



ACIAR Project FST/2016/151
"Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia"

Case Study 2

**Gender and employment in the Burapha plywood factory,
Hin Heup District, Vientiane Province, Lao PDR.**



Mr Stuart Ling,
Dr Khamtan Phonetip,

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Acronyms

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
ADB	Asian Development Bank
BAFCO	Burapha Agro-forestry Company
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FFS	Faculty of Forest Science
ILO	International Labour Organization
LAK	Lao Kip
LSB	Lao Statistics Bureau
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
NUoL	National University of Lao PDR
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PMO	Prime Minister's Order
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
THB	Thai Baht
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
VALTIP3	Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia
WGEA	Workplace Gender Equality Agency

Executive Summary

Background

Plantation forest industries in Lao PDR are supported by ACIAR Project FST/2016/151 “Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia”, or VALTIP3. One of the planned impact pathways of VALTIP3 is:

Improved livelihoods of plantation growers, and greater and more secure opportunities for employment in the plantation wood processing sector.

This research study which was facilitated by one of VALTIP3’s partner organisations, the Faculty of Forest Sciences (FFS) within the National University of Lao PDR (NUoL), was completed with the cooperation of the Burapha plywood processing mill, Hin Huep district, Vientiane province.

Key findings in relation to the research questions

1. What are the social-economic profiles of male and female employees at the Burapha plywood factory in Hin Heup?

Women represent 66% of machine operators/labourers on the factory floor and 50% of those working as supervisors. Male and female employees are predominantly ethnic Lao, aged in their twenties (average 27.7 for women and 25.6 for men) and may be either single or married. Both men and women are employed on permanent contracts in accordance with the Lao law, which provides them with additional benefits such as annual/maternity/sick leave and social security compared to workers in other manufacturing industries.

2. What is the likely effect of this employment on household livelihoods for men and women?

The high demand for employment at the mill from those in surrounding villages reflects the desire for regular, off-farm income to meet the needs of a modern lifestyle. While some mill workers reported that their motive for employment was because they had insufficient land for farm livelihoods, there were others who had relatively secure farm incomes. Mill employment may be providing a pathway out of ‘hands-on’ labour intensive farming to a hybrid situation in which farm income is also derived from land rental to Chinese investors and rubber sharecropping (or ‘hands off’ farming).

3. How can the gender balance of the Lao wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?

This study highlights the importance of women to the Lao wood industry, where they are particularly valued for their attention to detail in finishing tasks. In contrast to the Paklay case study¹ however, the high level of mechanisation and the commitment by Burapha management to training and gender equality has meant that women have been employed in almost all roles within the mill (the exception is skilled maintenance). This meant that the incomes for women are equivalent to those of men. Permanent contracts and the benefits they provide for women under the Lao law (including

¹ A summary of this study is provided in Annex 1.

maternity leave, social insurance) have contributed to a high level of satisfaction amongst women employees.

Implications of this study

Like Paklay, this study presents an alternative perspective to other employment studies in Lao PDR² by examining the transition that ordinary local women are making from a farming to wage labour livelihood. For the Lao government, it highlights the potential of wood industries to generate rural employment and the importance of attracting quality investors that have the capacity to provide working conditions in line with the Lao law. Reducing unnecessary transaction costs and procedures for growers and industry would encourage more investment in tree planting and wood processing. This study has particular implications for the FFS and other vocational training providers, since it highlights the demand for capable graduates in wood processing. As more plantations come on line and more processing facilities are established, a career in private sector forestry becomes an attractive proposition for both men and women.

The apparently greater role that women play in wood processing in Laos raises the question of why similar mills in Australia employ so few women (17.3% according to the latest WGEA figures³) despite also being highly mechanised. According to the Business Council of Australia, (2013), the main incentives that help drive employee retention are workplace flexibility, breastfeeding facilities, return to work programs and parental and carers leave provisions. The issue of flexibility is interesting, because Australian workers are predominantly from nuclear, rather than extended, families– the role of extended families in being able to provide the flexibility and childcare that women need to participate in the workforce appears to be an important factor in the high proportion of women in the Lao wood processing industry compared to Australia– this is an area worthy of further research.

² Which have focussed on young migrant workers and their remittances.

³ Workplace Gender Equality Agency

ບົດສັງລວມຫຍໍ້:

ຄວາມເປັນມາ

ອຸດສະຫະກຳປູກໄມ້ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ໄດ້ຮັບການສະໜັບສະໜູນ ແລະ ສົ່ງເສີມໂດຍ ສູນຄົ້ນຄວ້າກະສິກຳສາກົນ ຂອງ ປະເທດອົດສະຕາລີ (ACIAR) ຜ່ານໂຄງການ “Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia” , or VALTIP3. ໜຶ່ງໃນແຜນງານຂອງໂຄງການແມ່ນ ເພື່ອປັບປຸງຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງ ປະຊາຊົນຜູ້ປູກໄມ້ ໃຫ້ດີຂຶ້ນ ແລະ ເພື່ອຮັບປະກັນທາງດ້ານໂອກາດສ້າງວຽກເຮັດງານທຳ ໃນຂົງເຂດຂະແໜງການອຸດສະຫະ ກຳປູກໄມ້.

ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າຄັ້ງນີ້ ແມ່ນພາຍໃຕ້ການຮ່ວມມືກັບ ຄູ່ຮ່ວມງານຂອງໂຄງການ ເຊັ່ນ: ຄະນະວິທະຍາສາດປ່າໄມ້ ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລແຫ່ງຊາດລາວ. ໄດ້ດຳເນີນການເກັບກຳຂໍ້ມູນ ໃນໂຮງງານຜະລິດໄມ້ອັດ ຂອງບໍລິສັດບົວລະພາ ທີ່ຕັ້ງຢູ່ ເມືອງ ຫີນເຫີບ ແຂວງວຽງຈັນ.

ຜົນໄດ້ຮັບຈາກການສຶກສາ

1. ສະຖານະພາບທາງດ້ານເສດຖະກິດ ແລະ ສັງຄົມຂອງ ເພດຍິງ ແລະ ເພດຊາຍ?ທີ່ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ ໂຮງງານຜະລິດ ໄມ້ອັດ ເປັນຄືແນວໃດ?

ແມ່ຍິງທີ່ເຮັດວຽກກ່ຽວກັບການນຳໃຊ້ເຄື່ອງຈັກກວມເອົາ 66% ແລະ ອີກ 55% ແມ່ນເຮັດໜ້າທີ່ເປັນຫົວໜ້າສາຍງານການ ຜະລິດ. ພະນັກງານ ຍິງ ແລະ ຊາຍ ສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ແມ່ນຄົນທ້ອງຖິ່ນ ທີ່ມີອາຍຸສະເລ່ຍ 27.7 ປີ (ຊາຍ) ແລະ ຍິງ ແມ່ນ 25.6 ປີ ເຊິ່ງລວມທັງຜູ້ທີ່ແຕ່ງງານ ແລະ ສະຖານະໂສດ. ທັງເພດຍິງ ແລະ ເພດຊາຍແມ່ນເຮັດວຽກພາຍໃຕ້ການສັນຍາແບບ ຖາວອນ ໂດຍສອດຄ່ອງກັບກົດໝາຍຂອງ ສປປ ລາວ ເພື່ອໃຫ້ເຂົາເຈົ້າມີສິດໃນການພັກຊືດເຊີຍ ເຊັ່ນ: ລາພັກປະຈຳປີ, ພັກ ເກີດລູກ, ພັກປ່ວຍໄຂ້ ຄືກັບນະໂຍບາຍຂອງບໍລິສັດອື່ນໆ ຕໍ່ກັບພະນັກງານ.

2. ຜົນກະທົບຈາກການເຮັດວຽກຕໍ່ກັບຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງ ເພດຍິງ ແລະ ເພດຊາຍເປັນຄືແນວໃດ?

ຄວາມຕ້ອງການຂອງປະຊາຊົນທີ່ຢູ່ອ້ອມຂ້າງ ທີ່ຢາກເຮັດວຽກໃນໂຮງງານ ຖືວ່າສູງ, ການເຮັດວຽກປ່ຽນຈາກວິຖີ ເຮັດສວນ ມາສ້າງລາຍຮັບຈາກວິຖີທີ່ທັນສະໄໝກວ່າ. ພະນັກງານບາງຄົນອ້າງວ່າ ຕົນເອງຕ້ອງໄດ້ມາປ່ຽນວຽກ ເນື່ອງຈາກບໍ່ມີທີ່ດິນພຽງ ພໍເພື່ອເຮັດການກະສິກຳ ຄືກັບຜູ້ອື່ນໆທີ່ສາມາດສ້າງລາຍຮັບຈາກການກະສິກຳ. ການຈ້າງງານຂອງໂຮງງານອາດຈະຊ່ວຍໃຫ້ ສາມາດອອກຈາກວິຖີການກະສິກຳ ໄປສູ່ສະຖານະທີ່ໄວຂຶ້ນ (ໂດຍບໍ່ຈຳເປັນຕ້ອງໄດ້ເຮັດດ້ວຍຕົນເອງ) ໂດຍລາຍໄດ້ຂອງ ກະສິກຳຍັງມາຈາກການໃຫ້ເຊົ່າທີ່ດິນໃຫ້ກັບນັກລົງທຶນຈີນ ແລະ ການປູກພືດສວນຢາງພາລາຮ່ວມກັນ (ກະສິກຳ ທີ່ບໍ່ໄດ້ ລົງມືເຮັດເອງ).

3. ຄວາມເທົ່າທຽມກັນ ຂອງບົດບາດຍິງ-ຊາຍ ໃນຂະແໜງການອຸດສະຫະກຳໄມ້ຈະສາມາດປັບປຸງບົດບາດຂອງ ແມ່ຍິງໄດ້ແນວໃດ?

ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າຄັ້ງນີ້ ຊີ້ໃຫ້ເຫັນຄວາມສຳຄັນຂອງ ແມ່ຍິງ ໃນຂະແໜງການອຸດສະຫະກຳປູກໄມ້, ເຊິ່ງສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ແລ້ວແມ່ນວຽກ ລະອຽດອ່ອນ ແລະ ປານິດ ໃນສາຍງານການຜະລິດຂັ້ນສຸດທ້າຍ (Finishing task) ໂດຍສະເພາະ ກໍລະນີສຶກສາ ຢູ່ ເມືອງ ປາກລາຍ ແຕ່ໃນທາງກົງກັນຂ້າມ ຢູ່ບໍລິສັດບົວລະພາ ສຳລັບເພດຍິງແມ່ນໄດ້ຮັບການຈ້າງງານໃນທຸກຂົງເຂດສາຍງານ ຢ່າງເທົ່າ ທຽມກັນລະຫວ່າງຍິງ ແລະ ຊາຍ ຈົນເຖິງລະດັບການຄຸ້ມຄອງ ແລະ ຈັດການໂຮງງານ (ຍົກເວັ້ນວຽກງານບຳລຸງຮັກສາເຄື່ອງ

ຈັກ). ນັ້ນໝາຍຄວາມວ່າ, ແມ່ຍິງມີລາຍຮັບທຽບເທົ່າກັບເພດຊາຍ. ການເຮັດວຽກພາຍໃຕ້ການສັນຍາແບບຖາວອນ ໂດຍສອດຄ່ອງກັບກົດໝາຍຂອງ ສປປ ລາວ ເພື່ອໃຫ້ເຂົາເຈົ້າມີສິດໃນການພັກຊົດເຊີຍ ເຊັ່ນ: ລາພັກປະຈຳປີ, ພັກເກີດລູກ, ພັກປ່ວຍໄຂ້ ສິ່ງດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ ເຮັດໃຫ້ ພະນັກງານແມ່ຍິງມີຄວາມເພິ່ງພໍໃຈໃນລະດັບສູງສົມຄວນ.

