrating trees with crops and livestock, which helps in enhancing biodiversity and improving soil health. The organization also focuses on increasing women's participation in forestry value chains and promoting gender-sensitive approaches in tree selection and planting.
5. USAID's Vietnam Forests and Deltas Program: This program aims to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation while enhancing community resilience. It includes specific components targeting women's involvement in forest management and value chains. Training programs under this initiative equip women with skills in sustainable forest management, agroforestry, and climate-resilient agricultural practices

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Violence against women or gender-based violence (GBV) in Vietnam is one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally, and in Vietnam. The National Study on Violence Against Women in Viet Nam (2019) ("VAM") reveals that one in four women (26.1%) in Viet Nam who had ever been married or married/partnered mentioned that she had experienced

¹¹⁴ FAO, 2015, Understanding Women's Position in Forestry in Vietnam

physical violence from a husband/partner during her lifetime (lifetime violence); Sexual violence by a husband/partner was experienced by 13.3 of women in Viet Nam in their lifetime; One in three women aged between 15 and 64 (32.0 per cent) experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. Rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Nearly half (47.0 per cent) have experienced emotional violence at least once in their lifetime; More than a quarter (27.3 per cent) of women experienced one or more acts of controlling behavior (a form of psychological abuse) by a husband/partner during their lifetime. When controlling behavior is combined with physical, sexual and emotional abuse, the violence rate becomes 60.2 per cent (nearing two thirds) during lifetime; Combining all five forms of violence by a husband/partner (physical, sexual, emotional, controlling behaviors, and/or economic), more than half (62.9 per cent) of ever-married/partnered³ women have experienced at least one of these forms of violence in their lifetime.

Globally, gender-biased norms and attitudes are a key driver of GBV, as well as one of the main barriers hindering its elimination. Vietnam is no exception. Over one third of women in Viet Nam hold attitudes supporting men as decision makers and the head of the household. More than half of the women interviewed (51.8 per cent) believe that a man is justified in beating his wife if she were unfaithful (45.2 per cent) or did not take “care of children” (27.0 per cent). These myths were also more strongly supported by people living in rural areas as compared with urban areas and among women with lower levels of education. Women who were victims of violence were also more likely to justify and excuse perpetration of violence by a husband/partner compared with women who have not experienced violence. Women who experienced physical violence by a husband/partner were asked if there were situations that led to or triggered their husband/partner’s violent behavior. Multiple triggers could be mentioned. The most commonly mentioned triggers were “family problem” (50.8 per cent) and “drunkenness” (40.9 per cent), followed by “money problems” (18.8 per cent).

Social and cultural silence and stigma is still rampant, often preventing the abused from raising their voice and reaching for help, according to the Country Gender Equality Profile 2021. The VAM 2019 found that half (49.6 per cent) of the women who had experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a husband/partner had never told anyone about it, and most women (90.4 per cent) did not seek help from formal services or authorities. Furthermore, policies on the prevention of GBV, especially VAWG, is relatively comprehensive. Nonetheless, there are gaps, especially with respect to marginalized women such as women with disabilities and ethnic minority women.

Lao PDR

Overview of Gender Equality and Gender Gaps in the Country

In 2024, Lao PDR ranked 89th place out of 146 countries with a score of 0.7 for the Global Gender Gap Index, dropped in ranking compared to the previous 2023 (drop 35 places). Gender equality in Laos has seen progress in recent years, particularly in legal reforms and policy measures.

Although almost equal to men in labor force participation, women’s average monthly income is just 77% of that of men, are overrepresented in low-skill occupations, and spend a disproportionate amount of time on unpaid family and care work. Just 21.9% of Members of

Parliament are women and the number is even lower in subnational levels (less than 2% of village heads are women). More than one third of ever-partnered women in Lao PDR reported experiencing one form of violence (physical, sexual, or psychological) in their lifetime (VAW Study, 2014) and less than 2% of women report it to authorities.¹¹⁵

Despite several achievements, gender inequality in Lao PDR is still a challenge and affects the main development areas in the country. These include: the cultural norms associated with a patriarchal society; limited awareness and acceptance of the importance of gender equality and women's rights; weak implementation of legal frameworks on gender equality and gender-based violence; gender-blind policy making process.¹¹⁶

National Policy Environment and Legal Framework for Gender Equality and Women Empowerment

