

OUR COAST - OUR FUTURE PILOT¹



Why gender matters in sustainable coastal resource management within Vietnam's mangrove forests

Brief no. **1**

Introduction

There is an emerging momentum for supporting sustainable coastal forest management in Vietnam. This is reflected in Decree no. 119/2016/ND-CP, issued in August 2016, covering policies on sustainable management, protection, and development of coastal forests for coping with climate change. It is part and parcel of a growing interest in understanding how best to manage coastal landscapes in an integrated way. A central part of the challenge is developing inclusive forms of governance and management approaches in order to improve livelihoods, reduce disputes, and promote sustainable coastal forest management, including mangroves. Promoting gender equality is therefore a critical component of coastal forest management.

Vietnam compares favorably against other countries in the region when it comes to gender equality indicators². Positive developments such as the 2006 Law on Gender Equality, 2013 Constitution, 2013 Land Law, and 2014 Law on Marriage and Family were put into motion to bring about greater equality between men and women. Yet, in practice, there are still deep-rooted socio-cultural practices that tend to discriminate against women and their rights to assets, resources, and decision-making power³.

Some of the continuing larger problems include a wage gap and limited access to formal employment opportunities⁴. In addition, women are underrepresented in government agencies and mass organizations⁵ (except for the Women's Union, a socio-political organization). That said, there has been a positive trend at work with the current 2016-2021 term of the People's Council at the commune, district and provincial levels of representation ranging between 26.6% and 27.5%⁶. At the community level in rural areas, due to the prevalence of patriarchal gender roles and gender stereotypes, women's leadership tends to be more limited.

Given that gender inequality continues to persist in rural areas, it is important to examine the particular ways in which it occurs in coastal areas. It is clear that women work longer hours than men and take part in most household-level production activities,

¹ This pilot was developed through the USAID-funded Tenure and Global Climate Change (TGCC) Program and implemented in conjunction with the Vietnam Forests and Deltas Program over the period October 2016 to December 2017. The pilot involves a five-step process for carrying out participatory coastal spatial planning and mangrove co-management. <https://www.land-links.org/project/tenure-global-climate-change-vietnam/>

² The World Bank. (2011). *Vietnam Country Gender Assessment*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

³ See ICRW. (2015). *Land Law and Gender in Vietnam*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women.

⁴ UNWOMEN. (2016). *Facts and Figures on Women and Men in Vietnam 2010-2015*. Hanoi: UNWOMEN.

⁵ "Mass organizations" are one of four types of civil societies in Vietnam. More details can be found in: Asian Development Bank. (2011). *Civil Society Briefs: Vietnam*. (<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28969/csb-vie.pdf>)

⁶ UNWOMEN. (2016). *Facts and Figures on Women and Men in Vietnam 2010-2015*. Hanoi: UNWOMEN.

but at the same time, they have less access to and control over assets and resources. It is critical to identify how women and men use different parts of the landscape as well as their role in coastal resource governance, so that when interventions to improve mangrove and coastal management are designed, they can promote gender equality to strengthen the inclusive distribution of rights and benefits⁷. Attention needs to be given to the different perspectives of women and men on the value of mangroves and how they should be protected.

The rights and roles of community members making use of natural resources within a coastal landscape with mangrove forests are shaped by the complex interactions of gender, social class, wealth, and age. The specific type of complex interlinkages depend on changes related to socioeconomic transformations as well as policy and legal frameworks⁸. For example, the economic reforms (*doi moi*) introduced in the late 1980s significantly transformed how women and men used and worked in coastal mangrove forests⁹. To design a sustainable way to manage coastal landscapes with mangroves, it is important to understand how to establish incentives for all community members, women and men, poor and rich.

This brief examines the gender-differentiated character of land and resource rights, the particularities of natural resource use, and power dynamics in decision-making. It also highlights the critical role of women's participation and leadership in mangrove planting and management from the mid-1990s onwards. The brief presents findings from the

Our Coast – Our Future pilot project, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), on participatory coastal spatial planning and mangrove co-management in Tien Lang district of Haiphong municipality. It focuses on four main areas of resource use in this landscape: gleaning and fishing by hand, aquaculture production, fishing by boat, and clam farming. These perspectives are offered to provide insights into the challenges that need to be addressed to develop a holistic and equitable mangrove management approach. In doing so, the brief elaborates on positive outliers – women who have been successful pioneers in roles where women have traditionally been underrepresented. Their stories can help inspire



Women actively engaged in a participatory coastal resource assessment discussion.

initiatives to empower women and create transformative change, leading to gender equality among coastal communities¹⁰.