ຜົນສະທ້ອນຂອງການສຶກສາ

ກໍລະນີຜົນໄດ້ຮັບຈາກການສຶກສາຢູ່ ເມືອງປາກລາຍ ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນເຖິງຄວາມແຕກຕ່າງ ກ່ຽວກັບການຈ້າງງານ ເມື່ອສົມທຽບກັບ ກໍລະນີການສຶກສາອື່ນໆ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ໂດຍການພິຈາລະນາການຫັນປ່ຽນ ແມ່ຍິງທ້ອງຖິ່ນທີ່ຫັນຈາກການເຮັດກະສິກຳມາເປັນວິຖີການຈ້າງແຮງງານ. ສຳລັບພາກລັດ ເຫັນວ່າ ນີ້ເປັນໂອກາດສຳລັບການສ້າງວຽກເຮັດງານທຳໃຫ້ແກ່ທ້ອງຖິ່ນໃນຂະແໜງອຸດສາຫະກຳໄມ້ ເພື່ອດຶງດູດ ນັກລົງທຶນທີ່ມີຄຸນນະພາບ ທີ່ມີຄວາມອາດສາມາດທີ່ຈະດຳເນີນເງື່ອນໄຂການເຮັດວຽກໃຫ້ສອດຄ່ອງກັບກົດໝາຍຂອງ ສປປ ລາວ. ຫຼຸດຜ່ານຄ່າໃຊ້ຈ່າຍ ທາງດ້ານທຸລະກຳ ແລະ ຂັ້ນຕອນຕ່າງໆ ສຳລັບຜູ້ປຸກໄມ້ ແລະ ອຸດສາຫະກຳໄມ້ ເພື່ອສົ່ງເສີມນັກລົງທຶນໃຫ້ຫຼາຍຂຶ້ນ ໃນດ້ານການປຸກໄມ້ ແລະ ການປຸງແຕ່ງໄມ້. ຜົນການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ ສະທ້ອນໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າ ສະຖາບັນການສຶກສາ ເຊັ່ນ: ຄະນະວິທະຍາສາດປ່າໄມ້ ແລະ ສູນຝຶກອົບຮົມທາງດ້ານສີມືແຮງງານ ເປັນຈຸດທີ່ຕ້ອງການສ້າງຄວາມອາດສາມາດ ໃຫ້ແກ່ນັກສຶກສາທີ່ຮຽນຈົບດ້ານ ການປຸງແຕ່ງໄມ້. ເມື່ອມີປ່າປຸກຫຼາຍ ການປຸງແຕ່ງກໍ່ຕ້ອງໄດ້ຖືກສ້າງຕັ້ງຂຶ້ນ ເຊິ່ງນຳໄປສູ່ການສ້າງວຽກເຮັດງານທຳໃນຂົງເຂດວຽກເອກະຊົນ ເຊິ່ງຈະນຳໄປສູ່ຄວາມສົນໃຈໃນການເຮັດວຽກຂອງ ເພດຍິງ ແລະ ຊາຍ.

ດັ່ງທີ່ພວກເຮົາເຫັນແລ້ວວ່າ ບົດບາດຂອງແມ່ຍິງ ທີ່ເຮັດວຽກໃນຂະແໜງການປຸງແຕ່ງໄມ້ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ມີການເພີ່ມຂຶ້ນ ເຊິ່ງກໍ່ໃຫ້ເກີດຄຳຖາມວ່າ: ເປັນຫຍັງການຈ້າງງານຂອງເພດຍິງໃນຂະແໜງການດັ່ງກ່າວຢູ່ປະເທດອິດສະຕາລີຈຶ່ງມີອັດຕາຕໍ່າກວ່າ (17.3% ອີງຕາມຂໍ້ມູນ WGEA) ເຖິງວ່າຈະມີເຄື່ອງຈັກທີ່ທັນສະໄໝກວ່າກໍ່ຕາມ. ອີງຕາມ ສະພາບທຸລະກິດຂອງປະເທດອິດສະຕາລີ (2013), ແຮງຈູງໃຈຕົ້ນຕໍທີ່ຊ່ວຍຊຸກຍູ້ການຮັກສາພະນັກງານແມ່ນຄວາມຍືດຫຍຸ່ນ ກ່ຽວກັບບ່ອນເຮັດວຽກ, ສະຖານທີ່ອ່ານວຍຄວາມດວກການໃຫ້ນິມລູກ, ການກັບຄືນໄປເຮັດວຽກ ແລະ ນະໂຍບາຍລາພັກໄປເບິ່ງແຍງພໍ່ແມ່. ບັນຫາດັ່ງກ່າວນີ້ ເປັນທີ່ໜ້າສົນໃຈຫຼາຍ ເນື່ອງຈາກວ່າ ສະຖານະພາບຄອບຄົວຂອງຄົນ ປະເທດອິດສະຕາລີ ສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ເປັນຄອບຄົວດ່ຽວ ຕ່າງຈາກ ຄອບຄົວທີ່ມີສະມາຊິກຫຼາຍຄົນ. ບົດບາດຂອງຄອບຄົວ ທີ່ມີສະມາຊິກຫຼາຍຄົນ ຄືເຫດຜົນທີ່ຕ້ອງການຄວາມຍືດຫຍຸ່ນ ແລະ ການລ້ຽງດູລູກທີ່ແມ່ຍິງຕ້ອງການເຂົ້າຮ່ວມໃນກຳລັງແຮງງານ ປະກົດວ່າເປັນປັດໄຈສຳຄັນຂອງອັດຕາສ່ວນຂອງແມ່ຍິງໃນອຸດສາຫະກຳປຸງແຕ່ງໄມ້ຂອງລາວທີ່ສູງເມື່ອທຽບກັບອິດສະຕາລີ - ນີ້ແມ່ນຂອດທີ່ສົມຄວນສືບຕໍ່ຄົ້ນຄ້ວາຕື່ມອີກ.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

This is the second case study on rural employment and gender undertaken by the staff and students of the Faculty of Forest Science (FFS), National University of Laos (NUoL), which is a partner of ACIAR Project FST/2016/151 “Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia”, or VALTIP3 (2017-2022). Like the first case study (Ling et al, 2021), which was completed with the cooperation of the Huamchai teak processing factory in Paklay, Xayaboury, this case study addresses two of the research questions stated in the VALTIP3 project document:

1. What are the factors (including private sector engagement) which need to be in place to achieve significantly higher levels of viable domestic downstream processing to increase the contribution to economic growth, employment generation and greater participation in industry?
2. How can the gender balance of the Lao plantation and wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?

While the Paklay study focussed on female workers, this study also surveys male workers to better understand gender differences in employment and livelihoods.

1.2 Hin Heup district and the Burapha plywood mill

Hin Heup is a rural district located in Vientiane province, about 80 km north of the national capital Vientiane, and is readily accessible along the recently constructed expressway that links Vientiane with Vang Vieng and the newly opened Chinese funded Boten-Vientiane railway. The district has three main ethnic groups being ethnic Lao⁴, Khmu and Hmong, of which ethnic Lao make up the majority in villages surrounding the mill along the Nam Lik valley, while Khmu and Hmong are concentrated on sloping lands further from the district centre.

⁴ The ethnic Lao are the majority ethnic group in Lao PDR, and dominate in the valleys of the Mekong River and its tributaries.

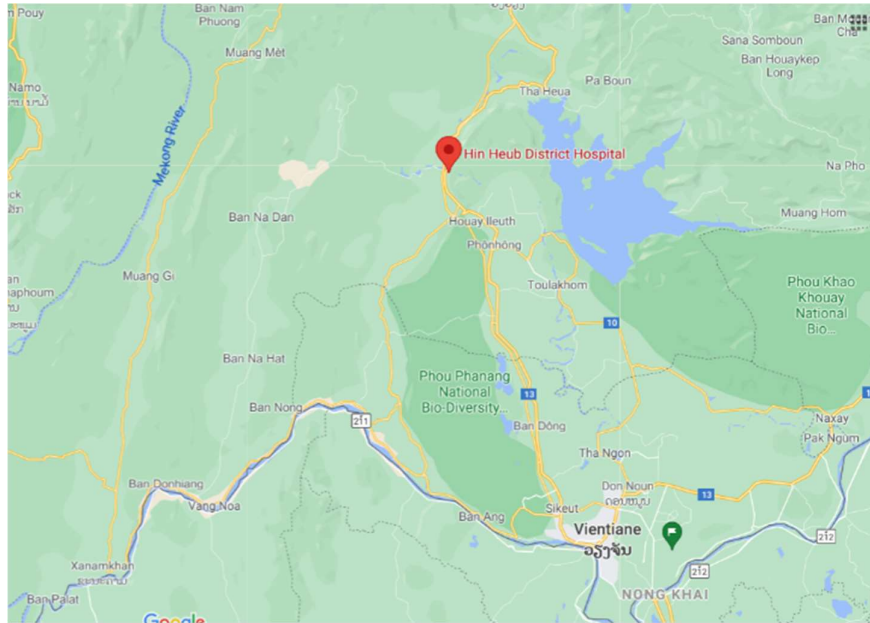


Figure 1: Research location in relation to Vientiane

Established in 1990, the Burapha Agro-forestry Company (BAFCO or simply Burapha⁵) is a Lao Swedish plantation and wood products manufacturing company with its own plantations. Its plywood mill in Hin Heup district began production in the first half of 2021 with an intake of between 130,000 and 192,000 m³/year of raw material, or between 700 and 1,000 ha of mature eucalypts/year. With a planned rotation period of seven years, the mill needs a total estate of 7,000 ha.

Once fully operational and working 24 hours/day, the mill will employ about 360 people, of whom about 60% are expected to be women⁶. Apart from BAFCO, key employers in Hin Heup are the cement factory (about 100 people), two rubber processors, an agarwood (*Aquilaria*) processor and a cassava starch factory.

1.3 Specific research questions

The two broad research questions from the Project Document (Section 1.1) are further developed into three specific research questions for this study as follows:

1. *What are the social-economic profiles of male and female employees at the Burapha plywood factory in Hin Heup?*

Question 1 seeks gender disaggregated data of Burapha's factory workers by ethnicity, age, household size and educational attainment. These characteristics will be used in the contextual analysis of the impact of this employment on household livelihoods (Question 2) and in understanding ways in which the role of women may be enhanced (Question 3).

⁵ Both terms are used in this report.

⁶ At the time of writing the mill employed 204 people, of whom 112 were female.

2. What is the likely effect of this employment on household livelihoods, for men and women?

This question seeks to understand existing and potential livelihood changes due to employment in the mill, by considering household income and expenditure within the wider farm economy.

3. How can the gender balance of the Lao wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?

This question considers the gender balance and role of women within the context of the permanent employment contracts provide to Hin Heup mill workers. It will thus provide a contrast to the Paklay case study, which identified several areas in which women felt less satisfied due to the casual nature of their employment.

The three questions are quite similar (or the same in the case of Question 3) to those asked during the first case study, which will allow the team to compare and contrast the two cases. For reference, a summary of the Paklay findings is given in Section 2.4.

1.4 Structure of this report

This report is structured as follows. Section 2 is a literature review. Rather than repeating common elements of the Paklay study, it examines the feminization of labour and wood processing more broadly in the South-east Asian context.

Section 3 presents the quantitative and qualitative methods used in this research and their potential limitations. Section 4 presents the analysed data and discusses it in relation to the literature, the research questions and the Paklay study, while Section 5 draws conclusions and their implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Female industrial workers in South-east Asia

The feminization of the industrial workforce in South-east Asia is historically linked to the growth of foreign direct investment (FDI) to produce labour intensive consumer goods for international markets (Tran, 2019; Kaur, 2004). Beginning in the 1970's, more developed economies such as Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia introduced favourable policies such as Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to attract investment and absorb workers that had been displaced from agriculture due to population growth and mechanisation. In the 1990's, less developed nations with low labour costs such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos also began to attract investors with their own export-oriented manufacturing policies.

The international literature tends to focus on young and exploited migrant female garment workers who struggle between the demands/expectations of supporting their natal households versus experiencing freedom and modernity as part of the industrial labour force (McKay and McKenzie, 2020; Anner, 2019; Mills 1997). Recruiting women has enabled employers to build their competitive advantage since they are believed to possess gender-specific skills and "attributes" such as dexterity, docility, submissiveness, and reluctance to join unions, which made them suitable for certain gender-typed jobs in areas such as textile and apparel, small electronics and food processing (Tran, 2018; Elson & Pearson, 1981). Women are considered to be more manipulable than men, being

easier to let go at times of low demand, particularly in SEZ's where working conditions may not follow national standards (Kaur, 2004). Women are further constrained by gender role conformity (the preferences and expectations of both women and men in the labour market) as well as social expectations of a greater number of hours of unpaid work on household chores and care provision (ILO, 2017).

2.2 Women and wood processing in SE Asia and Australia

Limited studies available on the wood-processing sector in SEA suggests that it is also structured around gender roles. Indonesian paper giant Asia Pulp and Paper (APP) reports that women only constituted 6% of their workforce in 2021 (APP, 2021) which they attribute to operating “in a sector that has traditionally employed a high proportion of males.” Purnomo et al. (2011) report that women are concentrated on finishing tasks such as sanding, painting and varnishing in the Indonesian teak furniture industry, but only earn half the wages of their male counterparts despite working full-time: this is partly attributable to their need to combine their work with domestic duties which limits their mobility.

In Vietnam, women in the wood production and processing sectors are remunerated up to 60 percent less than men, even for similar jobs, since they are concentrated in the informal sector which has less job security and lower representation in trade associations (Forest Trends, 2019). Forest Trends consider that the underlying cause of this gender inequity is prevailing cultural attitudes which often discourage women from participating in meetings or having stronger decision-making influence.