Laos has taken significant steps towards gender equality and women's empowerment through various national policies and legal frameworks. Lao PDR ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. The Constitution of Laos, revised in 2015, guarantees equal rights for men and women. It stipulates that the state shall protect the rights and interests of women and children, and promote gender equality. This constitutional provision lays the foundation for other laws and policies aimed at advancing gender equality:

- Law on Gender Equality 2019 establishes the principles, regulations, and measures to mainstream gender throughout laws and policies in all sectors (Article 1). It defines and guarantees gender equality (Article 2; Chapter 2, Articles 26–31) and gender mainstreaming (Article 3), and outlines important provisions amounting to temporary special measures, i.e., taking positive measures to redress historical disadvantages to women and create substantive equality with men (Chapter 1, Article 24).
- The key policy document guiding the promotion of gender equality and elimination of discrimination is the National Action Plan on Gender Equality 2021–2025. Its goals are to promote gender equality, raise public awareness, develop a gender responsive database, develop national policies and legislation that commit to international agreements on women's rights to which the Lao PDR is a party, and strengthen the structure and personnel of gender equality institutions.
- The other laws that mandate women's advancement and women rights are **Law on the Development and Protection of Women (2004)**, which is a cornerstone for gender equality and women's rights in Laos. It aims to prevent discrimination against women, ensure equal participation in political, economic, social, and cultural life, and protect women from violence. The law also includes provisions for maternity leave, equal pay for equal work, and protection from workplace discrimination and **Law on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Children (2015)**, which specifically targets gender-based violence. It defines

¹¹⁵ UNDP, [https://www.undp.org/laopdr/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment#:~:text=Although%20Lao%20PDR%20ranks%20137,\(2021\)%20is%20at%20120.](https://www.undp.org/laopdr/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment#:~:text=Although%20Lao%20PDR%20ranks%20137,(2021)%20is%20at%20120.) Accessed 25 July 2024

¹¹⁶ Laos Women's Union, 2019, National Review of Lao People's Democratic Republic (BPfA+25)

various forms of violence, including physical, psychological, and economic abuse, and sets out measures for prevention, protection, and support for victims. The law also establishes mechanisms for reporting and addressing incidents of violence

Key policies on Climate, Agricultural, Forestry Sectors and their Mentions of Gender Equality or Women's Economic Empowerment

Due to the wide-ranging impacts of climate change, many laws and policies in Lao PDR are relevant to this topic, some of which are analyzed concerning the agriculture sector, and others regarding women's access to assets. All but one of the laws and policies on climate change in the Lao PDR are not yet gender mainstreamed. They do not include mandates or mechanisms for special measures to achieve substantive gender equality.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, laws and policies in the Lao PDR relating to agriculture lack reference to the essential concepts of equality and nondiscrimination, despite the significant barriers women face in accessing land and finance and participating in decision making in this area. A more systematic approach to gender analysis and mainstreaming in the Lao PDR climate change laws and policies and their implementation— informed by sex-disaggregated qualitative and quantitative data—would better support women's resilience to climate change, while promoting women's equal access to land and participation in decision making would strengthen women's resilience to the impacts of climate change and disasters.

Policies/ Regulations	Summary
National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES)	The strategy aims to improve agricultural practices for women and strengthen land tenure security by incorporating women's customary land rights into land reallocation, titling and dispute settlement plans
National Agro-Biodiversity Program and Action Plan 2021–2025	It notes that men and women have different roles in and understandings of the management and use of agro-biodiversity resources, which “need to be fully incorporated in all biodiversity management plans” (2.1, p. 6). It does not mention the principles of equality and nondiscrimination.
Decree on Environmental Impact Assessments 2019	It includes provisions on participatory consultations and assessments that mainstream gender, such as the requirement for project owners to collect baseline information on gender and ethnicity-related issues (Article 13) and conduct assessments with management and monitoring plans relating to gender and ethnicity (Articles 22[7] and 36).
National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021–2025) (NAPGE)	There are aspirational targets for capacity-building on gender equality for National Assembly members. There are also positive targets to promote equality and improve women's resilience to disasters and increase the participation of women in climate change and disaster risk reduction.

