



ACIAR Project FST/2016/151

“Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia”

Research Report

**Livelihood impacts for women due to employment in a teak wood processing factory,
Paklay District, Xayaboury Province, Lao PDR.**

ຜົນກະທົບຕໍ່ຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງແມ່ຍິງຍ້ອນການຈ້າງງານໃນໂຮງງານປັງແຕ່ງໄມ້ສັກ, ເມືອງປາກລາຍ, ແຂວງໄຊຍະບູລີ,
ສປປລາວ.



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Acronyms

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office
FFS	Faculty of Forest Science
LAK	Lao Kip
LECS	Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey
LSB	Lao Statistics Bureau
LSW	Labour and Social Welfare
LWU	Lao Women's Union
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry
NUoL	National University of Lao PDR
NSEDP	National Socio-economic Development Plan
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
PMO	Prime Minister's Order
PNG	Papua New Guinea
THB	Thai Baht
USD	United States Dollar
VALTIP3	Advancing enhanced wood manufacturing industries in Laos and Australia

Executive Summary (English)

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 undertaken with the cooperation of the Huamchai teak processing mill, Paklay district, Xayaboury 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.

Executive Summary (Lao) ບົດສະຫຼຸບຫຍໍ້

ຄວາມເປັນມາ

ອຸດສາຫະກຳປູກໄມ້ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ແມ່ນໄດ້ຮັບການສະໜັບສະໜູນ ຈາກໂຄງການ ACIAR FST/2016/151 "ການສົ່ງເສີມອຸດສາຫະກຳປູກໄມ້ ທີ່ທັນສະໄໝ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ແລະ ອິດສະຕາລີ", ຫຼື VALTIP3. ເຊິ່ງເປັນວຽກງານໜຶ່ງຂອງ ໂຄງການ VALTIP3 ທີ່ຄົ້ນຄວ້າເລື່ອງ: ປັບປຸງຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງຜູ້ປູກໄມ້, ແລະ ການມີໂອກາດທີ່ດີກວ່າ ແລະ ມີຄວາມປອດໄພກວ່າ ສໍາລັບການຈ້າງງານໃນຂະແໜງປູກໄມ້ປູກ.

ການສຶກສາຄົ້ນຄວ້ານີ້, ດໍາເນີນການໂດຍການຮ່ວມມືຈາກໂຄງການປູກໄມ້ຮ່ວມໃຈ, ເມືອງປາກລາຍ, ແຂວງໄຊຍະບູລີ. ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າຄັ້ງນີ້ແມ່ນກວມເອົາ 3 ຄໍາຖາມ ດັ່ງລຸ່ມນີ້:

1. ພື້ນຖານເສດຖະກິດ - ສັງຄົມ ແລະ ສະຖານະພາບຂອງຜະນິດການຍິງທີ່ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໃນໂຄງການປູກໄມ້ຮ່ວມໃຈ, ເມືອງປາກລາຍເປັນຄືແນວໃດແດ່?
- 2a. ລາຍຮັບຂອງພວກເຂົາ ຈາກການເຮັດວຽກໃນໂຄງການ ແລະ ການໃຊ້ຈ່າຍເປັນຄືແນວໃດ?
- 2b. ຜົນກະທົບຂອງການຈ້າງງານຕໍ່ກັບລະບົບການປູກຝັງຂອງຄົວເຮືອນເປັນຄືແນວໃດ?
3. ຄວາມສົມດຸນລະຫວ່າງຍິງ - ຊາຍໃນອຸດສາຫະກຳປູກໄມ້ຂອງລາວສາມາດປັບປຸງແນວໃດເພື່ອເພີ່ມບົດບາດຂອງແມ່ຍິງ?

ການຄົ້ນຄວ້າດັ່ງກ່າວໄດ້ຮັບການ ອໍານວຍຄວາມສະດວກຈາກອົງກອນຄູ່ຮ່ວມງານຂອງ VALTIP3, ຄະນະວິທະຍາສາດປ່າໄມ້ (FFS) ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລແຫ່ງຊາດລາວ (NUoL). ວຽກພາກສະໜາມໄດ້ດໍາເນີນໄປເປັນເວລາ 10 ວັນນັບແຕ່ວັນທີ 28 ມິຖຸນາ 2020, ແລະ ໄດ້ສໍາພາດຜະນິດການຂຶ້ນເມືອງ, ຜູ້ຕາງໜ້າໂຄງການປູກໄມ້, ຜູ້ທີ່ເຮັດວຽກໃນໂຄງການ ຍິງ 33 ຄົນ ແລະ ເພດຊາຍ 21 ຄົນ.

ຜົນຂອງການຄົ້ນຄວ້າຕໍ່ໄປນີ້

1. ພື້ນຖານເສດຖະກິດ - ສັງຄົມ ແລະ ສະຖານະພາບຂອງຜະນິດການເພດຍິງທີ່ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໃນໂຄງການປູກໄມ້ຮ່ວມໃຈ, ເມືອງປາກລາຍ

ຜະນິດການເພດຍິງ ທີ່ເຮັດວຽກກັບໂຄງການປູກໄມ້ຮ່ວມໃຈ ມີອາຍຸສະເລ່ຍປະມານ 35 ປີ, ສະຖານະແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວ, ມີລູກ ແລະ ຮຽນຈົບຊັ້ນມັດທະຍົມຕອນຕົ້ນ. ອັດຕາການມີລູກກວມເອົາປະມານ 1.3 ຄົນ ເຊິ່ງເຫັນວ່າຕົວເລກດັ່ງກ່າວແມ່ນຍັງຕໍ່າ ສໍາລັບຊົນເຜົ່າລາວ-ໄຕ ຖ້າທຽບກັບຊົນເຜົ່າອື່ນ, ມີການສຶກສາ ແລະ ດໍາລົງຊີວິດຢູ່ໃນຕົວເມືອງ. ຮູບແບບການຈ້າງງານແມ່ນຊົ່ວຄາວ (ວຽກຂົງເຂດສໍາເລັດຮູບ) ເຊັ່ນ: ວຽກຄັດກະດາດຊາຍ, ທາກາວ ແລະ ປະກອບເຄື່ອງເຝີນີເຈີ.