Women's employment in wood processing in Australia is also low compared to men. ABARES (2015) reports that women represented only 18% of forest industry workers in 2011, with the majority of this group performing clerical and administrative functions (44%) rather than manual ones (14%). In 2019/2020, the proportion of women in the Wood Product Manufacturing Sector was 17.3%, according to data from Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), compared to a figure 50.5% for the total workforce (WGEA, 2021).

2.3 Rural women and wage employment in Lao PDR

The majority of the Lao population, which comprises 50 recognised ethnic groups, relies upon agriculture for their livelihoods (FAO, 2018). However, poverty is more than three times higher in rural areas than in urban ones due to factors that include poor infrastructure, low education attainment and a high proportion of ethnic minorities: poverty rates are particularly high for households in which farming is the sole source of income (LSB and World Bank, 2020).

The need to supplement farm income with wage labour is well recognised by rural people, and thousands migrate every year for wage labour both domestically and abroad – in Thailand alone there are 224,000 documented Lao workers as well as many more that are undocumented, of which women make up the majority (ILO, 2021). Many migrants do not return to the family farm, with the percentage of the farming workforce dropping from 77% in 2010 to only 69% in 2020 (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2021).

The prevalence of women, and particularly young women under 25 in the migration figures highlight the social norms in many Lao communities, in which women are encouraged (indeed take it upon

themselves) to seek off-farm income to support the household, while men stay behind to work on the farm (Moglia et al., 2020). The majority ethnic Lao⁷ are matrilineal, which means that it is customary for sons-in-law to move to the family home of the wife, and for the youngest daughter to inherit the family agricultural land/home in return for caring for her parents in their old age (ADB, 2012). In general, this gives ethnic Lao women a notable degree of freedom compared to patrilineal societies such as Hmong and Khmu, in which men control household assets and strictly limit the movements of their spouses. While this historical pattern is changing with modernisation and development, it is still evident in many rural communities⁸.

Despite this freedom, disparities in access to education and training opportunities may limit the ability of women to advance professionally, compared to men (FAO, 2018; Estudillo et al. 2013). Phouxay and Tollefsen (2011:433) observed that even though female garment workers “increased their skills over time, they did not see it translated into higher wages or better work conditions or prospects of professional advancement.” Traditional gender norms and patriarchal structures that prioritize household tasks and family/child care may also stifle workforce participation (FAO, 2018; Suyavong, 2019).

2.4 Women and employment in the Lao plantation processing sector

Historically, most Lao timber was harvested from native forests before being exported to neighbouring countries either as roundwood or in a semi-processed state. The number of employees was low and the work was heavy, resulting in few opportunities for female employment (UNIDO, 2016). In 2016, Prime Minister’s Order PMO15 was promulgated, under which a pre-existing moratorium on harvesting of production forest areas (native forest) was strengthened and further measures were introduced to reduce illegal logging, round log exports were prohibited and domestic processing to finished or near-finished products was promoted to boost local employment in value adding activities. This order resulted in ‘structural adjustment’ of the wood processing sector; the number of wood processing and manufacturing facilities in Laos decreased from over 2700 prior to PMO15, to around 1,152 in December 2020. The government also targeted for closure small family wood processing businesses, which reduced from 1,352 in 2006 to 121 in 2020 (Smith and Phonetip forthcoming).

An analysis of teak value chains in 14 processing mills in Sayaboury and Luang Prabang by VALTIP3 found that women made up nearly half of all employees at 48% (Ling and Chanthapith, 2018, Chanthapith, 2021 – see Annex 2 for details) which suggests that they are already playing a key role in the wood sector. Since there appeared to be a proportional relationship between value adding and women’s employment, and that women in rural areas would particularly benefit from investments in secondary wood processing, a more detailed study was initiated with the Huamchai mill in Paklay (the first case study by Ling et al., 2021). Key findings in Paklay were:

⁷ Ethnic Lao are often referred to as Lao Loum, or lowland Lao, although officially this term has been abandoned.

⁸ Compared to some other patrilineal ethnic groups, such as the Hmong, Khmu women have a greater mastery of Lao language which eases their integration into the greater society. Whereas single Khmu women have similar freedoms to the ethnic Lao, married Khmu women have far fewer freedoms in order to satisfy cultural obligations. For an ethnographic treatment of the Khmu, see Chamberlain (2006).

- The demand for mill employment amongst women is genuine and is greater than the positions available. Women are valued for their attention to detail in finishing tasks such as sanding, gluing and assembly.
- Mill management prioritises the employment of married women, who are seen as reliable workers compared to single women.
- The average monthly income for female workers, including overtime, was \$225/month. This is 38% lower than the average monthly income for male workers of \$311, which appears to reflect their more specialized technical roles and/or work that requires strength.
- Women expressed pride at using their income to improve their house or send their children to higher education. Having a regular income to meet the needs of a modern lifestyle, which cannot be obtained in farming was very important to these women.
- Working at the mill left little time for farming, and investments to boost farm productivity were low. Wage labour for women at the factory is providing a pathway off the family farm.
- Although earning less than men, women felt generally satisfied with their work and roles at the company, with pay rates, working hours and training all rated highly. The researchers recommended that a pathway from temporary to permanent employment should be explored with the company, which is likely to provide better legal protection for women in such areas as maternity leave or social insurance.

3. Methods

3.1 Research team and positioning

The research was facilitated by one of VALTIP3’s partner organisations, the Faculty of Forest Sciences (FFS) within the National University of Lao PDR (NUoL). Fieldwork was undertaken over three days from the 21st July 2021, and comprised a team of eight researchers (three women), including the Dean of FFS, Dr Latsamy Boupha.

The study’s design and implementation actively encouraged all to contribute, with the aim of engendering learning for the study team while producing this research. Ownership of the study is therefore considered to be collective, rather than that of expert researcher and subordinate researchers.

3.2 Research process

The four target groups for this study, along with sampling methods, survey instruments and outputs used are presented in Table 1. All interviews were conducted in Lao language, and translation into other ethnic languages was not required, since all participants were fluent in Lao.

Table 1: Sampling method, survey instrument and outputs for each target group

Target Group	Sampling method	Survey Instrument	Output
1. DAFO ⁹ Hin Heup	Not applicable	Semi-structured interview	- Contextual information

⁹ District Agriculture and Forestry Office.

2. Mill management	Not applicable	Semi-structured interview	- Contextual information - Sampling frame for quantitative data.
3. Local communities	Village committee and a subset of women	Semi-structured interview	- Information to answer the research questions, especially on the pre-mill situation
4. Mill machine operators/labourers	Directed sampling of 30% of workers (men and women)	Structured interview, Semi-structured supplementary interview	- Data/information to answer the research questions

A description of the data collection process for each target group is given below:

1 DAFO in Hin Heup

A briefing session was held at the DAFO office prior to starting data collection, at which the Head of DAFO provided some background in the current state of agriculture and forestry employment in the district. Interview notes are given in Annex 3.

2 Burapha plywood mill management

Key informants from Burapha management were the Human Resources Manager, Ms Cara McCartney and the Plywood Production Manager, Adam Redman¹⁰. Prior to beginning the survey proper, the FFS team was introduced to the mill's operations and given updated information on employee characteristics, training and qualifications and differences in the roles between male and female employees. (Annex 3).

3. Local communities

Two villages close to the plywood mill with a significant number of mill workers were visited to understand their existing village livelihoods and reasons why many of their inhabitants sought fulltime employment with Burapha as an alternative to farming. Khonephouk is ethnically Lao with 129 households, while Phonemuang is predominantly Khmu with 180 households. Within each village, semi-structured interviews were held separately with village leaders and women (Annex 3).

4 Mill machine operators/labourers

Factory workers were organised to participate in the interviews by Mr Lothim Saetern, who had previously worked with FFS and is now a manager with the plywood mill. Given that there were 112 women and 92 men currently employed at the mill, a 30% target would require 40 women and 30 men to be interviewed (note that 30 is generally considered to be a minimum number of interviews to ensure a normal distribution).

Prior to starting the survey proper, each member of the team undertook two pilot test interviews to assess the suitability of the structured questionnaire and how well it was understood. A team

¹⁰ Previously Adam was a member of the VALTIP3 research team.

feedback session then made suggestions to modify the questionnaire accordingly, and the test interview data was discarded.

Interviews were not conducted during working hours, but either immediately before or after the 4pm shift change. Since those surveyed were identified and invited to participate by Mr Lothim, the sampling method for the structured interviews may be described as directed sampling. As Table 2 shows, the number of women sampled exceeded the original target. The eight women who answered the semi-structured questionnaire (see interview notes in Annex 4) were randomly chosen to participate from the quantitative sample.

Table 2: Employees surveyed in this study

Sex	Sampling frame	Actual sample	Percentage sampled
Women	102	62	61
Men	75	31	41
TOTAL	177	93	53

Each structured interview took about 15 minutes, while the semi-structured interview took an additional 15-20 minutes.

3.3 Data management and analysis

All quantitative data from the factory-worker interviews was entered into Kobo Toolbox, a specialised data collection program that may be used on or off line. Those FFS team members who had not yet had experience with Kobo were introduced to this program prior to starting fieldwork. Once entered, the Kobo data was checked for completeness before being exported to Excel, which allows for a more comprehensive data analysis (pivot tables, charts) to be completed. A copy of the structured questionnaire is given in Annex 5.

The qualitative information from the semi-structured interviews was typed up as Word files in English on a daily basis.

3.4 Ethical protection of participants

Research undertaken by VALTIP3 has been approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the Australian National University (Protocol Number 2017/861). The NUoL team were introduced to the approved ethical procedures during the preparations for the field visit. It was emphasised to the team that participation was entirely voluntary, and that those interviewed could withdraw at any stage. By agreeing to answer the questionnaire or other questions, all those interviewed are considered to have given consent in accordance with the Oral Consent Protocol. There were no participants who refused to take part or who asked to withdraw from the interview.

The results of the study were not shared directly with the company or district officials, but feed into the broader ACIAR project which includes reports and presentations to be shared with various in-country partners.

3.5 Limitations of the study

Limitations to this study are:

- With seven researchers gathering the quantitative data, including some with limited experience, some inconsistencies in the application of the questionnaire did occur. Data cleaning on a daily basis allowed some of these inconsistencies to be addressed;
- Given that Burapha employees had only been working at the mill for between one and three months, it may be unrealistic to expect them to have nuanced responses to questions related to job satisfaction or the use of their income.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Employment policies and working conditions at the Burapha plywood mill

Burapha has a written employment policy, which states that it is committed to maintaining a “diverse and inclusive workforce” without any form of discrimination (BAFCO, 2020). The company also works closely with Lao government agencies to ensure that they fully comply with national laws, especially the Labour Law (2013) and the Social Security Law (2013). In addition, Burapha must also ensure that it complies with the conditions laid down by its international investors and its Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification, which include compliance with the standards of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

At the request of Burapha investors, a consultancy firm in Laos was engaged to complete a livelihood assessment of their existing workforce prior to mill opening, to ensure that all employees would receive at least a living wage. This living wage was determined to be 1.3 million kip/month¹¹, which is higher than the current minimum wage established by the Lao government of 1.1 million kip (Civitas, 2020).

Table 3 presents a breakdown of male and female employees working at the factory, along with the base salaries.

Table 3: Breakdown of employees by position

Position	Salary/month (LAK)	Total	Women	% women
Senior supervisor	Up to 9.5 million	2	1	50
Supervisor	5 to 7.5 million	14	7	50
Machine operator/labourer	1.5 to 2 million	198	130	66
Maintenance	Not requested	26	0	0
Office	Not requested	13	4	31
TOTAL		253	142	56

Source: Cara McCartney, by email, 20/8/2021

Base salaries at the mill start at 1.5 million kip/month for both men and women, rising to 2.0 million kip/month once the two-month probation period has been completed, which is well over the minimum wage. It is intended that salaries will be updated annually in line with inflation (BAFCO,

¹¹ There are approximately 10,000 kip/USD as of August 2021.

2020). As the literature review indicated, equal salaries for men and women would appear to be the exception rather than the rule in the South-east Asian wood processing. The base salary is supplemented by a 15%-night allowance for evening shifts (all workers are rostered), along with a daily meal allowance of 15,000 kip.

Table 3 indicates that women make up over half of all employees, and two-thirds of those in unskilled machine operator/labourer positions. There is presently no salary differential between these two groups. Women make up 50% of supervisors, who receive a much higher salary in return for managing a work unit that comprises up to twenty people. Supervisors (at least for mill start-up) were expected to have tertiary qualifications, with many being recent graduates of FFS who had benefitted from the spindle less lathe and other wood processing equipment provided through the three VALTIP projects. The first intake of machine operators/labourers received a two-day induction training at the FFS wood technology centre in Vientiane.