¹¹⁷ ADB, 2022, Women's Resilience in the Lao PDR

Policies/ Regulations	Summary
National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES)	The strategy aims to improve agricultural practices for women and strengthen land tenure security by incorporating women's customary land rights into land reallocation, titling and dispute settlement plans
Agriculture Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision to 2030	The strategy acknowledges the critical role of women in agriculture and includes measures to support women's economic empowerment. It promotes access to agricultural resources, training, and technology for women farmers. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to address gender disparities in agricultural productivity and income

Key Demographic Trends

Population

Lao PDC has an ethnically diverse, largely rural population of about 7.6 million (2023), of which 49.7% percent are female¹¹⁸. While 68% of the population resides in rural areas,¹¹⁹ urbanization has expanded at an annual rate of 5.3 percent —among the fastest in Southeast Asia.¹²⁰ A majority of households are headed by men (86.9 percent).¹²¹ Female-headed households are more prevalent in urban areas (17.2 percent) than in rural areas (11.2 percent); the share of female-headed households is highest in Vientiane Capital (21.2 percent), Khammuan (20.4 percent), and Champasack (18.6 percent).¹²²

Poverty and Income

SDG 1	Chosen Indicators	Values ¹²³
	• % of population at international poverty line • % of population at national poverty line • % of population at lower middle income class poverty line • % of population at upper middle income class poverty line • % of population at severe multidimensional poverty • Annualized GDP per capital growth • Annualized consumption growth per capita from household survey • Growth of the annual median income/ consumption per capita	• 7.1% (2018) • 18.3% (2018) • 32.5% (2018) • 70.5% (2018) • 10.3% (2018) • 5.62% (2012 – 2018) • 3.07% (2012 – 2018)

¹¹⁸ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=LA>. Accessed 25 July 2024

¹¹⁹ Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB), 2017, Lao Social Indicator Survey II- Survey. Cited in USAID/LAOS Country-level Gender Analysis, 2022

¹²⁰ UN Habitat. 2016. World Cities Report. Cited in USAID/LAOS Country-level Gender Analysis, 2022

¹²¹ GOL. 2018. Lao Labor Force Survey 2017. Cited in USAID/LAOS Country-level Gender Analysis, 2022

¹²² This is defined as a household that does not have an adult male earning member and is headed by a woman who may have been widowed, separated, or deserted. GOL. 2018. Lao Labor Force Survey 2017. Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare. Cited in USAID/LAOS Country-level Gender Analysis, 2022

¹²³ The World Bank Group, April 2024, Poverty and Equity Brief, East Asia and Pacific, Lao PDC

		• 2.19% (2012 – 2018)
--	--	---

Inequality remains high and has risen in the last few years: the GINI index went from 35.4 in 2007, to 36 in 2016 and reached 38.8 in 2018.¹²⁴ Inequality is driven by a high concentration of consumption at the top of the distribution. The impact of COVID-19 on tourism, remittances and the labor market has further exacerbated the challenges experienced by the economy in previous years

Poverty remains remarkably higher in the rural areas, the share of urban poverty is rising, and the geography of poverty has changed in the last decade: the central region, historically the wealthiest, is now home to a much larger share of the poor, from 34% in 2012/2013 to 42% in 2018/2019. Poverty is higher among ethnic minority groups, and the Hmon Lu-Mien group is lagging significantly behind the others: poverty declined by 15% since 2012/2013, compared with a reduction by one third for the other groups.¹²⁵

Poverty is higher among male-headed households, however while the gap was almost 10% in 2012/2013, with 16% of female-headed households in poverty compared with 25% of male-headed households, that gap is now only 0.9%, which shows a much faster pace of poverty reduction among male-headed households. That can be explained by change in the average household size and the primary economic activity: 60% of male-headed household are engaged in farming activities, as opposed to 45% of female-headed households.¹²⁶

Health

SDG 3	Chosen Indicators	Values
	• Life Expectancy, both sexes • Life Expectancy, Male • Life Expectancy, Female • Maternal mortality ratio • Under-five Mortality Rate	• 69 (2022)¹²⁷ • 67 (2022)¹²⁸ • 71 (2022)¹²⁹ • 126.1 (2020)¹³⁰ • 40.38 (2022)¹³¹

¹²⁴ World Bank Data Bank, Lao PDR: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=LA>. Accessed 25 July 2024

¹²⁵ World Bank, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020

¹²⁶ World Bank, Lao Statistics Bureau, 2020

¹²⁷ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Laos. Accessed 25 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=LA>

¹²⁸ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Laos. Accessed 25 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.MA.IN?locations=LA>

¹²⁹ World Bank, 2022, Life expectancy at birth, total (years) – Laos. Accessed 14 July 2024. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.FE.IN?locations=LA>