The brief begins by presenting key findings and a set of recommendations on how to support gender equity in mangrove management, followed by an analysis of the gendered dimensions of coastal resource uses and associated contract and management arrangements within the three coastal communes in Haiphong municipality, namely Vinh Quang, Tien Hung, and Dong Hung. This analysis is followed by a discussion of women's participation and leadership both in mangrove planting and management, as well as more broadly in village and commune leadership.

⁷ See USAID. (2012). *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*. Washington, DC: USAID.

⁸ The World Bank. (2011). *Vietnam Country Gender Assessment*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

⁹ See for example, Le Thi Van Hue. (2006). Gender, *doi moi*, and mangrove management in northern Vietnam. *Gender, Technology, and Development*, 10(1), 3-59. DOI: 10.1177/097185240501000103

¹⁰ This review was prepared on the basis of a set of interviews carried out by Nguyen Thu Ha in July 2017 in the three communes. A total of 20 people (seven men, nine women, and two couples) were interviewed including gleaner/ fishing by hand villagers, boat fishers, clam farm owners, aquaculture pond owners, Women's Union chairwomen, and village heads

Key findings

In general, it is clear that there are significant differences between women's and men's access to and control of coastal natural resources in Tien Lang. In practice, women have had a significant role in planting mangrove forests as well as in running mangrove nurseries, primarily through the Women's Union but also through other mass organizations. They depend more than men on the natural resources that thrive in mangrove ecosystems. Women are mainly involved in either gleaning (which has low income potential) or as workers within aquaculture operations (on a short-term or long-term basis). The emerging trend of privatization of the previously common mudflats and mangroves will adversely affect women and women-headed households with limited access to land use rights and exposure to environmental degradation.

From an institutional perspective, men hold more formal roles in forest protection agreements and have opportunities to generate income based on aquatic resource harvesting, given their assets recognized in Land Use Rights Certificates and aquaculture contracts; use of tools and boats; and, ultimately, larger investments in aquaculture ponds or clam farming. Women are not typically joint rights holders on Land Use Rights Certificates or aquaculture pond contracts. Lacking assets and opportunities to learn the skills and develop the social networks to run aquaculture operations, boat fishing, or clam farming, women remain unable to reap the benefits of their direct work in expanding mangrove forests within Tien Lang's landscape.

When it comes to leadership positions at both the village and commune levels, women are only now gaining recognition for their capabilities and public service orientation. As a consequence, their ability to work for inclusive forms of coastal landscape and mangrove management is still nascent.

There are various reasons for gender inequities:

- (i) The persistence of patriarchal values within rural society undervalues women's reproductive, child raising, and food security work in the household and limits their contribution in the public space, specifically their participation, control, and leadership in mangrove and mudflat management;
- (ii) The lack of recognition of women's need to access common area mangroves and mudflats as major gleaners, supporting both household food security and income generation;
- (iii) The insufficient knowledge, social networks, and financial resources available to women to claim their rights to use the mudflat and mangroves for aquaculture production during the so-called open bidding and selection process;
- (iv) The challenges women face in claiming their legal property rights in case of conflicts, as land use rights are often vested in male heads of households; and,
- (v) The underrepresentation of women in local government and village management groups leads to neglect of their voice and needs during decision-making processes.

Despite these gender dynamics, there is a rising gender-related trend at work in Tien Lang district. Women are both entering professions that were previously the sole domain of men, such as running aquaculture production, fishing by boat, or clam farming, and increasingly being elected to positions of public office as a result of their proven capabilities in public service. The question now is how to take these steps forward at a wider scale so that women can also play a visible role in both coastal and mangrove management as well as become entrepreneurs by owning and running aquaculture, fishing, clam farming, and farm product companies.

Why gender matters in coastal landscapes: Ways forward

Recommendations to address the above issues include:

- (i) Pilot a community-based forest management model with women making up at least 35% of the members of the executive committee. Research in other countries has shown that any successful model of community-based forest management has proven to be a good solution to sustainable access and management of forests, which involves inclusion and equal rights of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, including women and the poor;
- (ii) Provide support for ensuring both women and men become joint rights holders of Land Use Rights Certificates;
- (iii) Organize communication campaigns to acknowledge women's roles and contributions in mangrove management, and their equal rights to access and control natural resources;
- (iv) Promote cases of successful women who are undertaking roles and jobs in which women are traditionally underrepresented as role models for transformative change;
- (v) Include gender-disaggregated data in mangrove use and management mapping and planning; and,
- (vi) Conduct a gender scan of the bidding procedures for aquaculture ponds and mangrove forest protection contracts and provide gender equity measures to empower women so they can claim their use rights over aquaculture ponds, mudflats, and mangroves.