In contrast to those with the Huamchai mill in Paklay, all BAFCO mill employees are on permanent, rather than casual contracts. One benefit of permanent contracts is that all employees are automatically members of the Lao Social Security Fund (SSF) with their contributions automatically deducted from their salaries. For women there are benefits, including paid maternity leave of up to 105 days¹² and provision for up to three months leave in the event of miscarriage or abortion. BAFCO provides personal leave of up to five days/incident in the event of a family member being hospitalized or dying (BAFCO, 2020), which may be particularly important for women who traditionally are expected to take a lead role in care provision and household chores (ILO, 2017). Trade Union membership is available to those who wish to join and are willing to pay the annual fee of 5,000 kip/month.

The mill is conscious of providing a safe working environment for women. Sexual harassment, which predominantly affects women, is not acceptable, and Burapha has introduced an awareness program for its employees facilitated by CARE International.

Overall, the working conditions offered appeared attractive for nearby communities with mill management reporting that the number of applicants outnumbers the available opportunities.

4.2 Characteristics of male and female employees

This section addresses Research Question 1:

- 1. What are the social-economic profiles of male and female employees at the Burapha plywood factory in Hin Heup?*

4.2.1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics of the female and male labourers from the structured survey are shown in Figure 2. Both male and female employees are predominantly of Lao ethnicity, aged in their twenties (average 27.7 for women and 25.6 for men) and may be either single or married. There appeared to be no disparities along ethnic lines, although the proportion of ethnic women

¹² The employer pays the maternity leave first, and then SSF returns 80% to the employer up to a salary of 4.5 million kip/month (meaning that the employer is responsible for covering the other 20%).

interviewed represented only about 20% of the total – as noted earlier (Section 3.2), single women have greater freedoms than married women in Khmu communities.

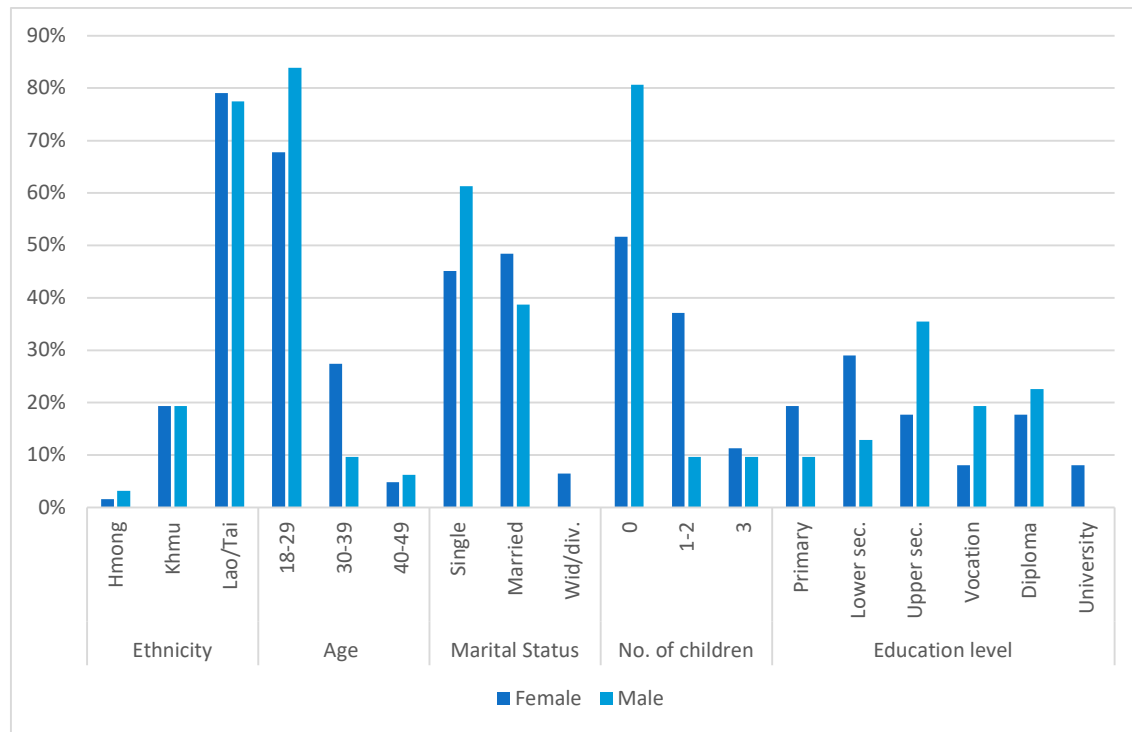


Figure 2: Demography of labourers at the Burapha mill

This demographic contrasts with the Paklay study, in which a typical female employee is aged in their mid-thirties and married with children. The older age of workers in Paklay reflects the eight-year age of the mill, low employee turnover and the stated preference by mill management for married workers, who are considered to be “more responsible.”

Also of note in Figure 2 is the difference in the level of education between men and women, with a greater proportion of men completing secondary school. This is consistent with other data from rural areas in Laos, with girls unable to attend secondary school due to a perceived lack of value in women’s education, difficulty in traveling to a larger village¹³ or the need to care for younger siblings. When women did receive educational opportunities, they compare favourably with men, with 26% of women employees graduating either with a higher diploma or university degree, compared to 23% of men.

I studied IT for 3 years in Vernkham [provincial capital] – after that I looked for work but couldn’t find any, so I came back home to be close to my parents. [Respondent 2]

Each woman has 0.94 children on average, which is lower than the average fertility rate for women aged 27 years of age in Lao PDR of 1.7¹⁴ (LSB, 2015). This lower figure reflects the relatively high

¹³ In most rural areas, one secondary school is expected to serve a cluster of villages, some of which may be a considerable distance away and necessitate students to sleep over if they do not have transport such as a motorcycle.

¹⁴ The average Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Laos is 3.2: the figure of 2.6 is calculated by analysing data from the age-specific fertility rates given in the 2015 census data (LSB, 2015).

proportion of educated women in the sample who have delayed having children – the 30 women in the sample who had only primary or lower secondary education had a total of 50 children between them (average of 1.67), while the 32 with upper secondary or above only had eight children (average of 0.25)!

The high number of single women in the sample is significant, because it is single women who are expected to seek off farm income to support the household to a greater extent than married women (Moglia et al., 2020). Without the local employment that the mill offers, it is likely that these women, many of whom did not complete school, would have had to leave their local villages to seek unskilled and possibly risky work in Vientiane or Thailand (UNICEF, 2019).

4.2.2 Differences in roles between male and female workers

As was the case in Paklay, women were valued by mill management for their attention to detail, with management noting that “they have a better eye for grading, and more patience for quality control.”

This observation was reinforced by two of the mill employees, of whom one was a supervisor:

Working with veneer takes a lot of patience - it cannot be rushed. Grading the veneer sheets properly takes time. You have to be careful moving the sheets or you will break them – and men are not so careful. [8]

Women have more opportunities than men at the mill, because they are more even-tempered ('chai yen'). Men can be hot tempered ('chai hawn'). [2]

Like dexterity, patience appears to be a gender specific attribute of the sort described by Tran (2018). Image 1 and Table 4, which present the tasks undertaken by one work unit at the mill, exemplifies this point, with 19/20 workers being female.

Overall, these kinds of fixed gendered attributes (or stereotypes) were widespread during our interviews and expressed by both sexes. It appears that while they can both provide opportunities for certain types of paid work, they may also constrain at the same time. It was not possible to explore the prevalence and implications of such stereotypes during this study.

Table 4: Tasks undertaken by men and women at one duty station (translated from Image 1)

Position	Men	Women
Supervisor		1
Grading veneer sheets 8*4		4
Stacking veneer sheets in order		4
Join veneer sheets		5
Sort the veneer sheets 4*4		2
Grade veneer sheets 4*4		2
Manage the mechanical joiner		2
Mechanical joiner assistant	1	
TOTAL	1	19

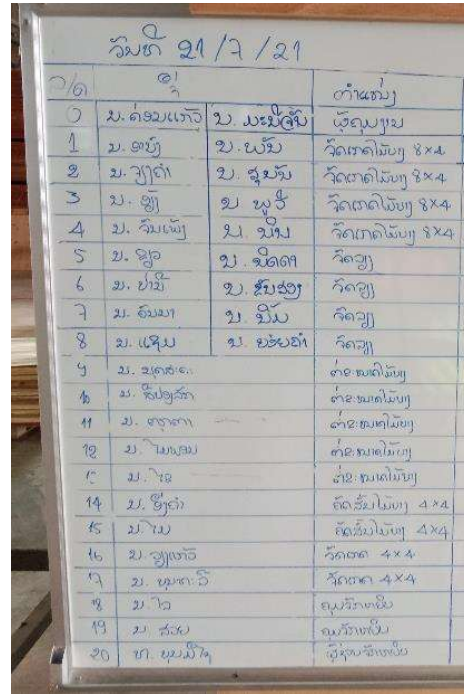


Image 1: Whiteboard allocating work duties at one duty station.

While concentrated in tasks that required patience, women also were given equal opportunity to take positions operating machines and equipment, since the mill was highly mechanized and there were few positions that required physical strength (Images 2-3). By way of comparison, only 4% of forklift drivers in Australia are female¹⁵.



¹⁵ Source : <https://joboutlook.gov.au/occupations/forklift-drivers?occupationCode=7213>

Image 2: Operating the veneer peeler



Image 3: Driving a forklift

4.3 Likely effect of employment on household livelihoods

This section addresses Research Question 2:

2. What is the likely effect of this employment on household livelihoods for men and women?

4.3.1 Profile of livelihoods prior to mill operation

The research team visited two villages nearby¹⁶ the mill which have contributed a large number of workers, to understand household livelihoods prior to and after the mill began operations. Khonephouk village is ethnic Lao with 127 households, while Phonemuang has 180 mostly Khmu households.

Livelihoods in Khonephouk are dominated by rubber production, with about 60% of families owning plantations ranging in size from 2-30 hectares. Families without rubber are typically poorer households, who could not afford to purchase seedlings upfront as well as maintain the plantation for seven years until they could start to receive a return. Raw latex prices were relatively high at the time of survey (8,500 kip/kg), and households who have sufficient labour to tap their own trees earn about 5,100,000 kip/ha/month¹⁷. Rubber income is often used to buy rice, since upland rice is no longer planted and because some farmers have rented their paddy land to Chinese banana growers. Fruit trees, especially rambutan and lime, are also a source of income, although these are progressively being replaced with rubber which provides regular, rather than seasonal income. Unlike Phonemuang, Khonephouk does not have BAFCO eucalypt plantations.

In Phonemuang, all households grow cassava, which is currently bringing good prices of about 10 million kip/annum/household. Most households also have income from casual labour on Chinese

¹⁶ Both villages are within three kilometres.

¹⁷ Assuming 450 trees per hectare and 1.33 kg latex/tree/month. A tree takes seven years to produce latex.

banana plantations (which pays 80,000 kip/day) or from labouring on BAFCO’s eucalypt plantations, which has been calculated to bring in 10-14 million kip/year/HH for ethnic Khmu villages in Hin Heup (EMC, 2018). About 40 households work as tappers on the rubber plantations of others, which brings in about 2,200,000 kip/month at current prices, although the tapping season lasts only about eight months/year¹⁸. The reliance on wage labour in Phonemuang observed during this study is consistent with the Civitas (2020) study, which found that 86% of total household income for day labourers on BAFCO plantations was earned off-farm compared to only 14% from agriculture.

In both villages, the recent conversion of both common and private lands to rubber, eucalypt and banana plantations has meant that most families no longer raised cattle, since there was no land left to raise them on. Similarly, natural food sources have declined, leaving villagers reliant on local markets to supply their food needs.

Before it was possible to find food in the forest such as rats, birds and mushrooms, but now we have no spare land.

Women’s group, Phonemuang

4.3.2 Motives for seeking employment at the mill

Table 5 summarises the responses of men and women during the quantitative survey when asked to provide their three most important motives for seeking employment at the mill. It shows that men and women had similar motives for seeking employment, with the need to pay daily expenses and the convenient location of the mill being important, as they were in Paklay.