ທາງໂຄງການໃຫ້ບຸລິມະສິດໃນການຈ້າງງານ ສໍາລັບແມ່ຍິງທີ່ແຕ່ງງານແລ້ວ, ເຊິ່ງຖືວ່າເປັນແຮງງານທີ່ ໜ້າເຊື່ອຖືເມື່ອທຽບກັບແມ່ຍິງທີ່ເປັນໂສດ. ຍັງມີຄວາມຕ້ອງການຫຼາຍຕໍາແໜ່ງ, ແລະ ແຮງງານຍິງສະເລ່ຍໄດ້ເຮັດວຽກເປັນເວລາ 4,1 ປີ.

2a ລາຍຮັບ ແລະ ລາຍຈ່າຍ

ລາຍໄດ້ສະເລ່ຍຕໍ່ເດືອນ ສໍາລັບກໍາມະກອນເພດຍິງ, ລວມທັງວຽກລ່ວງເວລາແມ່ນ 225 ໂດລາ / ເດືອນ. ເຊິ່ງແມ່ນ 38% ຕໍ່າກວ່າລາຍໄດ້ສະເລ່ຍຕໍ່ເດືອນ ສໍາລັບກໍາມະກອນເພດຊາຍ 311 ໂດລາ, ເຊິ່ງມັນ ສະທ້ອນໃຫ້ເຫັນເຖິງພາລະບົດບາດ ແລະ / ຫຼື ວຽກທີ່ມີຄວາມຊຳນານດ້ານວິຊາການພິເສດຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າ ທີ່ຕ້ອງການຄວາມເຂັ້ມແຂງ. ໄລຍະເວລາການເຮັດວຽກ, ຈຶ່ງ

ປະກອບສ່ວນ \$ 28 / ເດືອນ ຂອງພວກເຂົາ, ໄດ້ຮັບການຍອມຮັບດ້ວຍຄວາມຍິນດີເມື່ອມີການສະເໜີ ແລະ ປະກົດວ່າມີຄວາມສໍາຄັນຕໍ່ຊີວິດການເປັນຢູ່ຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າ.

ກໍາມະກອນເພດຍິງໄດ້ໃຊ້ຈ່າຍ 59% ຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງພວກເຂົາໃນການບໍລິໂພກ (ສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ແມ່ນຊື້ອາຫານ), 22% ໃນການລົງທຶນ (ການສຶກສາ ແລະ ທີ່ຢູ່ອາໄສ) ແລະ ສ່ວນທີ່ເຫຼືອແມ່ນຖືກປະຢັດໄວ້. ໃນໄລຍະການສໍາພາດ, ແມ່ຍິງໄດ້ສະແດງຄວາມພາກພູມໃຈທີ່ສາມາດປັບປຸງເຮືອນ ຫຼື ສິ່ງລູກຂອງພວກເຂົາໄປຮຽນຕໍ່ໃນລະດັບສູງ. ຜົນການຄົ້ນຄວ້າດັ່ງກ່າວໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນເຖິງຄວາມສໍາຄັນຂອງການມີລາຍໄດ້ເປັນປົກກະຕິເພື່ອຕອບສະໜອງຄວາມຮຽກຮ້ອງຕ້ອງການໃນການດໍາລົງຊີວິດທີ່ທັນສະໄໝ ເຊິ່ງບໍ່ສາມາດທີ່ຈະໄດ້ຮັບຈາກການເຮັດກະສິກໍາ

2b. ຜົນກະທົບຂອງການຈ້າງງານຕໍ່ກັບລະບົບການປູກຝັງຂອງຄົວເຮືອນ

ພະນັກງານ 19 ຄົນໃນ ຈຳນວນ 33 ຄົນທີ່ຖືກສໍາພາດຍັງປະຕິບັດການປູກຝັງແບບຄອບຄົວ, ແຕ່ລະບົບການປູກຝັງຂອງພວກເຂົາແມ່ນສຸມໃສ່ການຜະລິດເຂົ້າເພື່ອການບໍລິໂພກພາຍໃນຄອບຄົວເທົ່ານັ້ນ, ແທນທີ່ຈະແມ່ນເພື່ອສ້າງລາຍໄດ້. ຍ້ອນວ່າພວກເຂົາເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໂຮງງານເກືອບທຸກໆມື້, ແມ່ຍິງມີເວລາໜ້ອຍ ໃນການເຮັດໄຮ່ເຮັດນາ, ແລະ ປ່ອຍໃຫ້ການເຮັດກະສິກໍາເປັນ ໜ້າ ມື່ຂອງ ຜົວ ຫລື ຍາດຜີ້ນ້ອງຂອງພວກເຂົາ. ຂໍ້ມູນການໃຊ້ຈ່າຍສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າການລົງທຶນໃນການຊຸກຍູ້ການຜະລິດກະສິກໍາແມ່ນຕໍ່າ. ຍ້ອນຄ່າແຮງງານສໍາລັບແມ່ຍິງໃນໂຮງງານດີກວ່າ ຈຶ່ງເປັນສາເຫດເຮັດໃຫ້ແມ່ຍິງບໍ່ເຮັດວຽກກະສິກໍາຄອບຄົວ.