¹³⁰ Sustainable Development Report, Lao PDR. Accessed 25 July 2024

¹³¹ Sustainable Development Report, Lao PDR. Accessed 25 July 2024

Lao has made some remarkable progress in health in the last fifteen years. Life expectancy continuously increased until reaching 69 in 2022, maternal mortality was decreased, therefore meeting the MDG target, immunization rate has increased, and the Health Sector Reform (HSR) saw the introduction of the national health insurance, the reform of the health information system and the introduction of an essential service package. However, women and girls still face challenges and constraints:

Maternal mortality rates or MMRs: although MMR decreased to 126.1 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2020, compared with 905 in 1990, it is still above the regional average and far from the WHO and SDG goal of less than 70 per 100,000 births. The Lao PDR also has the highest maternal mortality ratio of all Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries.¹³² Only two thirds of births are delivered in a health facility and attended by a skill medical professional.¹³³ The World Bank reports that the proportion decreases significantly in rural villages without road access (38%), among the poorest wealth quintile (34%) and ethnic minority groups (43% for Chinese-Tibetan women). Likewise, while at the national level 44% of mothers and newborns receive post-natal care, the proportion is lower in the aforementioned groups: 24%, 27% and 23%, respectively¹³⁴

The Lao PDR has one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world—with one in four women aged 15–19 years old currently married—and the highest adolescent pregnancy in the region, with almost a quarter of girls aged 15–19 already having had a child¹³⁵. The high adolescent birth rate causes an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, with almost half of girls aged 15–19 suffering from anemia¹³⁶. Chronic malnutrition is prevalent across all age groups in the Lao PDR, which also has a high prevalence of childhood stunting (44.2% of children), and worse child health and nutrition outcomes than other countries in the mainland Southeast Asia region.¹³⁷ These health outcomes are influenced by a range of factors including poverty, food insecurity, and gender inequality.¹³⁸

Disasters impact health outcomes in the Lao PDR as storms, flooding, and droughts impact agricultural production and adversely impact food security. Outbreaks of diseases such as diarrheal disease, malaria, and typhoid fever are prevalent in the Lao PDR partly due to these hazards, and the incidence of tuberculosis is the highest in the region. Major disasters—such as

¹³² Government of Lao PDR, 2018, Lao People's Democratic Republic: Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹³³ Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018

¹³⁴ Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018

¹³⁵ Government of Lao PDR, 2018, Lao People's Democratic Republic: Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹³⁶ Government of Lao PDR, 2018, Lao People's Democratic Republic: Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

¹³⁷ UNDRR, 2019, Disaster Risk Reduction in Lao PDR: Status Report 2019

¹³⁸ Y. Kamiya et al. 2018. Mothers' Autonomy and Childhood Stunting Evidence from Semi-Urban Communities in Lao PDR, cited in ADB, 2022, Women's Resilience in Lao People's Democratic Republic

typhoon Haima in 2011, or the 2018 floods—worsen health outcomes due to damage to health-care facilities and destruction of livelihoods.¹³⁹

Education

SDG 4	Chosen Indicators	Values
	- Literacy rate, adult total (% of population) - Literacy rate, adult female (% of population) - Literacy rate, adult male (% of population) - Primary completion rate, male - Primary completion rate, female - Lower secondary completion rate, male - Lower secondary completion rate, female - Upper secondary completion rate, male - Upper secondary completion rate, female	88% (2022)¹⁴⁰ 83% (2022)¹⁴¹ - Not available 89% (2022)¹⁴² 89% (2022)¹⁴³ 58.1% (2022)¹⁴⁴ 58% (2022)¹⁴⁵ - Not available - Not available

Lao PDR has made significant progress in increasing literacy and education levels. The overall literacy rate increased from 72.7% (2005 Census) to 88% (2022). The literacy rate among young females (ages 15-24) reached an impressive 94%¹⁴⁶, indicating substantial progress in education for girls.