Differences between Women and Men: Coastal Resource Use, Rights, and Management

The 12-kilometer (km) coastline area of Tien Lang first experienced mangrove conversion to aquaculture ponds soon after economic reforms (*doi moi*) began, but since the mid-1990s has seen considerable expansion of mangroves through planting by local mass organizations such as Women's Union, Vietnamese Red Cross, and others. A wide range of productive activities take place in this coastal area, including aquaculture production, fishing by boat and nets, gleaning in mangroves and mudflats, and clam farming. Behind the sea dike, rice farming, vegetable and tobacco production, and animal husbandry are also part of people's livelihoods. Women have actively promoted mangrove planting and conservation to protect the sea dikes in this storm-prone area. At the same time, it is clear that mangroves provide many more benefits and nurture a wide range of aquatic resources found in this productive ecosystem.

Natural resources used in connection with Tien Lang's mangroves can be categorized into four major groups: gleaning and fishing by hand, aquaculture production, near-shore fishing by boat, and clam farming.

Gleaning and Fishing by Hand

Mangrove forests provide villagers with diversified sources of food and income. Many visit the forests in the inter-tidal area to glean fish, crabs, shrimp, snails, and clams, among other resources, to use for domestic consumption or to sell in the local markets. Depending on the local level of mangrove cover, people may go to a nearby commune to glean. For example, in Tien Hung commune, where a large-scale aquaculture production project led to mangrove loss, gleaners have to go to neighboring communes to glean aquatic species. Among the four categories identified above, gleaning and fishing by hand has the lowest income and depends significantly on the quality of the mangrove ecosystem. This group consists of mainly women across a range of income backgrounds and poor men who seek supplemental food and income to add to their agricultural production. Men tend to use tools such as fishing cage traps (*lờ bát quái*), large dip nets (*vó bè*), pots (*đăng, đót*), and even electric shock, which is illegal, while women mainly collect fish and crustaceans by hand or small pots.

The mangrove forests are formally "open access" areas, but in practice, the men who set up gear in the mangroves (such as cage traps) establish informal boundaries, which they patrol. Those gleaning by hand, predominantly women, are

therefore restricted in terms of the areas they are able to access and the types of aquatic species (mainly fiddler crabs) they can collect, which can lead to low-level disputes. That said, the communes do not restrict mangrove access to their residents; outsiders from neighboring communes or communes further afield are able to glean in their mangroves. Women gleaners have noted that where mangrove areas have declined, the fecundity of aquatic resources has gone down; in addition, they highlight that changes in salinity as a result of sea dike construction also affect the productivity and taste of some species such as crabs.



Fishing cage traps in a household in Vinh Quang commune.

Women are also in charge of selling their and their husbands' catch in the local market. Though the majority of those gleaning are women, men's income per person is much higher than that of women because they tend to use tools. However, in using tools, men have a more negative influence on the mangrove ecosystem than women do. The tools used by men such as large dip nets and cage traps require large spaces, so they have to clear the site by cutting down tree branches. Moreover, these tools capture all seeds, juvenile and adult fish, and crustaceans, affecting the reproduction of these species.

For mangrove protection, and at different times in different communes, the local government has signed a number of one-year mangrove forest protection contracts with individuals (all men) and/or local organizations that cover all the mangroves in that commune. In most cases, these contracts stipulate the requirement to protect mangroves as well as regulate any fishing activities involving the use of tools. The contracts typically allow other villagers to enter these forests to fish by hand for specific aquatic species (such as fiddler crabs). In some cases, though, villager access is limited by specific mangrove forest protection contractors, especially where it relates to the collection of high-value marine products such as 'ruoi' (Nereidae worms). In the view of several villagers, including one village head, such mangrove forest protection contracts should not be signed with individuals to ensure equal access to marine products for all villagers.

Aquaculture Production

After economic reforms (*doi moi*) in 1986, there was significant conversion of mangrove areas for aquaculture ponds along Vietnam's coastline, including Tien Lang's coastal mangroves from the late 1980s. Mangrove conversion created multiple gendered repercussions, whereby women started to work on aquaculture operations and gleaners had to find alternative sites that, at times, led to conflict with existing users. Currently, aquaculture pond users agree that mangrove replanting and conservation has resulted in favorable contributions for aquaculture farming by providing juvenile crabs and maintaining water quality in the aquaculture ponds between the sea dike and mangroves.



Female gleaner in Dong Hung commune.

Both obtaining an aquaculture pond lease and managing aquaculture ponds are complex, involving various governmental agencies and varied contract types, particularly in terms of duration.