3. ການປັບປຸງຄວາມສົມດຸນລະຫວ່າງ ຍິງ - ຊາຍ ໃນອຸດສະຫະກຳໄມ້ຂອງລາວເພື່ອເພີ່ມບົດບາດຂອງແມ່ຍິງ

ການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າແມ່ຍິງມີບົດບາດສໍາຄັນໃນອຸດສະຫະກຳໄມ້ຂອງລາວ, ເຊິ່ງພວກເຂົາມີຄວາມເອົາໃຈໃສ່ໃນລາຍລະອຽດໃນວຽກງານ ຂອດສໍາເລັດຮູບ ເຊັ່ນ: ການຄັດກະດາດຊາຍ, ການທາກາວ ແລະ ການປະກອບສ່ວນຂອງເຝີນິເຈີ. ຜົນຂອງການຄົ້ນຄວ້ານີ້ແມ່ນສອດຄ່ອງກັບຂໍ້ມູນທີ່ເກັບກຳຢູ່ບ່ອນອື່ນ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ, ແລະ ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນເຖິງຄວາມສໍາພັນລະຫວ່າງການເພີ່ມມູນຄ່າ ແລະ ການຈ້າງງານຂອງແມ່ຍິງ.

ໂດຍທົ່ວໄປແລ້ວ, ແມ່ຍິງຮູ້ສຶກພໍໃຈກັບການເຮັດວຽກ ແລະ ພາລະບົດບາດຂອງເຂົາເຈົ້າຢູ່ບໍລິສັດ, ດ້ວຍອັດຕາຄ່າຈ້າງ (ເຖິງແມ່ນວ່າພວກເຂົາຕໍ່າກວ່າຜູ້ຊາຍ), ຊົ່ວໂມງເຮັດວຽກ ແລະ ການຝຶກອົບຮົມທັງໝົດ ແມ່ນມີຄວາມພໍໃຈລະດັບສູງ. ມີສາມຂົງເຂດທີ່ແມ່ຍິງຮູ້ສຶກບໍ່ພໍໃຈ, ເຊິ່ງສາມາດສ້າງຈຸດເລີ່ມຕົ້ນເພື່ອປັບປຸງບົດບາດຂອງແມ່ຍິງ, ແມ່ນການປະກັນສັງຄົມທົ່ວໄປສໍາ ລັບຜູ້ທີ່ຕ້ອງການມີ, ໂອກາດຫຼາຍກວ່າເກົ່າໃນການສົ່ງເສີມ ແລະ ປັບປຸງເງື່ອນໄຂນະໂຍບາຍຕໍ່ກັບການເຮັດວຽກຂອງແມ່ຍິງຖືພາ ແລະ ແມ່ລູກອ່ອນ. ບັນຫາເຫຼົ່ານີ້ອາດຈະຖືກແກ້ໄຂດ້ວຍຄວາມໂປ່ງໃສຫຼາຍຂຶ້ນໃນສະພາບການເຮັດວຽກ (ລວມທັງສັນຍາ) ແລະ ໂດຍການເຮັດໃຫ້ການຫັນປ່ຽນໄປສູ່ພະນັກງານຖາວອນ, ແທນທີ່ຈະເປັນພະນັກງານຊົ່ວຄາວ.

ຜົນສະທ້ອນຂອງການສຶກສາ

ການສຶກສາກ່ຽວກັບວຽກເຮັດງານທຳ ທີ່ຜ່ານມາ ໃນ ສປປ ລາວ ໂດຍທົ່ວໄປໄດ້ສຸມໃສ່ປະສົບການຂອງໄວໜຸ່ມ ຜູ້ອົບຮົມພະຍົບ ບໍ່ວ່າຈະໄປເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ປະເທດໄທ (ອົບຮົມພະຍົບຕ່າງປະເທດ) ຫຼື ໄປຢູ່ນະຄອນຫຼວງວຽງຈັນ (ການເຄື່ອນຍ້າຍແຮງງານຊົນນະບົດ - ຕົວເມືອງ) ແລະ ການສົ່ງເງິນທີ່ພວກເຂົາຫາໄດ້ ປະກອບສ່ວນຊຸກຍູ້ໃຫ້ແກ່ຄອບຄົວ. ການສຶກສາຄັ້ງນີ້ ແມ່ນມີຂໍ້ຍົກເວັ້ນ, ໃນນັ້ນມັນໄດ້ສະແດງໃຫ້ເຫັນວ່າ ການຈ້າງງານໃນທ້ອງຖິ່ນ ຈາກທັດສະນະຂອງແມ່ຍິງໃນເຂດຊົນນະບົດ, ເຊິ່ງຫຼາຍຄົນທີ່ໄດ້ເຮັດຜ່ານມາເຫັນດີວ່າ (ຫຼື ກໍາລັງຢູ່ໃນຂັ້ນຕອນການຜະລິດ) ການຫັນປ່ຽນຈາກການດໍາລົງຊີວິດກະສິກໍາ ແມ່ນກ້າວໄປສູ່ການດໍາລົງຊີວິດແບບກໍາມະກອນແຮງງານ.

ການສຶກສາດັ່ງກ່າວໄດ້ເນັ້ນເຖິງຄວາມສໍາຄັນຂອງນະໂຍບາຍຂອງລັດຖະບານໃນການກະຕຸກຊຸກຍູ້ ແລະ ສົ່ງເສີມພາກ
ອຸດສາຫະກຳຊີນນະບົດ, ເພາະວ່າຄວາມຕ້ອງການຂອງການຈ້າງງານດັ່ງກ່າວແມ່ນເປັນຄວາມຈິງແທ້ ແລະ ມີຫຼາຍກວ່າຕໍາແໜ່
ງທີ່ມີ. ການຫຼຸດຜ່ອນຕົ້ນທຶນສໍາລັບຜູ້ປຸກ ແລະ ອຸດສາຫະກຳ ຈະຊ່ວຍດຶງດູດການລົງທຶນໃນວຽກງານການປຸງແຕ່ງໄມ້.
ຫົນທາງຈາກການເຮັດວຽກຊົ່ວຄາວ ໄປສູ່ການຈ້າງງານແບບຖາວອນຄວນໄດ້ຮັບການຊອກຫາ ວິທີການແກ້ໄຂ ຮ່ວມກັບ
ບໍລິສັດ, ເຊິ່ງມີແນວໂນ້ມທີ່ຈະໃຫ້ການປົກປ້ອງທາງດ້ານກົດໝາຍທີ່ດີກວ່າ ສໍາລັບແມ່ຍິງໃນຂົງເຂດດັ່ງກ່າວເປັນການລາຜັກ
ຂອງແມ່ ຫຼື ການປະກັນສັງຄົມ.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

The 2016-2020 National Socio-economic Development Plan (NSED) targets rural employment to develop the Lao industrial sector, which is expected to contribute to increased tax revenues and reduce reliance on the low-skilled agriculture sector (NSED, 2016). The possibilities for economic development in the plantation forest sector in Lao PDR are noted by the World Bank (2019), who observe that:

Intensively managed, fast-growing and short rotation industrial plantation forests, particularly if associated with agroforestry systems, can provide excellent opportunities for employment in wood production, processing, and manufacturing.