Table 4 School completion rates (2021). Source: World Bank Indicators

	Women	Men	Total
Primary	90.6	89.8	89%
Lower Secondary	60.5	61.1	60.8

The Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (2016-2020) set forth Objective 3 to achieve the Human Asset Index target necessary for exiting Least Developed Country status by reducing disparities in gender, disability, poverty, and ethnicity. A significant aim was to increase the secondary Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) from 60% in 2015 to 75%. Following this, the National Action Plan on Gender Equality (2021-2025) focuses on improving the livelihoods of women and girls through economic empowerment and increased access to quality services, including education. Specific targets include achieving a Gender Equality Index (GEI) of school enrolment for students aged 5 between 0.97 and 1.03, and a GEI of 1.00 for Year-1 students passing early childhood education. Additionally, the overall re-enrolment rate of Year-5 students nationwide aims for a GEI of 0.97-1.03. By the end of the plan, the goal is for 54% of women to graduate

¹³⁹ Government of Lao PDR. 2018. Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA) 2018 Floods Lao PDR

¹⁴⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.MA.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.CMPT.FE.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.MA.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴⁵ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.FE.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

¹⁴⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.1524.LT.FE.ZS?locations=LA>. Accessed 26 July 2024

from primary equivalency programs, 49% from lower secondary, and 40% from upper secondary and basic professional skills training. In vocational education, 80,000 students are expected to enroll, with 35% of graduates being women. Higher education aims to enroll 59,000 students, with women making up 49% of graduates, and more than 4,000 students graduating in natural science, engineering, and technology, with 35% being women⁸⁰

As of 2022, the literacy rate in Lao PDR was 87.52%⁸¹ with significant strides in female literacy. The literacy rate among young females (ages 15-24) reached an impressive 94%⁸², indicating substantial progress in education for girls.

In Lao PDR there are many more illiterate adults than adults who never attended school, pointing to failures of the education system to equip young people with needed skills. Rural schools especially lack qualified pre-primary and early primary teachers capable of addressing barriers to literacy in their classrooms.

Key informants cite that disparities based on ethnicity, residence, and socioeconomic status persist¹⁴⁷. The urban population is much better educated, with 66.3% having completed primary school or above, in comparison with less than 40% in rural areas. Key informants also note that girls tend to drop out beginning around fifth grade, especially in Hmong communities, where education for girls is less valued.¹⁴⁸ Illiteracy has decreased across generations, especially for males. Nearly half of women between 35 to 49 years are illiterate, in comparison with 28 percent of men in the same age range. Sex-based differences in literacy decrease among younger age groups, but even among the 15 to 17 age group there is a 6-percentage point gap between girls and boys (at 11 percent and 17 percent, respectively).¹⁴⁹

Regarding women in STEM, Laos currently has a 17% tertiary enrolment rate with 25% of majors focused on STEM subjects. However, no research has been carried out on the scope of women and girls in STEM in Lao PDR.¹⁵⁰

Political Participation

Penal Code No.26 (2017) states that “any person who discriminates against any woman, or who keeps separate from or prevents, or restricts the participation of any woman in political, economic, socio-cultural or family activities based on gender reasons, shall be punished by imprisonment from one year to three years and shall be fined from 1.000.000 Kip to 3.000.000 Kip”¹⁵¹

Women hold 22% of parliamentary seats, marking nearly a 20% increase in their political representation in the National Assembly since 1990. Despite these gains, women still face challenges in achieving equal representation, particularly in senior government positions, where

¹⁴⁷ USAID, 2022, Country-level Gender Analysis-Laos

¹⁴⁸ Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare , 2018, Lao Labor Force Survey 2017

¹⁴⁹ USAID, 2022, Country-level Gender Analysis-Laos

¹⁵⁰ Seameo secretariat. SEAMEO Secretariat. (n.d.). <https://www.seameo.org/>

¹⁵¹ UNDP Lao PDR gender equality strategy 2022- ... (n.d.-n). https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-11/undp_lao_pdr_gender_strategy_and_action_plan_2022-2026-signed.pdf

they comprised only 10% in 2018.¹⁵² Women represents 32.2% of seats in deliberative bodies of local government.

Women's Economic Participation and Entrepreneurship

In the labor force, women constitute 47% while men make up 53%. Employment distribution across sectors shows that in services, 23.26% of the workforce is engaged, with men representing 11.7% and women 11.75%. In the industry sector, which employs 7.18% of the workforce, men account for 4.77% and women for 2.82%. Agriculture, the largest employment sector, absorbs 69.57% of the workforce, with 37.1% being men and 32.9% women^{153 154}

The labor participation rate for women aged 15-64 is 59%¹⁵⁵, while the rate for men in the same age group is 70.8%¹⁵⁶. Unemployment rates for women are at 0.9%, compared to 1.5% for men.¹⁵⁷