In theory, the government organizes a public bidding process to lease aquaculture ponds to households and entrepreneurs. Although everyone, both inside and outside the communities, has the right to participate in bidding, only people and enterprises with sufficient resources, knowledge, skills, and social connections can invest in this sub-sector because aquaculture farming requires major investment and expertise. The poor and women across the income spectrum may primarily benefit only by working as long-term or short-term workers for the ponds. Maps created for the Tien Lang pilot project (see Figure 1 below) indicate that both short-term and long-term female workers are involved in aquaculture production although a significant number of ponds (large and small) do not employ any women at all. Since shrimp or crab farming is highly lucrative, aquaculture ponds are hot spots of land use conflicts. Tien Lang has seen several violent events related to the use rights of aquaculture ponds, even up to involving weapons.

At the household level, even though the recent Land Law (2013) stresses equal rights to own and control land by both husband and wife, most households still retain only the husband's name on the Land Use Rights Certificate (red books) and aquaculture pond contracts. This practice limits women's control over their productive resources, especially in case of widowhood or divorce. The case of Mrs. Vu Thu Doi demonstrates this well: after her divorce in 2001, the family settled the division of assets and properties themselves. Accordingly, the aquaculture pond, which was registered in her husband's name, was divided into two parts. After her husband refused to sign the necessary documents to register her part of the pond in their son's name, she went to the district government and obtained a promise that it would solve the problem. The district government, however, only ended up dividing the tax on the pond use and did not alter the pond contract.

Although aquaculture in the district is dominated by men, the situation in Tien Lang is better than in Nam Dinh, the neighboring province, where women have not been allowed to work in shrimp farming due to a belief that the presence of women would bring disease and bad luck. In Tien Lang, women are hired to work on a short-term and long-term basis to collect seaweed, prepare food for the shrimp, fish, and crabs, and weed unwanted plants.

AQUACULTURE PONDS: PERCENTAGE OF FEMALE LABORERS, TIEN LANG DISTRICT

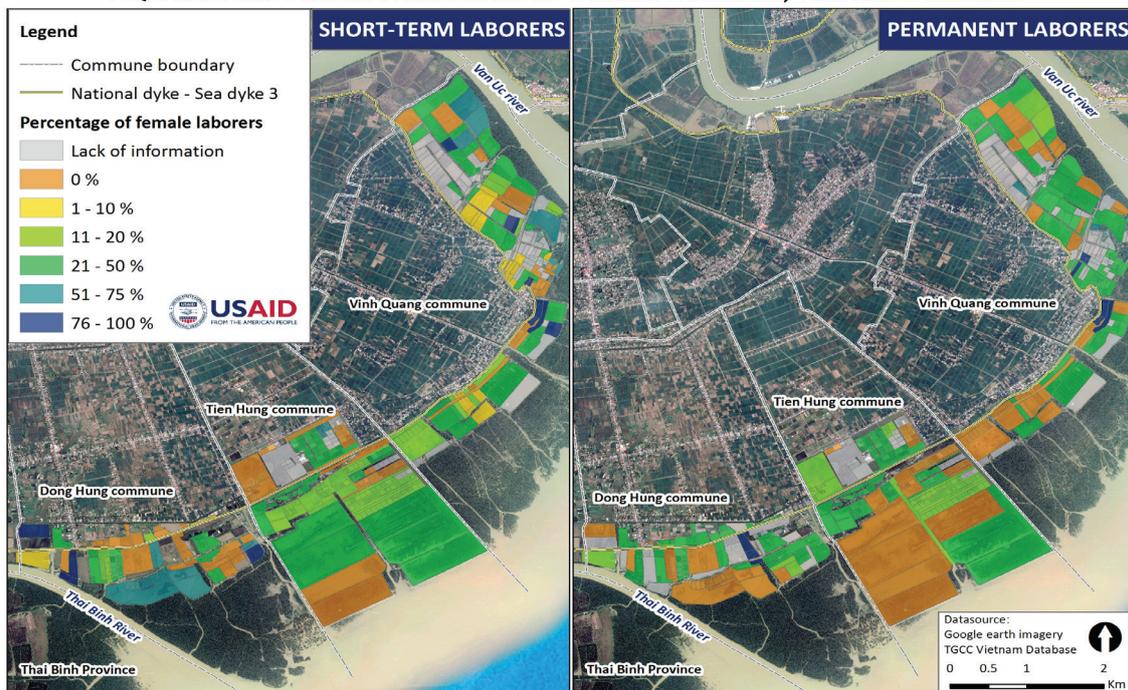


Figure 1: Map showing percentage of short-term and long-term laborers who are female on aquaculture farms.

A conventional explanation for the underrepresentation of women in this highly profitable sub-sector is the stereotype that women are “weak” and lack the required knowledge and skills to manage this risky business.