Table 5: Motives for seeking employment at the mill

Motive	Women	Men
Need to pay daily expenses	84%	94%
Near to home	74%	74%
Opportunity to earn more money	39%	26%
Save for investment/house	29%	16%
Land too small/not enough farm work	16%	12%
Tired of farming	10%	10%

Overall, farmers in Hin Heup appeared to have more livelihood options than those in Paklay, with a lower proportion reporting that poor farming conditions (insufficient land, low crop prices, natural disasters, lack of irrigation water) were a motive to seek employment at the mill. In Paklay, workers reported earning little from their farms due to limited plot size and a lack of irrigation for rice, whereas in Hin Heup rubber, cassava and plentiful labouring opportunities provided income for most households. Even hired rubber tappers working for about four hours/day can earn the same monthly income (two million kip) as a fulltime BAFCO labourer. This raises the question of why demand for positions at the mill is so high. Excerpts from the semi-structured interviews, presented below, were able to provide more nuanced responses than the quantitative survey could provide.

¹⁸ Tappers are typically paid about 50% of the yield in return for their labour, although this may be reduced to 40% as latex prices increase. On average one tapper is needed per hectare, with work undertaken in the early morning (from about 3-7am) so the latex will drip longer before coagulating and sealing the cut.

Although existing household incomes appeared diverse, the need for a regular and consistent income to pay daily expenses was highlighted during the semi-structured interviews.

When we are working at the factory, we can be confident of our income and can save money.

Women's group Phonemuang

The best thing about this job is that the salary is regular – I will continue to work here and save money for my child to study in future. [5]

The land shortages highlighted earlier, even in a relatively wealthy village such as Khonephouk, were motives for some households:

Two of my children are working at the mill, because we have no agricultural land. I rented my paddy to Chinese banana growers. I didn't want to rent the land out, but since all my neighbouring landholders let the Chinese rent their land, I had no choice.

Women's group, Khonephouk

My parents could not afford the inputs to plant rubber, and so we don't have much land. I got married at 16 to a soldier and now has 3 children. I want to continue working at the mill, since neither of us have time to do agriculture anymore.

Women's group, Khonephouk

The discipline engendered by full-time work was attractive to some.

Work forces us to earn money because we have to work eight hours per day - if staying at home there is free time so it is better to work.

Women's group, Phonemuang.

Many rural people aspire to work with government, but positions are hard to obtain without the proper connections.

Many people in our village want to be soldiers, but there are not enough positions – so they need to find other work to do. [2]

Women felt that had fewer work opportunities than men, due to the perception that strength was needed

The expressway employed some women for manual work, but they only got 60,000 kip/day. Those with skills such as concreters and machinery operators could get 120,000/day, but these jobs were only taken by men [due to the heavy nature of the work].

Women's group, Phonemuang

The notion that working in a factory was 'easier' and possibly less dangerous than farm work (*saduak, sabay*)¹⁹ was also prevalent in many responses.

¹⁹ Saduak (convenient) and sabay (comfortable) are commonly used words in Lao to express an "optimal status quo" that extends to "physical wellness, tranquillity, happiness, contentment" and even inner peace." See: https://www.travelfish.org/beginners_detail/thailand/89

Many people don't want to do agriculture any more, since it is necessary to "to labour hard in the rain and sun." They want to do something different, and the factory provides a good clean environment "with fans and no mosquitoes!

Women's group, Phonemuang.

I would like to work at the mill, because I am tired of getting up early to tap rubber. Working at the mill would be "saduak sabay."

Women's group, Khonephouk

My mother doesn't want me to work in the bananas due to the dangers posed by chemicals.
[1]

It was suggested by the interviewer that seeking regular off-farm employment is a good way to diversify income and manage risks such as variable prices and climate change (see for example Rigg et al., 2016). However, this notion was rejected by one respondent.

No, it is not related to risk – the only reason [to seek mill employment] is "saduak, sabay."
[6]

Those that have a job at the mill expect to be working there in the medium-long term. Of the 93 employees surveyed, 94% of men and 84% of women expected to still be there in another 12 months, with only a small proportion either being unsure or saying they would not continue. Villagers in Ban Khonephouk suggested mill employment may be affected by the rubber economy: as young plantations start to yield latex then interest in becoming a mill employee will wane if prices remain high.

4.3.3 Income and expenditure

As noted in Section 4.1, ordinary workers (women and men) at the plywood mill who have completed their probation period have a salary of two million kip/month (US\$200). While this amount is similar to the normal wage²⁰ paid to women by Huamchai (US\$197), the BAFCO salary is of greater benefit once paid leave and other allowances are factored in. Men at Huamchai receive a higher normal wage (\$282) than those at BAFCO to reflect their specialised roles such as sawyers, maintenance workers and forklift operators.

The US\$200/month salary, including allowances and benefits is roughly equivalent to what they could earn in Vientiane or Thailand.²¹ Employing local workers benefits the rural economy, in which, as noted earlier, poverty rates are three times that in urban areas (LSB and World Bank, 2020).

Table 6 summarises the most common forms of expenditure by mill workers, by asking each respondent to list their three top categories of spending per month. Given that the mill has only just opened, and spending patterns are still evolving, the figures should be considered as provisional only.

²⁰ Both men and women at Huamchai regularly earn overtime, which increases their wages by

²¹ The daily minimum wage in Thailand is presently 336 THB, or about 120,000 kip.

Table 6: Top three forms of expenditure spending by category for men and women

Category	Women (%)	Men (%)
Rice and other food	90	97
Electricity/water/phone	84	90
Transport (e.g., petrol)	56	45
Education	26	3
Savings	23	19
Rent	3	16

Men and women appear consistent in the use of their income, with consumption items²² making up the top three categories. Agriculture was reported as an important expenditure item by only 5/93 households. The cost of living (and the lack of natural food sources), was highlight by the women’s group from Phonemuang.

Now it is much more difficult – we have to buy meat in the market – one kg of pork is 50,000 kip. “The average household spends about 80,000 kip/day on food.”

4.4 Changes in gender balance to increase the roles of women

This section addresses Research Question 3.

How can the gender balance of the Lao wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?

4.4.1 Satisfaction with working conditions at the BAFCO mill

Figure 3 averages nine measures of working conditions for 61 female respondents based on a Likert scale, with a score of 1 being very dissatisfied and a score of 5 being very satisfied. The average score for each category is indicated in brackets. Where the total number of respondents for each category in Figure 3 does not reach 61, the difference is the number providing a ‘Don’t know’ answer.

²² Productive investments help to build human and physical capital (such as education, housing and business investments), whilst consumption covers food and consumer goods.

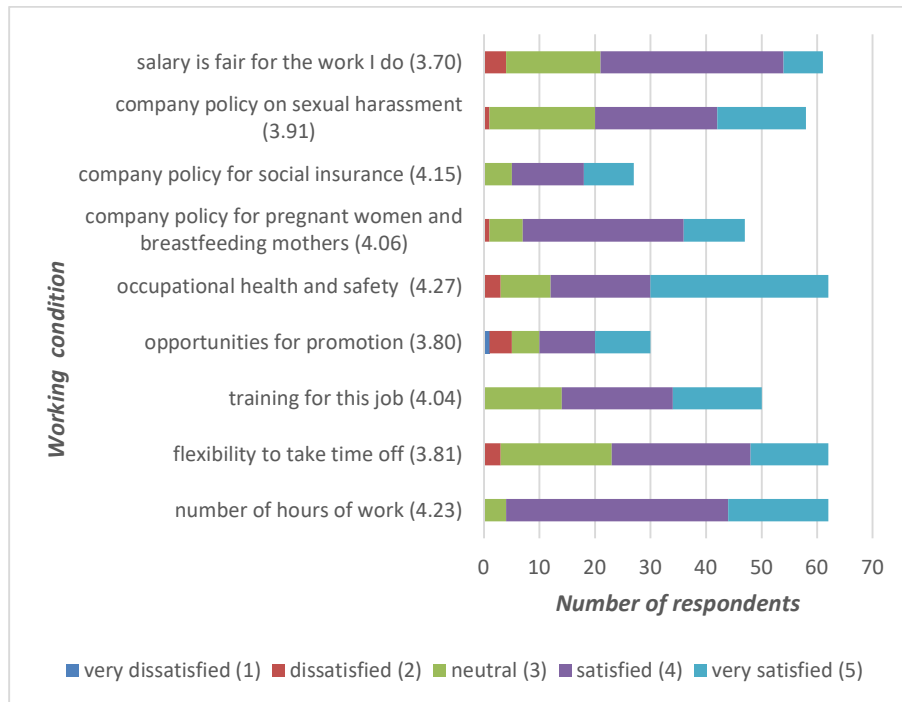


Figure 3: Satisfaction with working conditions at the mill for women

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=61).

The results show that at this early stage of the mill’s operations, there is widespread satisfaction amongst women of their working conditions in all categories. This is a positive sign, but as noted in the study’s limitations, it may be unrealistic to expect them to have nuanced responses to questions related to job satisfaction in areas they have yet to experience - this is evidenced by the high proportion of “Don’t Knows’ for company policy for social insurance, company policy for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers and opportunities for promotion.

Figure 4 shows the same information for male workers.

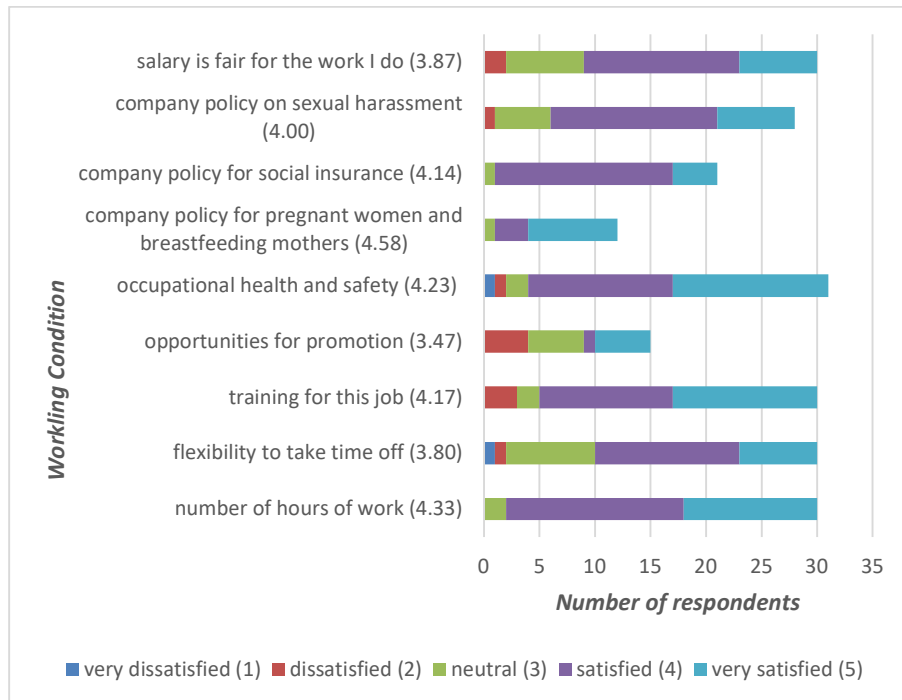


Figure 4: Satisfaction with working conditions at the mill for men

In contrast to BAFCO, women at Huamchai were ‘dissatisfied’ with the company policies for social insurance and pregnancy/breastfeeding. This is likely due to BAFCO workers being on permanent contracts under the Labour Law, whereas the casually employed women at Huamchai do not receive maternity leave and are often forced back to work early, thereby putting their own health (and that of their baby) at risk.

Satisfaction with salary/wages at both companies was similar, despite differing pay scales for advancement. Incentives for good performance given at Huamchai such as regular pay rises, were valued by women and reinforced their loyalty to the company. Performance-based contracts for semi-skilled positions such as machine operators which might increase their salaries, are presently being considered by Burapha management

4.4.2 Changes in traditional household roles due to employment at the mill

As in Paklay, traditional female roles at the household level, in which women are expected to take on a greater share of home duties and care giving, appear to have been redistributed to other household members to reflect their status as fulltime workers at the plywood mill. The importance of extended households to enable flexible working arrangements, including covering women during shift work, is reflected in the quotation below.

When the husband and wife live as a nuclear family, then the husband will seek work while the wife stays at home with the children. But more commonly, households have several generations, and they will organise the work so that it revolves around the people who would be working at the mill. If a woman or daughter works at the mill, then the others will assist with household and farm duties.

Women’s group Phonemuang

As in Paklay, the qualitative data provided examples of husbands assisting their wives to perform household duties.

My husband helps with the housework and prepares the evening meal because I finish later than him (for the day shift). Now home duties are easier to manage because my daughter is also able to help. [5]

An additional benefit for women of extended family is that women are able to maintain the regular work attendance and performance needed to have a chance of receiving a promotion. Australian studies have shown that women are often passed over for promotion not just because of their gender, but because they are perceived to be unable to work additional hours during peak periods (for examples, see TPM, 2021).