Excluding civil servants, the employed population in Lao PDR is just over 1.44 million people. Of this population, 8% are employed in the formal sector, 45% in the informal sector, and 47% work in households. This indicates that nearly half of the workforce is engaged in informal employment, highlighting the significant presence of non-regulated labor activities.¹⁵⁸

In Lao PDR, women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid work and unpaid care work, a trend consistent with global patterns. According to the 2015 population and housing census, 61% of women in the labor force were unpaid family workers compared to 26% of men. Despite this, women's labor force participation is comparable to men's, standing at 70.8% for women and 67.6% for men, indicating that women are equally engaged in the labor market but often in unpaid roles.¹⁵⁹

Access to financial services remains a challenge for certain segments of the population, particularly rural and low-income households, with 25% excluded from financial access. Women have slightly higher financial access at 76% compared to men at 72%.¹⁶⁰ In rural Laos, women are well integrated into financial decision-making at home, with 90% of financial decisions made jointly. However, female participation in village bank operations is less ideal, with only 25% feeling

¹⁵² Gender equality in Lao PDR. (n.d.-f). https://luxdev.lu/files/documents/Genre_LAO_vF.pdf

¹⁵³ Employment by economic sector in Laos 2022 - statista. (n.d.-b). <https://www.statista.com/statistics/804983/employment-by-economic-sector-in-laos/>

¹⁵⁴ Lao PDR . World Bank Open Data. (n.d.-l). <https://data.worldbank.org/country/lao-pdr>

¹⁵⁵ Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate) - Lao PDR. World Bank Open Data. (n.d.-k). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS?locations=LA>

¹⁵⁶ Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate) - Lao PDR. World Bank Open Data. (n.d.-l). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.MA.ZS?locations=LA>

¹⁵⁷ UN Women database for Lao. Available at <https://data.unwomen.org/country/lao-peoples-democratic-republic>

¹⁵⁸ International Labor Organization. ILO Brief: Understanding informality and expanding social security coverage in Lao People's Democratic Republic: A quantitative study of the labour force and enterprise landscape. January 2023.

¹⁵⁹ ADB. ADB Briefs No. 163. December 2020

¹⁶⁰ Bank of the Lao PDR. Financial Inclusion Roadmap (2018 – 2025). August 2019.

fully included. Challenges include a lack of confidence, literacy and numeracy barriers, and traditional role models that exclude women from full participation. Despite these obstacles, over 50% of women in village bank governing bodies feel well-integrated in decision-making processes, though many who feel excluded attribute this to their gender, with 85% citing low awareness of their capacities as a major barrier. A dominant aspect preventing equal voice is low awareness of own capacity and knowledge (55%).¹⁶¹

Social and Cultural Context

The cultural norms associated with a patriarchal society like Lao PDR make efforts toward gender equality challenging, with limited awareness and acceptance of women's rights, particularly in remote and mountainous areas. In these regions, women and girls face significant disadvantages, as men are typically viewed as the heads of households and represent their families at official meetings. Many women are illiterate and do not speak the national language used for education, which restricts their access to knowledge and opportunities. Social and cultural norms undermine women's confidence to express their opinions and participate in discussions, and they often lack basic meeting skills, such as taking turns to speak, hindering their ability to engage fully in village development activities.^{162 163}

The combination of illiteracy, language barriers, and prevailing social norms means that women frequently cannot participate fully in village development processes, preventing them from contributing to decisions that affect their lives and communities. As a result, women and girls remain underrepresented in local governance and development efforts, perpetuating a cycle of disadvantage and exclusion. Efforts to promote gender equality in Lao PDR must address these deep-rooted cultural norms and barriers by increasing awareness and acceptance of women's rights, especially in remote areas. Empowering women through education, improving their literacy and language skills, and promoting their participation in community activities are essential steps toward achieving gender equality and enhancing the overall development of these communities.

Access to Land

There are numerous Laws related to gender and land such as Forest Law and policy documents, Property Law, Family Law, Inheritance Law and Land Law (Mann 2008, 19 and Annex 5, Van Duin 2017). Gender equality is also safeguarded by Article 2 of the Family Law stating that men and women have equal rights in all aspects. The Inheritance Law promotes equality in the division of land between siblings regardless of Gender¹⁶⁴. Although the Land Law of 2003 has a specific

¹⁶¹ Microfinance in rural areas – access to finance for the poor - giz. Giz Deutsche. (n.d.). <https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2014-en-financial-inclusion-gender-rural-areas.pdf>

¹⁶² Lao's Women Union. (2019, May). National Review of Lao People's Democratic Republic. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Lao%20PDR.pdf>

¹⁶³ A better future for women in Laos. Oxfam International. (2022, May 25). <https://www.oxfam.org/en/better-future-women-laos#:~:text=Indeed%2C%20women%20and%20girls%20living,national%20language%20used%20for%20education>.