Very few women have overcome gender stereotypes and gained success with their aquaculture operations such as Ms. Vu Thi Doi (56 years old) in Dong Hung commune:

“The water sluice gate for my aquaculture pond was the biggest here. The concrete culverts were very heavy but I managed to pull them myself in order to let water in and drain waste water out. I did all the other work myself too: releasing the seed fish/shrimps into the pond, and selling them. There were moments when it seemed to be too much to bear and I always had to tell myself: ‘It is my family’s life. I cannot lose it.’ Across Vinh Quang and Tien Hung commune, I am the only female aquaculture pond owner. In Nam Hung commune, there is one female pond owner too. She is my cousin-in-law and somehow she is in the same situation as me. Her husband goes away and rarely comes home. She asked for my advice and I told her that she needs to stand up. It is miserable to have our lives depend on others. And as time passed, she has matured and she has made it.”



Near-shore Fishing by Boat

Fishing by boat has been the traditional role of men. In fishing families, the traditional roles of men and women are clear cut: men go fishing, and women prepare the net (which takes four to six hours), sell the fish, and take care of the paddy rice. During bad weather, the women assist their husbands. Because the work women do is unpaid and primarily for subsistence, both men and women consider men the main breadwinners of the family.

Very few among them have had the courage to break through the social norms and undertake this non-traditional role, but there are special cases where women are the primary breadwinners. The women realize that powerboats are not impossible for them to manage, and they can fish as well as men. Unfortunately, the number of these women is limited to one or two per village, and their experience and success has not been communicated broadly to the local communities.



A boat fisher family in Tien Hung commune.

Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hau (49 years old) from Dong Hung commune, born to be a farmer, married a fisherman. After some years of marriage, when her husband fell ill and could no longer fish, she took up the initiative to maintain their livelihood. Mrs. Hau decided to become a boat fisher because they would earn double or even triple as much as fishing by hand. She shares her experience:

“I thought women could do all the jobs that men could. My family’s boat was 15 horsepower whereas most of the boats in the village were just eight horsepower. It was big but I thought I had to give it a go and I made it. I came from the land so I was not knowledgeable about the water. And now, I can even go fishing at night time.

At the beginning, people talked behind my back but I knew how to deal with it. We live our own life, we do what we can do. At that time, I did not dare to dream of what I have achieved today. For me, it’s a question of attitude: if we say that we will try our best, then we can do what men can do. If women think they are women and cannot do what men do, they will not be able to do it. Our perception is the key. Before me, there was no female boat fisher. I was the first. Later, one of my sisters-in-law followed me and became a female boat fisher too.”



Clam Farming

Clam farming is new to the locals in Tien Lang district, but some hope it will significantly improve their income. For the local government, clam farming is still in its pilot phase, so the government has not signed any official contracts, nor does it collect taxes on the mudflats used for clam farming. Twelve pioneer households had sufficient capital to set up their nets (30 hectares per farm), as well as the technical knowledge and social networks to run a clam farm. Because of the huge initial investment required and high risk, they have typically organized their clam farms as corporations with multiple shareholders.

The establishment of clam farms is essentially a land claiming process that has marginalized the poor, especially women and girls, who do not have sufficient resources, networks, and knowledge to invest and appropriate their rights to use the mudflat. Moreover, the traditional access for gleaning marine products and for boat fishing has been reduced by the mudflat areas claimed by clam farms. Additionally, boat fishers argue that because the pillars used for establishing the clam area boundary do not rise sufficiently above high sea tide level, they can potentially cause serious damage to or even sink boats. There have been several cases where violence has broken out between clam farm guards and boat fishermen (see Figure 2). These conflicts will become more intense as the number of privatized mudflats for clam farms increase in the future. That said, villagers acknowledge the positive influence of the clam farms on the marine population in recent years, stating that clams provide food and attract more crabs and fish to the mangroves.