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. Objective 1 of the VALTIP3 project is to:

Identify the key elements of the policy, governance and administrative environment that constrain the development of plantation forests and value chains in Lao PDR, and other constraints to improving plantation value chains, and develop strategies for engaging with this environment and improving plantation value chains.

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 study addresses this pathway, by examining aspects of the following research questions, as 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?

Preliminary evidence gathered from a study of the teak value chain by VALTIP3 in Luang Prabang and Xayaboury suggests that the employment potential of processing into final products can be significant, particularly for women (Smith et al., 2018). The Huamchai processing factory in Paklay, Xayaboury, was found to employ 230 Lao labourers including 130 women, on a monthly wood intake of only 80m³/month. Since women were preferred as employees for finishing work such as gluing and sanding these figures suggest that female employment in processing is directly proportional to the level of value adding. Through a more in depth study of teak production in Paklay, and Huamchai operations, constraints for women in their existing roles can be examined, and ways in which these can be addressed can be identified.

This study was undertaken by VALTIP3 team members and the staff and students of the Faculty of Forest Science (FFS), National University of Laos (NUoL), which is a partner of VALTIP3.

1.2 Paklay district, teak production and the Huamchai processing factory

Paklay is a rural district located in southern Xayaboury province, 200 km west of the national capital Vientiane, and 68 km from the Thai border at Kenethao (Figure 1).

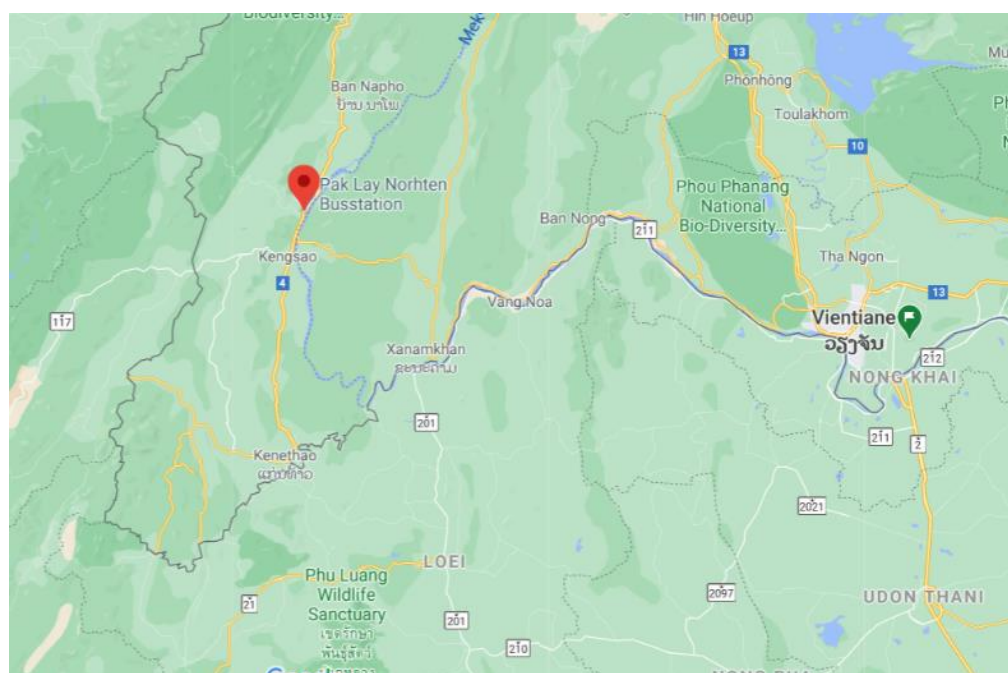


Figure 1: Research location in relation to Vientiane

The district has a population of 68,215 people (LSB, 2015), of which the majority are from the Lao Loum ethnic group and engage in farming. Key agricultural crops are cassava, rice and maize. Mapping undertaken by VALTIP3 has calculated that there are 2,626 ha of smallholder teak plantations in Paklay District (Ken Boer, pers. comm., 2/2/2021): there is also an area of native teak totalling about 2,700 ha., but this area is within a Provincial Protected Area and not legally available for harvesting (Smith et al., 2018).

The District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) reports that there were previously about 20 sawmills in the district, but this number has been reduced to four as a result of Prime Minister's Order PMO15 of 2016, which suspended the harvesting of production forest areas (native forest) and the export of all unprocessed wood including from plantations, in order to reduce illegal logging and add value within the country. With 230 workers, the 100% Thai-owned Huamchai mill is the largest employer in the district, with the next biggest employer being the Chinese cassava factory, which employs about 100 workers on a seasonal basis between October and January during the harvest period.

Huamchai mill purchases about 80m³/month of plantation teak from its contractors who buy from local plantation owners/smallholders, and converts it into a range of kiln dried products for the Thai market, including building materials (windows, frames, doors, ceiling panels, staircases) decking and decorative pieces (Smith et al., 2018). Based on the estimated area and age classes remaining in Paklay, Huamchai considers that there is only enough teakwood left in the district for another 8 years of production at its mill. They do not take wood from neighbouring Vientiane province due to high transaction costs and lower wood quality (due to sandy soils).

