



# Rewarding women for conservation with payments for environmental services

By Pamela McElwee, 24th June 2021

We have long known that women can play a crucial role in conservation, particularly as they often have intimate knowledge of local environments from their work in activities such as food production, fuelwood gathering and forest management. But the role of women in some of the newer financial models for conservation, such as payments for environmental services delivery (known as PES programmes) is less well known. These programmes have expanded rapidly in many parts of the world. But are women and men benefiting from them equally?

There is a danger in not including women in such programmes. Women often value, prioritize or use environmental services (such as energy, food, water and medicine) more than men. However, there are numerous examples of women being excluded from meetings about PES or accessing them at lower rates than men, often as a result of discrimination or time constraints. Women may also not have input into or control over assets such as the land required to participate in these programmes, or these activities may not be available to women because of gender norms. To combat these problems, some PES programmes have explicit requirements for a minimum number of women at PES meetings or quotas for female-headed households.

Các Nguồn Thu Nhập Chính

	% Số Hộ Có Thu Nhập Từ	T/Nhập T/B Nợ	Rau Rô	AI LAM
Lúa	100%	4.800.000*		♂♀
Sắn	100%	2.000.000*		♂♀
Rừng trồng	100%	5.000.000*		♂♀
Làm công	60%	1.000.000*		♂♀
Chăn nuôi gia cầm	100%	2.000.000*		♂♀
Cây ăn quả	50%	2.500.000*		♂♀

**Hoạt Động**

Phục vụ dân, chuẩn bị bữa cơm  
Đưa con đi học, chợ  
Đi chợ  
Làm việc  
Đưa con đi học, chuẩn bị bữa cơm  
Đi chợ  
Đi làm ruộng  
Đi làm công  
Đi chợ  
Đi làm ruộng  
Đi làm công  
Đi chợ  
Đi làm ruộng  
Đi làm công  
Đi chợ

AI LAM ♂♀

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Left: Chart from a focus group meeting indicating men and women’s activities, 2011. Right: Co-author Huang Vu in a coffee field, with natural forests managed by the community under PES in the background, in Son La province, 2011. Photos: Pam McElwee

Since 2010, Viet Nam has implemented a national PES policy that charges fees on hydropower plants, domestic water suppliers and a few other industries, and transfers this money to upland areas for forest protection. Many of these areas are threatened by illegal logging or agricultural expansion, particularly for cash crops such as coffee. Approximately USD 100 million per year is paid to more than 500,000 participating households, with households benefiting by USD 100–1,000 per year. My colleagues and I in Viet Nam were interested in understanding how women have been involved with these PES programmes.

In 2011 we surveyed 227 households in three provinces where PES was being piloted, and then surveyed the same households again in 2015 in two of the three provinces (133 households). About one fifth of our sample were households headed by women. Women in our study sites were often in charge of water provisioning, fuelwood, food and other forest products, whereas men’s work included pest control, marketing of goods and finding timber for house repair.



Left: Pam McElwee interviewing a PES-participating household in Lam Dong province in 2011. Right: A focus group in Lam Dong province led by co-author Huong Vu (far left). Photos: Le Trong Tuan

Overall, we found that men initially benefited more from PES participation. Male-headed households had higher enrolment in 2011, and more men within households reported providing the majority of labour (such as patrolling forests). Forest protection was considered a man's job, as it was physically demanding and required travel away from home. Women also reported being too busy with housework to participate in PES, or felt their attendance and participation was unnecessary or unwanted. However, by 2015, more gender-equitable participation was reported: in both re-surveyed sites, the per cent of households reporting that both husbands and wives participated equally in PES had risen markedly.

We also wanted to know how these PES programmes influenced conservation actions within households. Payments for environmental services over time have increased conservation efforts for nearly all households, particularly in reducing collection of forest products and fuelwood in areas where payments were larger. However, there were some differences between female- and male-headed households in terms of changing their land-use practices after PES. We found that 46% of female-headed households who had received payments in 2011 reported they had done nothing differently after receiving them, confirming low conditionality in early implementation. Yet by 2015, the women reported more behaviour change than male-headed households, including higher self-reporting that they had prevented others from logging or had reduced their own fuelwood collection.





Left: Co-author Tuyen Nghiem (right) interviewing a survey respondent in Son La province. Right: Co-author Hue Le (left) visits with a PES-participating household in Son La, 2011. Photos: Pam McElwee

What are the policy implications of our study? The per cent of female-headed households enrolling in PES was lower overall and did not increase over time, a sign that quotas in PES policy could be useful for these households. At the same time, female-headed households reported expending more yearly effort on PES contracts when they did have them, so additional support for these households (who may be labour constrained) could also be warranted, such as through higher payment rates or other subsidies. Female-headed households receiving payments also reported being more active in forest protection activities after a few years of incentives than they were at the beginning, when they lagged behind men. This argues for avoiding short-term projects and ensuring there is sufficient time for female-headed households to secure the benefits of both payments and overall forest conservation.

Additionally, where PES rules may fall more heavily on women (e.g. restricting fuelwood collection in conservation areas), additional in-kind investment, such as in alternative cooking fuels, could be beneficial. Increased involvement of civil society organizations in PES could also improve women's ability to be seen and included, particularly for female-headed households. Finally, the inclusion of women's names on land titles has been shown to lead to lower poverty incidence and higher education attainment, and thus explicit inclusion of women's names on PES contracts might be expected to have similar positive outcomes. Overall, our research confirms that paying attention to women's needs and constraints can help design better and more targeted conservation policies.



Left: A woman collecting fuelwood and caring for children in Lam Dong province. Right: A survey participant from a Black Thai community in Son La province in front of forests protected under PES, 2011. Photos: Pam McElwee

The open access article [Gender and payments for environmental services: impacts of participation, benefit-sharing and conservation activities in Viet Nam](#) by Pamela McElwee, Hue Le, Tuyen Nghiem, Huong Vu and Nghi Tran is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.



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