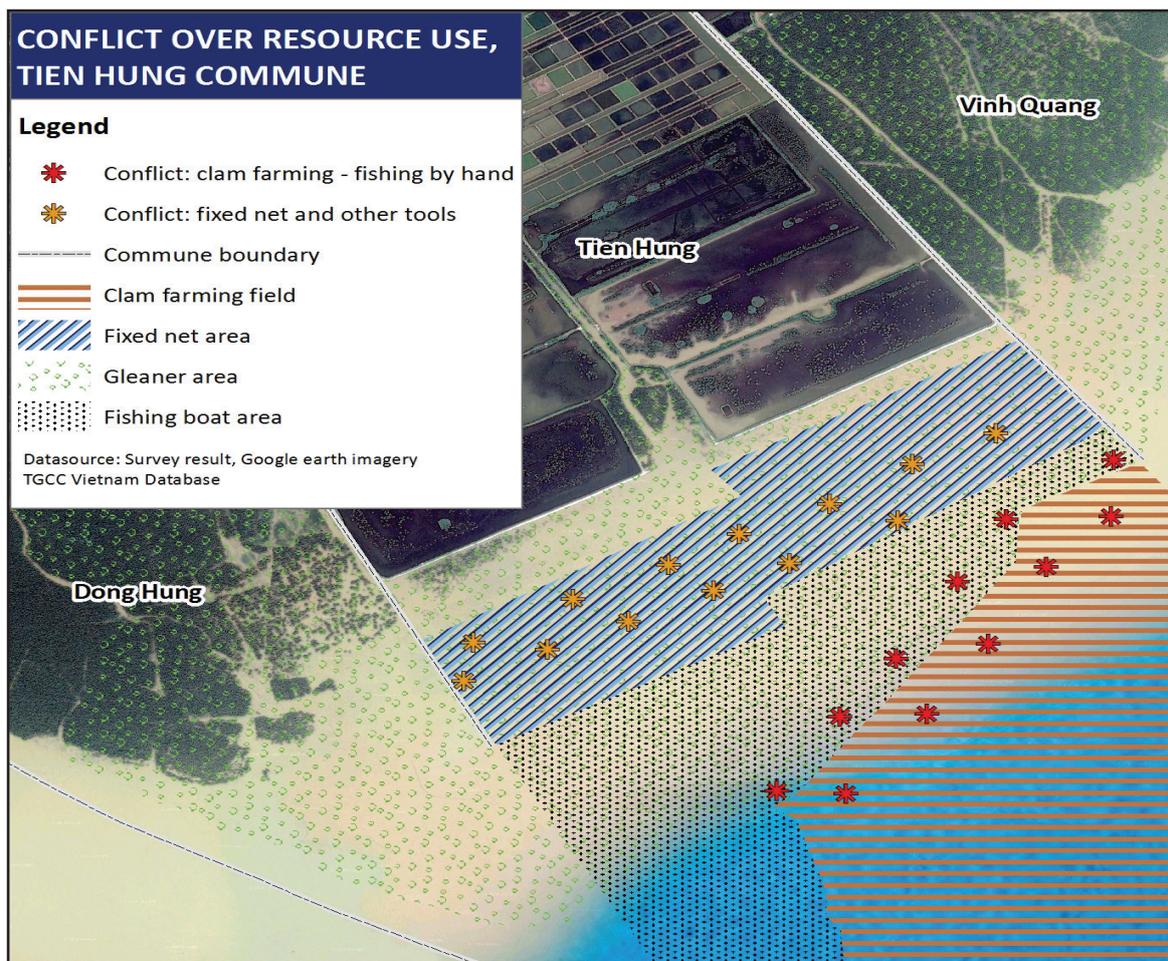


Figure 2: Natural resource use conflict map of Tien Hung commune. The red stars indicate sites of conflict between clam farmers and fishing-by-hand villagers.

In Tien Lang, at present men prevail in clam farming. With their large social networks, they are knowledgeable about the techniques, service providers, and potential customers, learning from other clam farmers in neighboring provinces. They initiate the investment (with the consent of their wives); learn the techniques; install nets, pillars, and guard houses; guard the clam farms; and, contact service providers and customers. Women are often recruited to distribute the clam seed in the mudflat and sort the clams after harvest. Currently, the clam farmers in Tien Lang tend to hire women from the neighboring provinces (Thai Binh and Nam Dinh) because they are more experienced and professional.

Within the male-dominated local clam farming emerges one special woman who stands out, having moved beyond the gendered constraints to learn the techniques and play an important role in the success of her family's clam farm.

Mrs. Pham Thi Bung (46 years old) is from Dong Hung commune. Her household started its 30-hectare clam farm one year ago with an initial investment of VND 5.4 billion (approximately USD 24,000). Unlike most women, who never participate in their household's clam farming, she is proud of her important role in selecting the clam seeds, and financial management. She shared:

"After we decided that we would invest in clam farming, I started to learn about clams from friends in Kien Thuy and Thai Binh who are our ferry passengers. They taught us how to select the clam shells, how to seed them and make monitoring sheets. It is very important because it influences the time to harvest and the price. My husband is in charge of hiring personnel and contacting customers because he knows many people. I can say that I am the only woman here working in clam farming."



Clam farm watch tower.

Women's Participation and Leadership in Mangrove Management

Women's role in mangrove planting

Women have had a significant role in the contemporary history of mangrove planting in Tien Lang. Since 1945, Tien Lang has extended its sea dikes outwards three times to claim more land and establish new communes, including Dong Hung (1986) and Tien Hung (1993). Women, shouldering the effort with men, have worked hard to improve the soil for agriculture and create ponds for aquaculture. Mangrove planting has been promoted since the mid-1990s with funds from the Vietnamese government and non-government organizations such as Japanese Action for Mangrove Restoration (ACTMANG) and the Vietnamese Red Cross.