1.3 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 socio-economic backgrounds and identity-status markers of female employees at the Huamchai teakwood processing factory in Paklay?

Question 1 classifies the sample of women working at the factory by their ethnicity, household size, age, qualifications, migration status, job position and employment type. These characteristics will be used in the contextual analysis of the use of income and its impact on livelihoods (Question 2) and in seeking measures to improve the role of these women (Question 3).

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?

These two closely related questions seek to understand livelihood changes due to employment in the mill. The first considers income and its use: has it been used for general consumption to make ends meet, or has it been used to invest in the family farm, a business or in education for children? The second addresses the issue of agrarian transition, and whether the full-time employment is seen as a pathway to move wholly or partially off the family farm.

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

This question mirrors the research question given in the VALTIP3 project document and seeks to identify the opportunities that women have to improve their roles at the Huamchai mill and how these might be addressed.

1.4 Structure of this report

This report is structured as follows. Section 2 is a literature review that places the three research questions in 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 existing literature and the research questions, while Section 5 draws conclusions and their implications and makes suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Rural employment, income and expenditure

The agriculture and fishery sectors accounted for about 62 percent of employed persons in Lao PDR in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). Average wages in the agriculture, fishing and forestry sector in 2017 were 1.5 million kip or about \$179¹/month which is lower than the national median income of 1,800,000 kip/month (\$215) (DOPLA, 2019).

The most recent (2018-19) Lao Expenditure and Consumption Survey (LECS), reports that poverty is more than three times higher in rural areas than in urban ones, even though the rural poverty rate fell 7.6% to 23.8% between 2013 and 2019 (LSB and World Bank, 2020). More than half of total

¹ Value in LAK converted to USD at 31/12/2017. See oanda.com.

consumption (purchased and own consumption) was spent on food, with the average share of food expenditure among rural households being 15% higher than in urban areas.

Workers in the agriculture and forestry sector often receive wages on a piecework basis. Under such arrangements in Chinese banana plantations in Bokeo, Hmong migrants working fulltime received an average income equivalent to \$152/month (Ling, 2015), with variations due to worker productivity, the time to fruit maturity or storm damage. Of this income, 56% was used for consumption, especially for the purchase of motorcycles -productive investments made up only 20% of total expenditure, and most of this went to land purchase or house construction rather than to actually developing their farms at home.

Studies on the impact of timber plantations to rural employment in Lao PDR have focussed on the farmer level, either in an outgrower scheme with a forestry company or as an independent plantation owner. Phimmavong et al. (2019) and Van der Meer Simo (2020) consider that collaborative investment models² in eucalyptus which promote both food production and trees, and which provide employment, are successful in achieving diversified livelihood strategies for rural people, but employment is seasonal and includes in-kind income from rice production. Rubber plantations, which cover about 280,000 hectares in Laos (Smith et al. 2020), nominally require a workforce of about 1.5 people per hectare for tapping, but prices are highly variable, and during times of low prices trees are often left untapped (Vongvisouk and Dwyer, 2016).

Smallholder owned teak plantations are a widespread livelihood option for thousands of households in Luang Prabang and Xayaboury provinces, where they cover some 25,000 ha (Boer, 2019). However, because they are not intensively managed, they represent an average of only 7% household income over the life of the plantation (Smith et al, 2018). In Paklay, Maraseni et al (2018) compared financial returns to three groups of actors (growers, traders and a teak processing company), and found that all actions were profitable, although traders' profits were considerably less than for the two other parts of the chain: returns to mill employees were not examined.

The revised Labour Law (No. 43/NA, 24th December, 2013) sets out the requirements for employers towards their employees. Its principles include: the provision of employment contracts between the employee and the employer; safe working conditions; responsibilities related to social insurance; and right to membership of mass organisations (Article 5).

2.2 Agrarian transition

Agrarian transition has been traditionally defined as the process in which farms become progressively larger, more mechanized and require less workers as capital becomes cheaper relative to land and labour. Workers leave for urban areas to take up higher-paying jobs in the diversified economy, and the number of farms goes down. The economy no longer relies upon agriculture, but industrial production and services. While this pattern is the experience in the global North, it appears that smallholders in south-east Asia, including Lao PDR, have defied this trend, a pattern described by Rigg et al., (2016) as the 'puzzle' of the persistent smallholder. Rigg et al. attribute this to a number of factors, including a preference for "multi-stranded" livelihoods at household level combining on and

² The two main types of collaborative investment models are the outgrower (or 2+3 scheme), in which the grower provides land and labour while the company provides inputs, market and technical support and land rental (1+4) in which the grower rents land to the company and is paid for their labour to manage the trees.

off farm income, the informal (risky) nature of wage employment and a lack of alternative social safety nets,³ and the cultural value of land for the next generation. Cole and Rigg (2019) emphasise that agrarian change is not simply an economic process.

“The impacts of this change in terms of widening local opportunities are transformative, and in many cases youth and parents alike hold aspirations to engage in ‘modern life’ in Laos’ expanding towns and cities” (p. 14).

To maintain viable farming communities, DOPLA⁴ (2019), argue that it is time to promote a people centred approach, that recognises that the key to improved household livelihoods is “multiple sources of income across different sectors”. Therefore, providing off farm work, particularly to rural youth, is needed to maintain viable farming systems.

Agrarian transition also has implications from a gender perspective. In their quotation above, Cole and Rigg echo the finding of Mills (1997) in Thailand some twenty years earlier, who found that young Thai women who migrated to Bangkok were influenced to a large degree by seductive advertisers, who seem to sense the vulnerability of rural people and their desire to become modern.

Amongst lowland rice farmers in southern Laos, men and women have pursued differing livelihood strategies, with women tending to focus on off-farm income whilst men focussed on farming (Moglia et al., 2020). Moglia et al. even suggest that women may actively seek to resist new agricultural technologies, because they may “burden women in a way that detracts from generating alternative income and producing other benefits.” Estudillo et al. (2013) observe that in Lao-Tai communities (as in this study area), daughters traditionally inherit their parent’s land, while sons are prioritised for education, an arrangement that encourages women to continue family farming. However, for women born after 1981 (the majority of women in this study), this situation has evolved, with more sons receiving land and more women seeking off-farm employment.