Although the sample is small, this case study suggests that Lao and Khmu women accessing fulltime employment can change their division of household labour and increase their contribution to household income. This is a positive development, given that women in patrilineal ethnic groups (which include the Khmu) are often burdened with more work and have fewer income opportunities than men (ADB, 2012). It also suggests that the assertions of FAO (2018) and Suyavong (2019), that household tasks and family/childcare may stifle workforce participation (see Section 2.3) need to be re-examined.

Due to its potential sensitivity, it was not attempted to discuss whether increased income by women has led to an increase in domestic violence as men attempt to exert authority over its use, particularly in rural areas where there is a “relative conservatism of gender relations” (Oxfam, 2015).

4.4.3. The importance of mechanization as an enabling condition for female employment

The images in Section 4.2 are a reminder of how mechanization can enable women to access jobs that were previously the role of men. As in other countries, sawmilling and wood processing has traditionally been regarded as a men’s task in Lao PDR, since it required heavy lifting in dirty and noisy conditions (UNIDO, 2016 provides figures that indicate that only 18% of wood processing workers in 2015 were female). In turn, the male-dominated working environment becomes a deterrent to many women, who feel that there is likely to be discrimination and that their opportunities for career development may be hindered (FAO, 2006). But women have a greater chance of becoming mill technicians if they can press “buttons rather than needing to engage in hard labour” (Kikon and Miletic, 2017). It was notable that in Paklay women were prepared to trade off equal pay in return for lighter and less risky work – mechanization has meant that this is no longer a decision that they have to take!

Mechanization brings another benefit to women beyond making hard work easy, with women in the study emphasising the importance of the clean and safe working environment that mechanization brings with it.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Responses to the Research Questions

The conclusions begin by considering each of the research questions in turn.

1. What are the social-economic profiles of male and female employees at the Burapha plywood factory in Hin Heup?

Women represent 66% of machine operators/labourers on the factory floor and 50% of those working as supervisors. Male and female employees are predominantly ethnic Lao, aged in their twenties (average 27.7 for women and 25.6 for men) and may be either single or married. All machine operators/labourers were employed from the surrounding area.

Both men and women are employed on permanent contracts in accordance with the Lao law, which provides them with additional benefits such as annual/maternity/sick leave and social security compared to workers in other manufacturing industries, many of whom are employed on a casual basis (including at Huamchai in Paklay).

2. What is the likely effect of this employment on household livelihoods for men and women?

The high demand for employment at the mill from those in surrounding villages reflects the desire for regular, off-farm income to meet the needs of a modern lifestyle: the reliance of farming households on external employment was highlighted by CIVITAS (2020) study which found that 86% of household income for Burapha rural day labourers was earned off-farm. While some mill workers reported that their motive for employment was because they had insufficient land for farm livelihoods, there were others who had relatively secure farm incomes (such as from rubber) and regarded mill employment as an easier way to earn a living than farming (such as not having to rise before 3am every morning to tap it).

As in Paklay, the study highlights the importance of local jobs that allow young people to stay with their families, instead of needing to relocate to Vientiane or Thailand. Although they remain living on the farm, mill employment may be providing a pathway out of 'hands-on' labour intensive farming to a hybrid situation in which farm income is also derived from land rental to Chinese investors and rubber sharecropping (or 'hands off' farming). In the medium term, some BAFCO workers may follow the same path as those at Huamchai, who have used their income to construct houses separate from the extended family, leave farming behind altogether and focus their spare income on their children's education. This will be interesting to monitor into the future.

3. How can the gender balance of the Lao wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?

This study again highlighted the importance of women to the Lao wood industry, where they are particularly valued for their attention to detail in finishing tasks. In contrast to the Paklay study however, the high level of mechanisation and the commitment by BAFCO management to training and gender equality has meant that women have been employed in almost all roles within the mill (the exception is skilled maintenance). This meant that the incomes for women are equivalent to those of men.

At this early stage of mill operations, women feel very satisfied with all their working conditions and they expect to continue working there in the medium-long term. Permanent contracts and the benefits they provide for women under the Lao law (including maternity leave, social insurance) have contributed to this satisfaction. The attractive working conditions reflect BAFCO's status as a company with European investors and markets that demand compliance with international labour

standards, and it might be expected that those relying on local or regional markets would not receive similar price premiums to improve their standards.

5.2 Implications of this study

Like Paklay, this study presents an alternative perspective to other employment studies in Lao PDR²³ by examining the transition that ordinary local women are making from a farming to wage labour livelihood. For the Lao government, it highlights the potential of wood industries to generate rural employment and the importance of attracting quality investors that have the capacity to provide working conditions in line with the Lao law. Reducing unnecessary transaction costs and procedures for growers and industry would encourage more investment in tree planting and wood processing, a point which has already been well described by Smith et al (2018).

This study has particular implications for the FFS and other vocational training providers, since it highlights the demand for capable graduates in wood processing. As more plantations come on line and more processing facilities are established (including Sun Paper, Mekong Timber), a career in private sector forestry becomes an attractive proposition for both men and women. This has already been recognised by the Faculty of Forestry Science at the National University, who have used a graduate survey done in conjunction with this research to evaluate their past forestry curriculum and consider how it can be improved to meet the forecast needs of industry (see Phonetip et al., 2021).

The apparently greater role that women play in wood processing in Laos raises the question of why similar mills in Australia employ so few women despite also being highly mechanised. An internet search failed to find reasons specific to the Australian wood sector, but the construction sector, in which women are equally underrepresented, suggested five key reasons as follows (TPM Builders 2021):

1. Construction isn't promoted as a viable career for female high school students;
2. Sometimes there isn't enough support for female construction students;
3. Networking often influences hiring decisions;
4. Fewer opportunities for career progression;
5. Inflexible working practices.

Another issue facing Australian employers wanting to increase their proportion of women are low retention rates. According to the Business Council of Australia, (2013), the main incentives that help drive employee retention are workplace flexibility, breastfeeding facilities, return to work programs and parental and carers leave provisions. The issue of flexibility is interesting, because Australian workers are predominantly from nuclear, rather than extended, families– the role of extended families in being able to provide the flexibility and childcare that women need to participate in the workforce appears to be an important factor in the high proportion of women in the Lao wood processing industry compared to Australia– this is an area worthy of further research.

²³ Which have focussed on young migrant workers and their remittances.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Summary of the results of the Paklay case study

This research study, which was undertaken with the cooperation of the Huamchai teak processing mill, Paklay district, Sayaboury province, addresses this topic with three research questions:

- 1. What are the socio-economic backgrounds and identity-status markers of female employees at the Huamchai teakwood processing factory in Paklay?*
 - 2a. What is their income due to this employment in and how has this been spent?*
 - 2b. What is the effect of this employment on their household farming systems?*
- 3. How can the gender balance of the Lao wood industry be improved to increase the role of women?*

The research was facilitated by one of VALTIP3's partner organisations, the Faculty of Forest Sciences (FFS) within the National University of Lao PDR (NUoL). Fieldwork was undertaken over 10 days from the 28th June 2020, and interviewed district officials, mill representatives, 33 wage earning women and 21 wage-earning men.

Key findings in relation to the research questions

1. Socio-economic backgrounds and identity-status markers of female employees

The typical female employee at Huamchai is aged in their mid-thirties, is married with children and has completed school to lower secondary level. The fertility rate of 1.3 is low, which reflects their Lao-Tai ethnicity, education and urban status. They are employed on a casual basis for finishing tasks such as sanding, gluing and furniture assembly.

Mill management prioritises the employment of married women, who are seen as reliable workers compared to single women. Positions are highly sought after, and the average female worker has worked there for 4.1 years.

2a Income and expenditure

The average monthly income for female workers, including overtime, was \$225/month. This is 38% lower than the average monthly income for male workers of \$311, which appears to reflect their more specialized technical roles and/or work that requires strength. Overtime, which contributed \$28/month to their incomes, was gladly accepted when offered and appeared to be critical to the livelihoods of the employees.

Female workers spent 59% of their income on consumption (mostly food), 22% on investment (education and housing) and the remainder was saved. During the qualitative interviews, women expressed pride at being able improve their house or send their children to higher education. The findings highlight the perceived importance of having a regular income to meet the needs of a modern lifestyle, which cannot be obtained in farming.

2b. Effect of employment on the household farming system

Nineteen of the 33 workers interviewed still practised family farming, but their farming system was focussed on rice production for self-consumption, rather than for income generation. Since they worked at the mill almost every day, the women had little time for farming, and would leave farm management to their husbands or relatives. The expenditure data showed that investments in boosting farm productivity were low. Wage labour for women at the factory is providing a pathway off the family farm.

3. How the gender balance of the Lao wood industry might be improved to increase the role of women

This study showed that women are already playing an important role in the Lao wood industry, where they are valued for their attention to detail in finishing tasks such as sanding, gluing and assembly. This finding accords with data gathered elsewhere in Lao PDR, and highlights the relationship between value-adding and female employment.

Women felt generally satisfied with their work and roles at the company, with pay rates (even though they were lower than men), working hours and training all rated highly. Three areas in which women felt less satisfied, which could provide a starting point to improve the role of women, were universal availability of social insurance for those who wish to have it, greater opportunities for promotion and improvements in working conditions towards pregnant and nursing women. Some of these issues might be addressed with greater transparency in working conditions (including contracts) and by making the transition to permanent, rather than casual, employees.

Implications of the study

Past employment studies in Lao PDR have generally focussed on the experiences of young, migrant workers, either to Thailand (international migration) or to Vientiane (rural-urban migration) and on the remittances that they contribute to their families. This study was exceptional, in that it examined the impact on employment from the perspectives of older rural women, many of whom had made (or were in the process of making) the transition from a farming livelihood to a wage labour livelihood.

The study highlights the importance of government policies to encourage and nurture rural industries, since the demand for such employment is genuine and is greater than the positions available. Reducing transaction costs for growers and industry would encourage more investment in wood processing. A pathway from temporary to permanent employment should be explored with the company, which is likely to provide better legal protection for women in such areas as maternity leave or social insurance.

Annex 2: Employment Figures for women at teak processing mills in Sayaboury and Luang Prabang

Name of Mill	Location	Total Employees	No. women	% women
Huamchai	Paklay	230	130	57%
Kok O	Paklay	47	10	21%
Boutsady	Kenthao	25	9	36%
Changsengmay	Phiang	30	10	33%
Phonesavang	Phiang	60	35	58%
Outhit	Sayaboury	50	13	26%
TOTAL		442	207	47%

Source: Data gathered in April 2018 by Stuart Ling and Sichanh Chanthapith, PAFO, Luang Prabang.

Name	Village	District	Total employees	Women	Percent
Bouasone secondary wood processing	Phonexay	Luang Prabang	10	3	30
Maynoy small teak processing	Nakhern	Nan	9	2	22
Xianghai Teak processing	Kok Ngiu	Luang Prabang	17	10	59
Houang Khouangpery Teak	Naka	Xieng Ngern	41	17	41
Pila wood panels	En	Xieng Ngern	70	50	71
Phouthone wood panels	Phonvanh	Luang Prabang	6	2	33
Keo wood panels	Vaykhang	Pak Ou	15	6	40
Tong Inthilath wood processing	Phonexay	Luang Prabang	14	2	14
			182	92	51

Source: Data gathered in August 2021 by Sichanh Chanthapith, PAFO, Luang Prabang.

In summary,

Grand total of employees	624
Women	299
Percent	48%

Annex 3: Semi-structured interview notes from DAFO, Burapha and local villagers

1. Meeting with Mr Bounyang, Head of DAFO,

- The investment environment is dynamic, due to the newly completed expressway and the Boten-Vientiane railway train (to open at the end of the year)
- As well as eucalypts, key crops in the district are rubber, bananas, cassava and fruit trees. Most rice is for self-consumption. There is little shifting cultivation anymore, because most upland fields have already been converted to rubber or forage
- Bananas, which cover about 1,500 ha, are in decline due to disease – current Chinese rental prices are between 2 and 5 million kip/ha/year, depending on the quality of the land
- Key employers are the banana plantations, the cement factory (about 100 people employed, including women), two rubber factories and a cassava powder factory.
- Biggest issue for DAFO at present is managing land use planning – most village protected areas have already been cleared to make way for rubber. Enforcement is difficult because of the need to coordinate with PONRE/DONRE (unlike before when forests were all under MAF)

2. Meeting with Cara McCartney, HR Manager, Burapha, 16/7/2021, from field visit to mill (21/7/21) and from follow-up emails.