The Women's Union (WU), with its hierarchical system from the central level to the village level, has been extensively involved in the process of planting mangroves in Tien Lang. Initially, ACTMANG approached the WU in the mid-1990s to carry out planting projects. Later, as the WU became technically proficient, it became the key implementing partner for subsequent Vietnam Red Cross and World Vision projects as well, focusing not only on mangrove planting but also on raising awareness among the communities about the multiple benefits of mangroves.

It is widely acknowledged in Tien Lang that the WU is an effective mass organization in regards to mangrove planting and management. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Thoan, Deputy Chair of Dong Hung commune Women's Union, said, "The year before last, Dong Hung commune was assigned a mangrove planting project. The authorities asked the Commune Farmers' Union to plant 40 ha of mangrove but they said they could not do so. In the end, the commune Women's Union took up the responsibilities. In Vinh Quang commune, the mangrove planters have also been women."

Even where projects assign mangrove planting tasks to other organizations and enterprises, most of the implementers have been women. A women's group discussion in Dong Hung commune noted, "Women are the main human resource for mangrove planting. We are enthusiastic and responsible because what we are doing will benefit our next generations....About 80% of the current mangroves were planted by women."

Initially, women received technical training from provincial forestry experts or project specialists, such as those from ACTMANG. Now they have technical proficiency and the ability to provide mangrove planting training to others. They are proud of the quality of their work – in group discussion in Dong Hung commune, they said, "At first, we just made holes and grew crabapple mangroves (bản chua) seedling in the beds but later we recognized that if we did not use sticks to hold up the seedlings, the waves would wrench them out or the sea wrack could get tangled in the plant causing them to die. Learning from experience, we used 1.2 m sticks tightened to each seedling by bamboo string. After one year, when we came back, the plants were growing very well. If they are not damaged by fishing activities or storms, the survival rate could be as high as 90%."

By mastering the planting techniques, local women have controlled the seedling nursery process. Several households in the district (largely those with aquaculture ponds) have a business raising mangrove seedlings with mainly female workers who collect the seeds from the mangroves, germinate them, and pot the plants. The quality of the local seedlings is high, not only for local use but also to meet the demands of other districts and provinces.

Women's Leadership at the Commune and District Levels

Despite their significant contribution to mangrove planting, women's participation in decision-making and leadership in mangrove management is very limited. At the commune level within Vietnam, the average percentage of female members of the Commune People's Committee (CPC) is lower than 30%. Most of them are assigned with "women's privileged tasks" such as education, health, and culture. No women serve as land officers. Women in decision-making positions are a minority. In Tien Lang's three communes, there are only two female deputy chairwomen of the CPC (one in Tien Hung and one in Vinh Quang), and female heads of villages and hamlets are very rare. These facts are explained by the heavy burden of childbirth and child raising roles, which are traditionally associated with women; migration of young educated women to urban and industrial areas; traditional discriminatory attitudes against women; and, insufficient institutional measures and incentives by the government to empower women.

Gender prejudice towards women has been a crucial factor hindering women's leadership. The expressions "oh, they women" or "men are as shallow as the well, women are as deep as the dish" still prevail in the communities that consider women to have lower capacity and status when compared with men. Some men use these prejudices to discredit the contribution of women or to disempower them. Though society has been changing quickly with significant transformation of women's roles both in society and in households, traditional gender norms still persist. While women participate more and more in production and social work, the social standard of expectation remains "good wives and good mothers" and women are expected to perform domestic chores, educate children, and generally take care of family members. There have been famous propaganda campaigns of the Women's Union over the decades promoting such standards, including the campaigns "Study Actively, Work Creatively, Raise Children Well and Build Happy Families" and "Good at Career, Good at Housework."

Nguyen Thi Thiep (48 years old), Chairwoman of Tien Hung commune's Women's Union for nearly two decades tried to explain the lack of female village



Ms. Nguyen Thi Thiep, chairwoman of Tien Hung's Women's Union is opening the "Managing our Coasts and Mangroves Together" workshop at the commune level.

heads as follows: “Village heads are very busy so even if they [women] are selected, I am not sure that they will take the position because the allowance for village heads is low and the women themselves are busy with their housework. A female village head in Dong Hung shared with me that if she became village head, she could not contribute to family income. Taking the village head position would be only to realize our passions and fulfil our responsibilities to society. No woman of working age wants to be the village head because they need to earn a living, take care of the children, and many other things. In rural life nowadays, women have become the main breadwinner like men, they are not supplemental anymore.”