2.3 The role of women in the wood industry

While women are clearly underrepresented in the forestry sector overall (FAO, 2006), they might be preferred in certain areas and sectors. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), “females were preferred for grading tasks due to their ability to remain focused for extended periods of repetitive work and therefore achieve higher rates of accuracy” (Hopewell and Leggate, 2017). In fact, the gender ratio in wood processing was more balanced in PNG (66:34 in favour of male employees) than it was in Australia (84:16). In six teak processing mills in Xayaboury (including Huamchai), Ling and Chanthapith (2018) found that women made up close to half of all employees (Table 1).

³ Workers can always return to the farm, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 crisis in Lao PDR.

⁴ Department of Policy and Legal Affairs, within the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)

Table 1: Proportion of female workers in teak processing factories in Xayaboury⁵

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	Xayaboury	50	13	26%
TOTAL		442	207	47%

Despite their importance to the workforce, women did not always receive the same working conditions as men. Some mills paid women lower wages because they are perceived to undertake less ‘difficult and dangerous’ work or because they do not undertake roles that require heavy lifting or technical skills such as saw sharpening (Sato 2020; Thammavong 2019; Smith et al., 2018). At Huamchai, starting rates were 200THB/day (USD6.39) for men and 150THB/day (USD4.79) for women, but the Boutsady mill paid the same wage to men and women of 50,000 kip/day (USD6.01)(Ling and Chanthapith, 2018).⁶

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 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).

3. Methods

3.1 Guiding assumptions

This research is guided by elements of both the positivist and interpretive paradigms and gathers multiple data types, which can be seen as mutually beneficial and supportive. An objective approach to gathering data on income and expenditure and its statistical analysis (Research Question 2) enables the results of this research to be compared with other rural employment studies (external validity). At the same time, the study gathered qualitative data which complements and interprets what employment means for the lives of these women in the form of transparent and authentic statements that add richness and texture to the results.

To address the gender component of the study (Research Question 3), quantitative and qualitative information was gathered that reflects the lived experiences of the participants, with a focus on . uncovering existing prejudices and constraints that women face within their employment, and to identify some answers on how these may be overcome.

⁵ All figures at April 2018, except for Phonesavang (December 2017).

⁶ Exchange rates at 1st April, 2018 at www.oanda.com.

3.2 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). Within this Faculty, rural development and gender issues fall under the responsibility of the Forest Economics and Wood Technology department, and all Lao members of the research team were from this department. Fieldwork was undertaken over 10 days from the 28th June 2020, and comprised a team of six people, as follows:

- Mr Stuart Ling, Community Development Specialist, VALTIP3, ACIAR;
- Dr Khamtan Phonetip, Head of Wood Technology Unit, Department of Forest Economics and Wood Technology, FFS, NUoL and VALTIP3 researcher;
- Mr Khonethong Soukphaxay, Senior lecturer in Wood Technology, FFS, NUoL and VALTIP3 researcher;
- Mr Lothim Saetern, Lecturer in Wood Technology, FFS, NUoL;
- Ms Somleuthai Chaisee, Masters Student, FFS, NUoL;
- Ms Kiphet Sittivong, Masters Student, FFS, NUoL;

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 an expert researcher and subordinate researchers.

3.3 Research Design

Research Question 1 was intended to gather basic data on the female employees at the mill in order to provide context for the other two research questions.

To answer Research Question 2a, two key constructs were measured, with the first being an estimation of *wage income*, by estimating the number of days they work (per week or month) and multiplying their daily wage accordingly for 12 months. As it transpired, all women were required to work fulltime, with only four days off/month which corresponded to Buddhist days off and official public holidays, meaning that a figure of 26 days/month was used by all workers to calculate annual salary. Note that a measure of household income (as distinct from wage income) was not included in the questionnaire.

The second construct was an estimate of *expenditure (including savings) from the wage*, by firstly asking the interviewee to rank their most important sources of expenditure, before calculating them in monetary terms. The difference between income and expenditure was allocated to general consumption, thereby ensuring that income and expenditure was matched. Following the classification of Adams et al. (2012) consumption covers food and consumer goods whilst productive investments are considered to be education, housing and business (including agriculture investments) that help to build human and physical capital.

The qualitative data complemented the quantitative data and added context by addressing the following topics in a semi-structured interview:

- Previous experience in wood processing;
- Past and present agricultural systems within the household;
- Satisfaction with existing working conditions and reasons;
- Perceived equality in the factory between men and women and policies towards women;
- Distribution of household duties between husbands and wives;

- Most significant livelihood change as a result of employment with Huamchai;
- Suggestions to improve the role of women within the mill;

3.4 Data collection

The three target groups for this study, along with sampling methods, survey instruments and outputs used are presented in Table 2. All interviews were conducted in Lao language, and translation into other ethnic languages was not required, since all participants were fluent in Lao⁷.

Table 2: Sampling method, survey instrument and outputs

Target Group	Sampling method	Survey Instrument	Output
1. District Government Paklay	Respondents allocated by government	Focus group discussion	- Approval to proceed - Contextual information
2. Teak Processor (Huamchai)	Not applicable	Semi-structured interview	- Contextual information - List of potential interviewees (sampling frame).
3. Women earning wages	Directed sampling	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 District Government in Paklay

Key government stakeholders were the District Labour and Social Welfare Office (which takes responsibility for labour issues), the Lao Women's Union (LWU) Office (which takes responsibility for gender issues) and DAFO. A two-hour focus group discussion was held at the DAFO office, with topics being government policies for promoting rural employment for men and women, opportunities and constraints for teak processing and labour issues. Interview notes are given in Annex 1.