¹⁶⁴ Cited in Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR, 2020

stipulation about women in Article 43 on land registration, stating that both names of husbands and wives must be included in the Land Register Book in the case of matrimonial property, unfortunately the Land Law 2019 no longer includes the protection clause for married women. Such circumstances indicate that titling may not add significant benefits to the protection of land rights of women.

A survey in 2018 showed that of a total of 224,000 land titles viewed, 70,000 are in the name of women, 50,000 in the name of men, 87,000 in both names and 14,000 in the name of others.¹⁶⁵

Women's land rights are closely linked to customary gender-based power systems in their culture. From a customary law perspective, women's land rights are determined mainly by whether a village is matrilineal or patrilineal in social structure. The former have women as the main land rights holders which is further refined by the number of children in a family, the age and number of females in the family and external factors such as land availability, migration and mobility, and other social and environmental factors. In patrilineal customary law systems women are not included in land inheritance patterns. Women in these systems gain land rights via men but can lose these rights when marriages dissolve or a husband passes away. Both above systems are influenced by many local factors so there can be exceptions and unique conditions for women's land rights.

Another significant influence on women's land rights is the agriculture system in which these are embedded. Reports and studies indicate that the processes of rural transformation in conjunction with new land policies might have an adverse impact on women's access to, and control and decision-making power over land. Expansion of roads, construction of buildings, resettlement, concessions to rubber plantations and leasing out land for sugarcane production are the main reasons for loss of land.¹⁶⁶

Women's Participation in the Agricultural and Forestry Sectors

The agricultural sector has been 'feminized' for decades, with women comprising just over 50 percent of the population economically active in agriculture since at least 1980 (World Bank, 2016). Despite women's heavy involvement in agricultural work, however, women face significant and persistent barriers to participating fully in the sector.¹⁶⁷

Overall for farming households, lowland or irrigated rice is the dominant seasonal crop, followed by upland rice and cereals (MAF and FAO, 2014). A greater percentage of female-headed farming households grow lowland/irrigated rice than do male-headed farming households (76.8% compared with 72.3%), and, general, female-headed agricultural households have a less diversified crop base than male-headed agricultural households (FAO and SIDA, 2010). Differences also exist in permanent crop choice, with female-headed households growing coffee most widely (grown by 29% of households) and male-headed households most widely growing rubber (33%) (MAF and FAO, 2014). For non-commercial agriculture, the predominant crop is sticky rice. In market gardens, the main agricultural products are vegetables and herbs such as pumpkin, beans, chilies, garlic, tomato, eggplant, sesame, and cabbage. Various types of

¹⁶⁵ Cited in the Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR, 2020

¹⁶⁶ Land Information Working Group (LIWG), 2020, Women and Land Rights in Lao PDR

¹⁶⁷ FAO, 2018, Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao PDR

livestock are also raised, including cattle, chickens, ducks, goats and pigs. Services for supporting raising of livestock, such as veterinarians or feedstock, are not widely available in rural areas, so livestock raising tends not to meet its full potential.¹⁶⁸

The shifting landscape of the agricultural sector from subsistence to market-based models, has unique – and potentially negative – impacts for rural women, many of whom face constraints in accessing markets due to limited mobility, literacy and, in the case of ethnic women, Lao language skills. Agricultural investment projects often undervalue women's involvement, this can have unforeseen negative impacts on women, such as increasing their workload or diminishing the availability of non-timber forest products and (iii) Improving rural women's education and literacy is, therefore, a necessary component of any intervention seeking to empower rural women and create gender equality.¹⁶⁹

Gender-based Violence and Harassment

In Lao PDR, 11.6 percent of ever-partnered women have experienced physical violence in their lifetime, with 4 percent experiencing it in the past 12 months. Additionally, 1.8 percent of ever-pregnant women faced physical violence during at least one pregnancy. Sexual violence has affected 7.2 percent of ever-partnered women over their lifetime, with 3.3 percent experiencing it in the past year. Emotional violence is even more prevalent, affecting 26.2 percent of ever-partnered women in their lifetime and 10.5 percent in the past year. The lifetime prevalence of experiencing both physical and sexual violence is 15.3 percent, while the overlap of physical, sexual, and/or emotional violence is 30.2 percent, indicating a significant number of women endure multiple forms of violence. Additionally, 34.8 percent of ever-partnered women have experienced controlling behaviors from their partners, and 6.8 percent have faced economic abuse.