With accelerating urbanization and industrialization in Vietnam, most young educated women leave their villages to work in factories and cities. The remaining are mainly mothers of young children or aged women who do not have much education.

Nguyen Thi Thoan, 48, Deputy Chairwoman of Dong Hung commune’s Women’s Union (also a former village head) observed that, “Young women do not want to become village heads because: firstly, the village head has to face a lot of hardship; secondly, they have to deal with many negative aspects of village life; and thirdly there are companies recruiting them for easier jobs with better benefits (four to five million VND per month). If a woman wants to be a village head, she needs to be strong and courageous to face all the issues. You need to dare to think and dare to act. Old women lack the capacity while educated women in their 30s do not want to do it. Mrs. Nghi, for example, is 53 years old but is still in charge of youth activities in the village because no young people want to do it.”

Despite all these developments, women are increasingly taking on leadership positions. There is growing acknowledgement that women are more responsible and capable than men in leadership positions. Even when there are “favorite” male candidates, women still receive high vote levels. There is evidence that if women are given a chance to fulfill these roles, they will gain the recognition of both villagers and local authorities for their efforts and valuable contributions. As a result, they are starting to be elected to positions as hamlet and village heads.

Mrs. Duong Thi Nghi (54 years old) has been the village head of Xuan Hung in Dong Hung commune since October 2016. When the former village head was dismissed over misconduct related to agricultural land reallocation, she was persuaded to participate in the election with the hope that she would create changes in the village. She received 98.7 percent of the votes. She said:



“I am very happy that most people voted for me. At the beginning, there were a lot of difficulties but with my enthusiasm, I worked out solutions with the villagers and proposed them to the commune authorities. I am happy that I can do something for my village. I think that the village head is the bridge between the villagers and the commune authorities to put forward what the villagers know and need. My strength is that I am sensitive to what people think, and good at explaining and negotiating. As such, people feel more comfortable with my solutions.

For example, in the past, hamlet no.9 was said to be difficult for collecting fees and contributions. But after I explained to the villagers that the fee would be used to invest in the bridge and sewage system of the village, most of them contributed. I remember one day when I visited the rice fields, someone told me that: ‘Mrs. Nghi, you should join the election for the next period, we will support you.’ And then a lady said: ‘Oh my, how could she do that, it must be her husband. What kind of capacity she has to be able to do it!’ But later on, when the lady came to me and refused to contribute some fees, I answered her questions in detail and showed her the cash book. At the end, she paid everything, even the fees that her household owed during the time of the former village head. Now I get more praise than complaints.”

A male village head with four female hamlet heads in his village also affirms the growing role of women as hamlet heads. Mr. Nguyen Van Thoan (44 years old) has been the village head of Duyen Hai village in Tien Hung commune since 2011. He noted:

“My village has four female hamlet heads. Frankly speaking, women can manage multiple tasks more effectively than men. Hamlet heads have a lot of work like communicating to villagers about the seed varieties, cultivation calendar, etc. Though the job is hard with a low allowance, the female hamlet heads are very enthusiastic. For men, they pay more attention to the income aspect of the job. If they go to the sea half a day to fish, they can easily get a hundred thousand dong while if they attend a meeting, they may get only about twenty thousand. On the other hand, women think both about the income and the responsibilities for the common good. As such, villagers voted for women as the hamlet heads in my village.”



It is becoming clear that it requires a group of women working in committees together to create real change. In communes where women form a collaborative part of the decision-making group, their voices will be better heard and their needs will be considered more equally with other priorities. Take the case of Tien Hung commune, which has the highest rate of female members in the CPC within the district at 33%. Thanks to the fact that there is one deputy chairwoman and five other female members, it is possible to create alliances. Where there is only one woman in any committee, she usually faces constant obstacles.

Conclusion

Based on this brief's findings, it is clear that women and men have different types of access, use and management rights to key natural resources within the coastal landscape of Tien Lang district. Since women are major gleaners within mangroves and mudflats, the effects of economic reforms as well as growing privatization of the coastal common-access areas have meant that they often suffer from having to travel further to glean or have to negotiate access with those who are informally privatizing the commons.

At the same time, women have played a leading role in planting and protecting mangroves within different projects since the mid-1990s. It is recognized by all that increasing mangrove cover has brought many benefits to the community including coastal protection and increasing aquatic productivity.

In recent years, women are increasingly being elected to key positions within hamlets, villages and commune levels. There is growing recognition that women possess significant skills and capabilities in carrying out public service roles, and as such, their influence and authority is likely to grow. It is anticipated that, over time, this will have a tangible effect in terms of ensuring greater gender equality both in coastal resource use as well as in opportunities for engaging in profitable entrepreneurial activity.