- The Hin Heup mill fully complies with the laws of the Lao government, especially the Labour Law and the Social Security Law. There is a written HR policy which is received by all staff.
- There are currently 112 females and 92 males employed at the Hin Heup mill from 21 different villages, with a focus given to nearby villages for employment. Villages with large numbers of employees are Phonemuang (Khmu) and Khonephouk (Lao).
- There were 659 applicants for 350 positions at the mill prior to being opened, and they receive another 3-4 /day. Demand for positions is very strong.
- The number of employees will nearly double when the mill moves to three shifts (24 hour production), since there is a need for four crews.
- Workers are shortlisted on the basis of their applications, with a preference for those with experience in having other jobs and at least primary education. They are then interviewed by HR to confirm their suitability.
- At the request of Burapha's investors, Civitas (a consultancy firm in Laos was engaged to complete a livelihood assessment of Burapha's existing workforce, to ensure that all employees could receive a living wage (which complements their other livelihood activities). This living wage was determined to be 1.3 million kip/month (which is higher than the current minimum wage of 1.1 million kip)
- All employees have individual contracts, with a two month probation period. The starting wage for labourers paid at the mill is 1.7 million kip/month, increasing to 2 million kip/month following the probation period. A 15% night allowance is paid for overnight shifts, along with a meal allowance of 15,000 kip (the mill will soon open a canteen). All salaries are paid directly into local bank accounts.
- All employees are automatically members of the Lao Social Security Fund, and the contributions are automatically deducted from the wages by Burapha
- Maternity leave is paid of 105 days, of which 80% of the wage (up to 4.5 million kip/month) is returned to the employer by the Lao Social Security Fund.

- Trade Union membership will be made available to those who wish to join and are willing to pay the annual fee [5,000 kip/month]
- Employees have received COVID19 vaccinations facilitated by the company
- There is a partnership with CARE to provide sexual harassment awareness training and the importance of savings/social security
- To date, three employees have been immediately terminated after testing positive for drugs (all men) – one man was immediately terminated for kicking a female supervisor

From an email dated 24/8/2021

Question: Do you think you will ever have performance based contracts, so that some workers get more than others for the same position (or will they be based only on seniority)?

Answer: Yes something we are considering, regarding operator of machines etc.

Question: Do you have a policy to rotate promising workers around the different sections of the mill so that they can get a broader skillset and be better placed to enter a supervisory role?

Answer: Initial staff have rotated around, however, due to the demand on production we need people to stay at their primary stations for production purposes for the time being. But when all new staff are taken on they do get trained on each machine.

On women employees:

Adam: 'women have better eye for grading, more patience for quality control, more reliable in coming to work on time.'

3. Interview with village committee and women of Ban Phonemuang, 22/7/2021

- There are currently 180 HH, mostly Khmu but some Lao and Hmong
- Most households have paddy and are rice sufficient. They also grow cassava, which is now at 550 kip/kg – this means that some households earn more than 10m kip/year. Only a few households have cattle, as there is no place to raise them
- Burapha started growing timber in 2013 in the village on a mostly 1+4 basis (renting community land and paying workers for their labour) and supporting farmers with a better road network and hospital treatment. About 80% of households are earning income from Burapha (maintenance payments are 600,000 kip/ha/year) – the other 20% don't have labour to contribute.
- Prior to Burapha villagers had simple households, and were able to source a lot of food locally, such as wildlife and NTFP's. Now they have more permanent houses
- Other labouring income comes from tapping rubber (employ 30-40 HH - not their own plantations so they take a share eg 60% to owner/40% to tapper) – the present rubber price of 8,500 kip/kg means that a tapper with a 40% share can earn about 2,200,000 kip/month²⁴. Also bananas, in which all HH participate - not full time but for irregular

²⁴ At a yield of 1.3kg/tree/month*500 trees/ha*8,500 kip/kg is 5,525,000 kip/ha/month. A husband/wife team will typically manage two hectares between them, with tapping undertaken two days in three. Monthly income for a tapper is therefore 40% *11,050,000 ha /2 people, or about 2,200,000 kip/month. Tappers must start work by 3 am in order to maximise yield, and they work until 6 or 7 am, before returning later in the morning to collect the cup rubber. Rubber also only flows for about 9 months of the year, so this income is not year round.

activities such as planting and harvesting: day labour in the banana is about 80,000 kip, but this work is declining as the bananas are affected by disease.

- Have only about 15 people working at the factory – many people have applied, but they don't hear anything. "All households would have a person working there if they could."

Women's focus group (two people)

- When the husband and wife live as a nuclear family, then the husband will seek work while the wife stays at home with the children. But more commonly, households have several generations, and they will organise the work so that it revolves around the people who would be working at the mill. If a woman or daughter works at the mill, then the others will assist with household and farm duties.
- Now it is necessary to have work, because the income from farming is not enough – if staying at home there is free time so it is better to work.
- Work forces us to earn money because we have to work eight hours per day – in the village we don't need to do that
- Also many people don't want to do agriculture anymore, "to labour hard in the rain and sun." They want to do something different, and the factory provides a good clean environment, "with fans and no mosquitoes! (it is sabay)"
- Before it was possible to find food in the forest such as rats, birds and mushrooms, but now we have no spare land. Now it is much more difficult – we have to buy meat in the market – one kg of pork is 50,000 kip. "The average household spends about 80,000 kip/day on food."
- When we are working at the factory, we can be confident of our income and can save money. There are few other good jobs for women – the expressway employed some women for manual work, but they only got 60,000 kip/day. Those with skills (concreters, machinery operators) could get 120,000/day, but these jobs were only taken by men (due to the heavy nature of the work).

4. Interview with village committee and women of Ban Khonephouk, 23/7/2021

- Khonephouk has 127 HH and 178 families (Lao Loum), and is a long established village
- Their livelihoods are dominated by rubber production, with about 60% of families owning plantations ranging in size from 2-30 hectares. Families without rubber are generally those who were poor and could not afford to purchase the inputs needed (seedlings) and maintain the plantation for 7 years until they could start to receive a return. Households who have the labour resources to tap their own rubber are making about 12 million kip/ha/month at current prices. The relatively good prices at present have meant that rubber is still being planted by those with available land.
- Households with large areas need to import labour to tap their rubber – there are Hmong coming from Sam Neua to work in the plantation
- About 1/3 of HH have rented their arable land (including some paddy land) to Chinese banana growers, where they were paid 6 million kip/ha upfront for a six year contract – they regret this now because they realise this is a low price.
- About 1/3 of HH have paddy land, while others also grow fruit trees such as rambutan and oranges. Nobody plants cassava. In the past there was large livestock, but most potential

grazing land has been converted to rubber. There are no NTFP's any more given the amount of banana and rubber.

- There are about 15 people working at the Burapha mill (Note: Burapha HR says this is an underestimate).

Q: Why are there still people seeking work at the mill when it appears that the potential farm income is higher than that being offered by Burapha

A: Those who seek work at the mill are:

- from poorer HH who don't have rubber plantations
- still have surplus labour after allocating it to their rubber
- not very skilled - "I wouldn't let them tap my rubber, because they would just damage my trees. My rubber would die!"
- a group (mostly women) who feel that rubber tapping is too hard, even though the money is better (rubber is smelly, have to get up early)
- As more rubber comes into production (since many plantations are still too young to yield latex), then interest in becoming a Burapha employee may decrease – assuming that rubber prices are still good (villagers are well aware of the volatile nature of rubber prices).
- At present, there is a greater demand for employment than positions available - villagers feel that they should have a greater priority in mill employment ("should have the first opportunity") because the Burapha mill falls under their own village management area.

Women's focus group (6 people)

- 1. Has a daughter at the mill who is divorced with one child and wanted to earn money for herself. She looks after her granddaughter when her daughter works.
- 2. Is older (44 years) and would like to work at the mill, as she is tired of getting up early to tap rubber. Working at the mill would be "saduak sabay"
- 3. Works at the mill, aged 30, married at 16 to a soldier and now has 3 children. "My parents could not afford the inputs to plant rubber, and so we don't have much land. I got married at 16 to a soldier and now has 3 children. I want to continue working at the mill, since neither of us have time to do agriculture anymore. "
- 4. Widowed with 5 children – two working at the mill. She has no agricultural land, because she ended up renting her paddy to the Chinese banana growers – "I didn't want to rent the land out, but since all my neighbouring landholders let the Chinese rent their land, I had no choice." – [paddy requires a communal effort to manage irrigation channels etc. – it can't really be done in isolation]
- 5. Runs her own business in the village – her two children are studying at university
- 6. Aged 41, she continues to tap rubber every day with her husband.

Annex 4: Semi-structured interview notes with female workers at the mill

1. Labourer at the mill, aged 23, single, ethnic Khmu from Ban Sotchalern (about 15 minutes away by bike)

Before she worked here she helped her parents fulltime with paddy and upland rice. They didn't have rubber, so the family would seek wage labour opportunities. "My mother doesn't want me to work in the bananas due to the dangers posed by chemicals."

She is the oldest in her family, and wants to take responsibility for educating her two younger siblings – she finished high school. Even though she works here, she still has time to help on the farm. She considers herself to be middle income – although they don't have any large livestock.

When she needs to return late (after finishing at midnight) she goes back home with her friends, so safety as a woman is not an issue. There are about 10 people from her village at the mill.

The company has a fair policy towards women and men "nothing needs to change."

"I am very happy now compared to before – I want to work here a long time."

Dream is to save enough money to buy a tractor for her parents – this will be about 20 million kip.

2. Labourer, age 21, single, Ban Hinnqone, ethnic Lao

There are five people in her family, she is the oldest. Her father is a soldier, her mother sells handicrafts. They have some farming land but they rent it to others.

"I studied IT for 3 years in Vernkham (provincial capital) – after that I looked for work but couldn't find any, so I came back home to be close to my parents." Before she worked at Burapha she had a job at a beer wholesaler on 1,700,000 kip/month – she moved to Burapha because she wanted a change.

"Many people in our village want to be soldiers, but there are not enough positions – so they need to find other work to do."

On gender: "Women have more opportunities than men at the mill, because they are more even-tempered (*chai yen*). Men can be hot tempered (*chai hawn*).

She is not sure if she will stay here a long time or not – she is still young.

3. Labourer, age 29, single, from Vientiane, Lao Loum

Well educated having finished engineering. Then worked at a market research company in Vientiane (Indochina), but while some months she earned good money (10 million kip including field allowance) there were other months when she didn't have any work. So she applied to work here – came with a friend.

She “really appreciates the regular income” even though it is not as high. Expenses are house rental and she sends some to her parents. “There is enough to live on.”

Gender – the policies are very good for women – she is also happy with the social security arrangements.

She would like to keep working here – but if she gets married she would probably move back to Vientiane where her mother lives (her father is in Sayaboury).

4. Labourer, aged 30, married with 2 children, from Hin Heup (ethnic Lao)

Prior to working here she sold school supplies and sweets to children at the local school, where her husband works as a teacher. But the first COVID outbreak forced her to stop working. After that she applied to work here.

They already own a house– they send 300,000 kip week to her stepson who is studying in Oudomxay. They have a plantation of *mai khetsana* (*Aquilaria*) but the price of the trees is low – about 60,000 each.

She was able to earn more selling to students, “I don’t want to work there like before, because there were 3-4 months without work since the school is closed. I also have to pay tax, which has to be paid upfront for one year – I couldn’t afford this. So, it is better to stay here.”

Very happy with the company policies towards women.

5. Labourer, aged 30, married with a ten year old daughter, ethnic Lao

Originally from Champassak, she came to look after her aunt in Vientiane and then met her husband, who is from Hin Heup. Her husband works at the district Governor’s office.

Before working at the mill she worked at the local Mai Ketsana factory, where there were about 50-60 workers before the mill was shut due to COVID in 2020. There she earned 60,000 kip/day to split the wood with a knife – she used to work every day, with just Sunday’s off. When the mill reopened again last year her working hours were reduced – as herself and her husband don’t own any agriculture land, they have to rely on their salaries and she also needs to work. Therefore, she applied to work here.

On gender – her husband helps her with the housework and prepares the evening meal because she works later than her (for the day shift). Now it is easy to manage because her daughter is able to help.

The best thing about this job is that the salary is regular – I will continue to work here and save money for my child to study in future.

6. Labourer, aged 24, married with no children, lives in Khonephouk with her husband, ethnic Lao

She studied office management in Vientiane, but after three years of study she couldn't find a job in Vientiane (her friends also couldn't find jobs). So, she came back to be with her parents, who are traders in Hin Heup. They don't have agriculture land.

Then she decided to apply here and got a job (part of the second intake). When she applied it was before COVID lockdown in 2021, so there was less competition for jobs. It is more competitive now, because many people are now out of work.

She only recently got married and moved to Khonephouk, since her husband has a lot of work. Their income comes from processing charcoal from trees on their own land (about 2 million kip/month), paddy land, fish raising and fruit trees (now they are intercropping their fruit trees with rubber – because the income is better).

On gender – “women want to work here because the work is easier – saduak, sabay (convenience, easy) – in the village they might be able to earn more from agriculture but the work is harder.”