Regarding non-partner violence, 5.1 percent of women have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, with the main perpetrators being female family members (34.9 percent), particularly mothers or stepmothers (26.8 percent), followed by female non-family members (26.4 percent), male family members (24.3 percent), and male non-family members (23.6 percent). Sexual violence by a non-partner since age 15 affected 5.3 percent of women, with 1.1 percent having experienced forced sexual intercourse. The prevalence of sexual abuse during childhood varied significantly depending on the questioning method, from 0.9 percent in face-to-face interviews to 9.9 percent when using cards, and 10.3 percent with a combination of methods. The overlap of partner and non-partner violence includes 14.4 percent experiencing physical violence, 10.9 percent sexual violence, and 20.2 percent facing either physical or sexual violence.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Cited in FAO, 2018, Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao PDR

¹⁶⁹ FAO, 2018, Country Gender Assessment of Agriculture and the Rural Sector in Lao PDR

¹⁷⁰ National Review of Lao People's Democratic Republic. (n.d.-j). <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/Lao%20PDR.pdf>

Conclusions

This gender assessment provides an overview of the key barriers and opportunities for closing gender gaps and contributing to gender equalities in the Lower Mekong Basin. The two countries present specific barriers for advancing gender equalities in the AFOLU sectors targeted by the MERF, and therefore a programmatic approach to ensure that each investment considers the specific situation of their context of implementation is needed.

The AFOLU sectors are a significant source of employment for women living in the two countries and gender equality and women's empowerment are used as guiding principles and a cross-cutting mandate for the MERF and its approach to gender lens investing. The MERF intends to support projects that have a positive impact on the lives of women and that have strong gender equality ambitions. To effectively address gender disparities, the MERF incorporates an explicit gender approach into its investment thesis, its performance objectives, and results measurement framework. This involves several key components:

1. **Mandatory Gender Assessments:** Each proposed project or program will include a comprehensive gender assessment to understand how it will impact men and women differently.
2. **Gender Action Plan:** Develop a fully costed, project-specific gender action plan that outlines steps to ensure gender equality and empower women, and that helps companies achieving business and impact objectives.
3. **Allocation of resources:** Allocate resources specifically for gender-related activities (see Gender Action Plan for this project) within the programme's budget to ensure that financial commitments are made towards achieving gender equality.
4. **Indicators and Measurement:** Establish clear quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure the project's contributions to gender equality. These indicators should track progress and outcomes related to gender-specific objectives. The alignment with 2X Criteria will ensure that the indicators of progress towards equality are in line with industry standards.
5. **Gender-Disaggregated Data:** MERF's investees will systematically collect and analyze data separated by gender to monitor the impact on men and women. This data will be crucial for assessing the effectiveness of gender-focused interventions and making informed adjustments as needed as they proceed in the GAP implementation.
6. **Knowledge creation and sharing of best practices:** Establish convening and events (virtual and in person) for investee companies to share their lessons learnt, and for the MERF to collect best practices, thus contributing to closing knowledge gaps about what works for women's inclusion in agriculture, forestry and aquaculture value chains.

By implementing these measures, the MERF can ensure that adaptation and mitigation efforts are equitable and effective, addressing the unique challenges faced by women and promoting gender equality in the two target countries. This approach not only supports women but also strengthens the overall resilience and sustainability of communities facing climate change.

The conclusions from this assessment have been used to develop the fund-level Gender Action Plan that incorporates a gender lens across all levels:

- **Fund-level:** activities to ensure that sex-disaggregated data collection and strong reporting is integrated, and aligned with ESG standards and 2X Criteria.
- **Portfolio-level:** support to identify gender opportunities (through the gender assessment), as well as investment-level GAP development for all participating companies. .
- **Country- and market-level:** activities to foster knowledge creation, participation and convening of stakeholders at the country level to ensure that lessons learned are shared and that collaborations are created.