2 Teak processor (Huamchai)

The Deputy Manager of Huamchai, Mr Thilasath, was interviewed at the mill's office. The semi-structured interview format covered employee characteristics, training and qualifications, differences in the roles between male and female employees and opportunities and constraints to improving the role of women (Annex 1).

At the time of interview, there were only 42 women employed at Huamchai (out of normally about 120), since about half the workforce had been laid off due to COVID-19. Three of these were from Thailand and therefore excluded, leaving a final sampling frame of 39. It was anticipated that the mill would provide a list of names and phone numbers of these female employees which could be randomly sampled to make up the target of 33, which is normally sufficient for normal distribution.

⁷ Paklay is located in an ethnic Lao area.

However, this list was not made immediately available, and the research team arranged the interviews directly with a female mill supervisor.

3 Wage earning women

Due to a high number of orders, Huamchai was unwilling to allow the women to take time off during working hours for interviews, which meant that interviews were arranged after working hours.

Since those surveyed were identified and invited to participate by the female mill supervisor, the sampling method for the structured interviews may be described as directed sampling rather than the random sampling that was originally intended. While directed sampling normally has lower statistical validity in a quantitative survey because it may not be representative of the population, it is not considered a limitation in this case since 33 (or 85%) of the 39 wage-earning women within the sampling frame were represented (Table 2).

The 13 women who answered the semi-structured questionnaire were randomly chosen to participate from the quantitative sample (also Table 3).

Table 3: Female employees surveyed in this study

Survey instrument	Sampling frame	Planned sample	Actual sample	Percentage sampled
Structured questionnaire	39	33	33	85
Semi-structured questionnaire	39	12	13	33

Interviews were held over four consecutive evenings, from July 1 to July 4, 2020. On the first evening, the team undertook two pilot test interviews to assess the suitability of the structured questionnaire and the data it provided. A team feedback session was held the following day to modify the questionnaire accordingly, and the test interview data was discarded: these women were not interviewed again. Each structured interview took about 30 minutes, while the semi-structured interview took an additional 20-30 minutes. All participants received a payment of 50,000 kip in return for giving their time outside working hours.

In addition to the 33 women, which are the focus of this study, one of the Master's students (Ms Somleutai) surveyed income and expenditure data from 21 men who were also working at the mill. That data, which provides an opportunity to compare the wage income from men and women, is presented in Section 4.3.

3.5 Data management and analysis

All quantitative data from the interviews of 33 wage-earning women was entered into Kobo Toolbox,⁸ a specialised data collection program that may be used on or off line. Prior to the research starting, the NUoL team were introduced to this program, created their own accounts and downloaded the app prior to leaving for the field. Kobo Toolbox allows for the creation of different types of questions (such as single answer, multiple answer, Likert scales), while voice recordings, photos and GPS points can

⁸ With the exception of the question on expenditure which was entered into Excel. One woman was withdrawn from the sample of income and expenditure data only when it was discovered that she was only working part-time, leaving 32 samples to be analysed.

also be uploaded into the server. Apart from eliminating paper questionnaires and avoiding inputting errors, advantages of using Kobo are that it is open source, others can view the data remotely (such as a thesis supervisor) and that it can be exported to Excel or SPSS for detailed analysis⁹. All data from this study was exported to Excel file to enable a more comprehensive analysis (such as filtering, sorting, making statistical calculations). A copy of the structured questionnaire is given in Annex 2.

The qualitative information (notes from the semi-structured interviews, as well as observations and reflections) was typed up as Word files in English on a daily basis. This is given in Annex 3.

3.6 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. Additional measures adopted in this study regarding ethical protection are:

- all interviews were undertaken in a public space;
- all questionnaires did not record the names of individuals, but assigned a number for record keeping. Phone numbers were recorded in the event that follow-up clarifications were needed;
- quotations in this report have not been attributed to individuals.

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.

3.7 Limitations of the study

Limitations to this study are:

- The narrow focus of the study on Lao-Tai women within only one wood processing factory may limit its external validity (transportability) to other ethnic groups in other factories. As FAO (2018:) points out, “ethnicity cannot be separated from gender”;
- With five researchers gathering the quantitative data, including two inexperienced students, some inconsistencies in the application of the questionnaire did occur. Data cleaning on a daily basis allowed some of these inconsistencies to be addressed;
- The gender component of this research is shallow from a technical viewpoint, since for practical reasons (time and budget) it does not seek to gather the views of men. The achievement of gender equality in the workplace implies changes for both men and women.

Representation issues may also constitute an additional limitation, since despite the lead authors’ 24 years of research experience in rural Lao PDR, fluency in Lao and best of intentions, he is nonetheless attempting to draw definitive conclusions on the lived experiences of Lao women. The team (which

⁹ FFS lecturers have since included teaching in the use of Kobo Toolbox in the student curriculum.

included five Lao researchers, two of whom were women) was aware of its positionality in relation to the respondents, and used a reflexive approach to discuss the preliminary results and the ways in which they may be interpreted.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Working conditions at Huamchai mill

Huamchai normally has 230 employees (about 130 women) including ten Thai workers, but as noted above (Section 3.4), this number had reduced at the time of survey to about 120 (42 women), due to the impact of COVID 19 on the market. There are only four permanent staff on salaries, while the remainder are paid daily wages even though they mostly work fulltime. The company permits wage labourers (or casual workers) to take time off without pay when needed, such as during busy agricultural periods, to give birth or to care for sick relatives. Wages start at 190 Thai Baht (THB) per day for women¹⁰ and 200 THB/day for men, with raises given regularly according to work performance and experience. Normal working hours are 8am to 5pm, with one hour for lunch and 10 minutes during each morning and afternoon.

The mill operates according to the Buddhist calendar, so that there is normally one day off/week as well as the standard Lao public holidays. However, the mill offers regular overtime (paid at 1.5 time) for workers wishing to work additional hours on normal days and/or on their days off.