Q: Is a desire for work at the mill by farming HH in Khonephouk also related to a desire to diversify income, since agriculture is subject to variable prices and climate change (ie less risky)

A: No, it is not related to risk – the only reason is “saduak, sabay.”

I have no issues with juggling work and household duties because my husband and parents in law also help to manage the household.

I plan to have a child soon, and the policy of the mill is good in that regard. But I may not continue, because I might feel too tired.

7. Supervisor, Age 27, Single

Has completed a Masters in Rural Development and Land Use Planning, Faculty of Forestry, Dong Dok. Comes from Meuang Feuang.

She was interested in this job because of the proximity of the mill to her parents. She was able to use her connections in the FoF to join the two days training for the Burapha workers, and was then selected to become a supervisor. There are a total of 14 supervisors (7 women) on the factory floor.

She is pleased with the employment policy of the mill, because it gives many women in rural areas the chance of a job, since it is difficult for them to find work locally. If they have to leave their village to go to Vientiane, they often don't come back.

Her dream is to use her salary to buy some land in Vientiane and build some apartments for renting.

8. Senior Supervisor, Age 24, Single

Recently promoted to be one of only 2 senior supervisors. Graduated in Wood Technology from FoF, Dong Dok in 2019, and worked for one year with Khampaysana on 1,500,000 kip/month in a sales position. When she heard about this job she was keen to apply, because it meant using the skills that she learnt at university.

After she was accepted there was a detailed training program which included field visits to Savannakhet and elsewhere.

Q; Why do women make more suitable employees.

A: “Because working with veneer takes a lot of patience - it cannot be rushed. Grading properly takes time. You have to be careful with the sheets or you will break them – men are not so careful.”

“The situation was the same in Khamphaysana – furniture finishing tasks (sanding, filling holes, painting) is much better done by women.”

Dream is to start her own business producing quality wood furniture – especially in furniture design and finishing. “But I would need to have many years of savings to start such a business, because the equipment needed is very expensive.”

Annex 5: Structured Questionnaire

Burapha Plywood Mill Hin Heub-Khamtan

<https://ee.humanitarianresponse.info/projects/2021/3132>



Burapha Plywood Mill Hin Heub-Khamtan

1. Date ວັນເດືອນປີ ສໍາພາດ

yyyy-mm-dd _____

2. Name of Interviewer ຊື່ຜູ້ສໍາພາດ

3. Name of Interviewee ຊື່ຜູ້ຖືກສໍາພາດ

4. Phone number ເບີໂທລະສັບ

5. Age ວາຍ

6. Gender ເພດ

- Male ຊາຍ
- Female ອົງ

Name of village ບ້ານຢູ່ປະຈຸບັນ:

ແລະເມືອງ (ຖ້າບໍ່ແມ່ນຫີນເຫີບ)

7. Education qualification ລະດັບການສຶກສາ

- Primary ປະຖົມ
- Lower secondary ມັດທະຍົມຕອນຕົ້ນ
- Upper secondary ມັດທະຍົມຕອນປາຍ
- Vocation school ວິຊາຊີບ
- Associate Diploma ຊັ້ນສູງ
- University ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ
- Did not go to school ບໍ່ໄດ້ຮຽນ

8. What ethnicity are you? ຊົນເຜົ່າ?

- Lao, Leu (Lao Loum) ລາວລຸ່ມ
- Khmu (Mon Khmer) ຂະມຸ
- Hmong ມົ້ງ
- Other ອື່ນໆ



9. What is your marital status? ສະຖານະພາບ?

- Single ໂສດ
- Married ແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວ
- Widowed/divorced ເປັນໝາຍ / ຟາຮ້າງ

10. How many children do you have? ຈຳນວນລູກຈັກຄົນ

ສຳລັບຜູ້ສຳພາດເທົ່ານັ້ນ

11. Number of people in your household ຈຳນວນຄົນໃນຄວເຮືອນ

ທຸກຄົນທີ່ອາໄສຢູ່ໃນເຮືອນ

13. When did you start working at this factory? ຈຳເລີມເຂົ້າມາເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ນີ້ເມື່ອໃດ?

yyyy-mm-dd

13. What is your job at the factory? ໜ້າທີ່ຮັບຜິດຊອບຢູ່ໂຮງງານ?

14. Why did you decide to work here? ເປັນຫຍັງທ່ານ ຈຶ່ງຕັດສິນໃຈມາເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ນີ້?

ເລືອກໄດ້ຫຼາຍກວ່າໜຶ່ງ ຄຳຕອບ

- Need to pay daily expenses ຕ້ອງໃຊ້ຈ່າຍປະຈຳວັນ
- Need to save for investment/house ຕ້ອງການປະຢັດເລືອກການລົງທຶນ/ເຮືອນ
- Need to repay loan ຕ້ອງໄດ້ໃຊ້ຄືນເງິນທີ່ໄດ້ກູ້ມາ
- Not enough work on the farm ການເຮັດວຽກກະສິກຳບໍ່ພຽງພໍ
- Land is too small/no longer productive ມີທີ່ດິນທຳມາຫາກິນຂະໜາດນ້ອຍເກີນໄປ/ສະພາບດິນເຊື້ອມຄຸນນະພາບ
- Crop prices are too low ລາຄາຜົດແມ່ນຕ່ຳເກີນໄປ
- Natural disasters destroyed crops ໄພທຳມະຊາດໄດ້ ທຳລາຍຜົນລະປຸກ
- Not enough water to grow crops ບໍ່ມີນ້ຳພຽງພໍ
- Livestock died of disease ສັດລ້ຽງໄດ້ເສຍຊີວິດຍ້ອນເປັນພະຍາດ
- Tired of farming ເມື່ອຍກັບການເຮັດນາເຮັດໄຮ່
- Wanted to earn more money ຟາກມີລາຍໄດ້ເພີ່ມ
- Wanted to come back home ຟາກກັບຄືນບ້ານເກີດ
- Near hometown ໃກ້ບ້ານ
- Other ອື່ນໆ



15. Do you have experience/skills in wood processing before you came to work here? ຜ່ານມາທ່ານໄດ້ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໃນ
ໂຮງຮັດກັບຫຍັງ?

- Yes ເຄີຍ
- No ບໍ່ເຄີຍ

If yes, what did you do? ຖ້າເຄີຍມີບະສົບການມາກ່ອນ ທ່ານເຮັດວຽກກ່ຽວກັບຫຍັງໃນໄຮງງານ?

16. Income per month normal time LAK ເງິນເດືອນ (ກົບ)

17. Income per month overtime LAK ເງິນລວງເວລາສະເລຍຕໍ່ເດືອນ (ໂອທີ)

ບໍ່ນັບເອົາເງິນອຸດໜຸນດ້ານອາຫານ ຫຼື ການເຮັດວຽກໃນຕອນກາງຄືນ

18. What proportion of your household income came from your work at the factory during the past month?

ອັດຕາສ່ວນຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນທ່ານແມ່ນມາຈາກການເຮັດວຽກຂອງທ່ານຢູ່ໄຮງງານໃນໄລຍະ 1 ເດືອນຜ່ານມາມີ
ອັດສະເລຍແມ່ນມີອັກເປີເຊັນ?

ຄົວເຮືອນ

- All of our household income ລາຍໄດ້ທັງໝົດຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ
- Most of our household income ລາຍໄດ້ສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ
- Half of our household income ເຄິ່ງໜຶ່ງ ຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄອບຄົວພວກເຮົາ
- Less than half of our household income ຫນ້ອຍກວ່າເຄິ່ງໜຶ່ງ ຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄອບຄົວພວກເຮົາ



19. What are the three most important uses of your income? ນັບຕັ້ງແຕ່ທ່ານໄດ້ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ນີ້, 3 ຈຸດໝາຍໃດໃຊ້ຈ່າຍຫລາຍທີ່ສຸດແມ່ນຫຍັງ?

- rice and other food ຊື້ເຂົ້າປາອາຫານ
- electricity/water/phone ຈ່າຍຄ່າໄຟ້າ, ຄ່ານໍ້າ ແລະ ຄ່າໂທລະສັບ
- transport (buy car, motorcycle/petrol/bus fares) ຄ່າເດີນທາງ (ຊື້ລົດໃຫຍ່, ຊື້ລົດຈັກ/ນໍາມັນລົດ, ຄ່າປີລົດ)
- TV/fridge/washing machine/furniture ຊື້ໂທລະທັດ, ຕູ້ເຢັນ, ຈັກຊັກເຄື່ອງ, ເພີນີເຈີ
- Clothes and shoes ຊື້ເຄື່ອງນຸ່ງ/ເກີບ
- wedding/funeral/invitations, ແຕງງານ, ຄ່າບັດເຊີນ, ກິນທານ
- savings (bank, lend to others, group savings, gold) ອອມເງິນ (ເຜາກທະນາຄານ, ກູ່ຮ່ວມ, ຫີນຫວຍ, ຊື້ຄໍ່າ)
- build/fix house ກໍ່ສ້າງ ແລະ ປັບປຸງເຮືອນ
- buy land ຊື້ດິນ
- education (pay fees, send money to children studying) ຈ່າຍຄ່າການສຶກສາ (ຄ່າເທົ່ມ, ສົ່ງເງິນໃຫ້ລູກຮຽນ)
- health (hospital/medicine) ຈ່າຍຄ່າໂຮງໝໍ ແລະ ຄ່າຢາປິ່ນປົວ
- agriculture (tractor, cropping, livestock, tree planting) ຈ່າຍຄ່າການເຮັດການກະສິກໍາ (ລົດແທັກເຕີ, ການປູກພືດ, ການລ້ຽງສັດ, ການປູກໄມ້)
- other business ໃຊ້ຈ່າຍວຽກອື່ນໆ
- Other ອື່ນໆ

If other, what did you spend it on? ຖ້າຈ່າຍອື່ນໆ ກະລຸນາບອກວ່າ ຈ່າຍສໍາລັບຫຍັງແດ່?

20. In my current role, I am satisfied with: ໃນບົດບາດຂອງຂ້ອຍໃນປະຈຸບັນ, ຂ້ອຍພໍໃຈກັບ:	(0) ບໍ່ຮູ້	(1) ບໍ່ພໍໃຈທີ່ສຸດ	(2) ບໍ່ພໍໃຈ	(3) ພໍໃຈບາບກາງ	(4) ພໍໃຈ	(5) ພໍໃຈທີ່ສຸດ
my number of hours of work ຈຳນວນຊົ່ວໂມງເຮັດວຽກ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my flexibility to take time off when I need it ການເລືອກເວລາ ເຮັດວຽກ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my training to do this job ການຝຶກອົບຮົມກ່ອນເຂົ້າເຮັດວຽກນີ້	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my opportunities for promotion ໂອກາດໃນການຂຶ້ນຕໍາແໜ່ງ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my occupational health and safety ສຸຂະພາບແລະຄວາມປອດໄພໃນການເຮັດວຽກ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
company policy for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers ນະໂຍບາຍຂອງບໍລິສັດ ສໍາລັບແມ່ຍິງຖືພາ ແລະ ແມ່ລູກອ່ອນ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
company policy for social insurance ນະໂຍບາຍຂອງບໍລິສັດ ສໍາລັບ ການປະກັນສັງຄົມ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
company policy on sexual harassment ນະໂຍບາຍຂອງບໍລິສັດກ່ຽວກັບ ທາງເພດ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my current salary is fair for the work I do ເງິນເດືອນເໝາະສົມກັບໜ້າວຽກ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



If "No" what is the reason? ຖ້າ "ອີ້ນຖຽງ" ແມ່ນເຫດຜົນຫຍັງ?

21. Would you like to have a different job at the factory? ຈຳນາກປຽນໜ້າວຽກອື່ນບໍ່ຢູ່ໃນໂຮງງານນີ້?

- Yes ແມ່ນແລ້ວ
- No ບໍ່
- Not sure ບໍ່ແນ່ໃຈ

If yes, what job would you like and why? ຖ້າທ່ານຕອບວ່າ ແມ່ນ, ທ່ານຢາກເຮັດວຽກຫຍັງ, ຍ້ອນຫຍັງ?

22. Will you continue to work in the factory over the next 12 months? ທ່ານຈະສືບຕໍ່ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໂຮງງານໃນ 12 ເດືອນຂ້າງໜ້າບໍ່?

- Yes ແມ່ນແລ້ວ
- No ບໍ່
- Not sure ບໍ່ແນ່ໃຈ

23. Other comments to improve the training topics at the FFS? ທ່ານຢາກໃຫ້ມີການປັບປຸງຫຍັງແດ່ໃນການຝຶກອົບຮົມ ກ່ອນມາເຮັດວຽກຕົວຈິງ?

4th August