Huamchai management stated that it seeks employees with skills rather than formal qualifications. Only four Lao employees (all male) have graduated from a vocational centre with specialist wood processing skills. A number of others gained practical experience at other mills prior to beginning with Huamchai. The company provides on the job training in accordance with the designated machinery or tasks, and those who demonstrate aptitude can be upgraded to specialist positions such as welders or forklift drivers¹¹. Production Line Supervisors, who manage about five people, are selected based on their talents as leaders and their respect from other workers, and receive a higher daily wage.

When the mill first began operations in 2012 wage labourers had individual contracts, but these seem to have been recently converted to a collective contract. Those signing contracts reported that these were quite long and kept by mill management - they did not receive a copy. Some women were offered social insurance in accordance with Article 71 of the Labor Law, which would mean that Huamchai pays into the National Social Security Fund. However, all parties (Huamchai, the District Labour and Social Welfare Office, or DLSW, and the women themselves) reported a lack of interest by workers in making a contribution and so the scheme is no longer offered (this will be addressed further in Section 4.5).

During their interview, Huamchai management was keen to emphasise their respect for Lao culture and its social norms, including norms on gender.

We always seek to employ women, but for suitable tasks. Gender is important, but we have a different sense of its meaning to western countries. We respect the role of women in the local traditions of Laos.

¹⁰ This is an increase from 150 THB/day reported in 2018 (Smith et al., 2018). Because it is a Thai company, wages are paid in THB rather than the national currency (LAK). The exchange rate at the time of survey was 8,863 LAK to one USD.

¹¹ There were no women in these positions at the time of interview.

4.2 Characteristics of female employees

This section addresses Research Question 1:

What are the socio-economic backgrounds and identity-status markers of female employees at the Huamchai teakwood processing factory in Paklay?

4.2.1 Demographic characteristics

All workers interviewed were ethnic Lao, which is to be expected given that Paklay is located in an ethnic Lao area of the country. This contrasts with those employed in two Chinese teak processing factories in the predominantly ethnic Khmu village of Kok Ngiu, Luang Prabang, where a high proportion of the workforce is Khmu (Smith et al., 2018). Labour migration was not addressed in the structured questionnaire, although of the 13 semi-structured interviewees, one had moved from Vientiane to be with relatives in Paklay and had subsequently obtained work at the mill, while another rented in Paklay because her home village was 50 km away.

Demographic characteristics of the female employees from the structured survey are shown in Figure 2. It shows that a typical female employee is aged in their mid-thirties, is married with children and has completed school to lower secondary level.

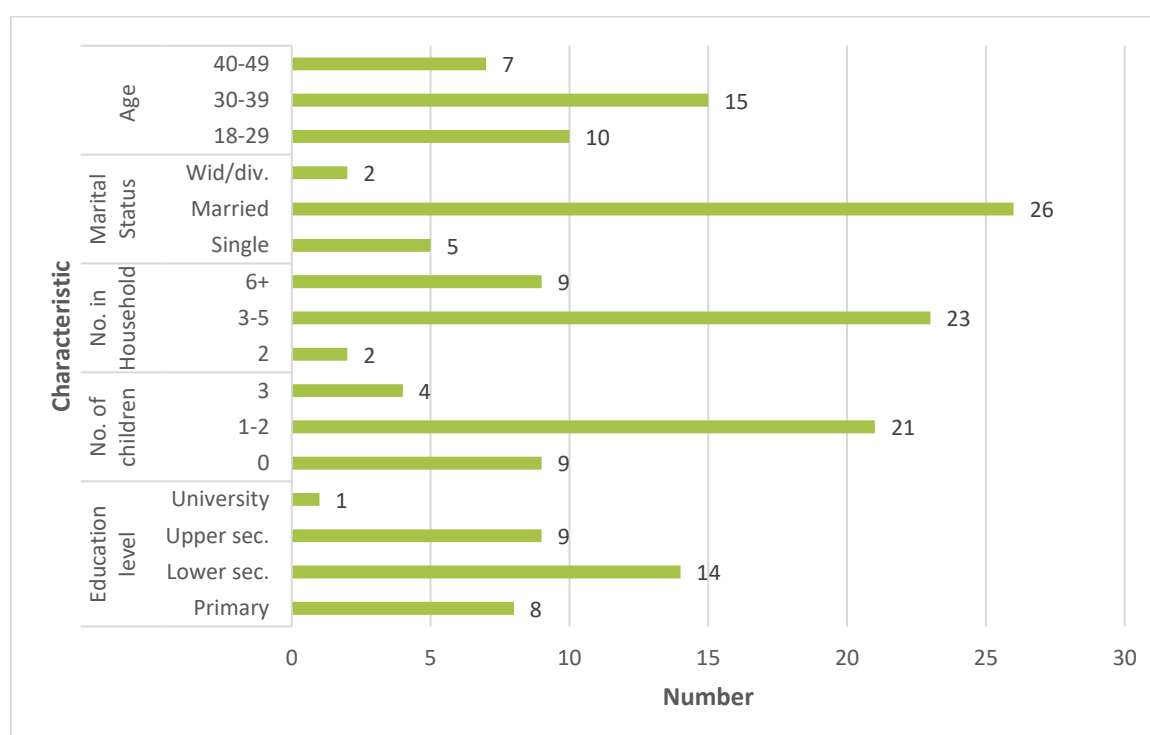


Figure 2: Demography of female workers at the Huamchai mill (N=33)

The youngest age within the sampled cohort was 21, the oldest 45, and the average 33.4. This age range is consistent with the stated policy of the company:

It is company policy not to employ anyone under 18. We prefer workers to be a bit older and more responsible and would only employ an 18-year-old if it is the child of an existing worker. New workers over 45 are also not employed [they retain existing workers over 45].

The preference for older workers at Huamchai contrasts with those starting work at garment factories in Vientiane, in which there was a preference for younger, unmarried workers (Phouxay and Tollefsen,

2011). Married workers are considered “more responsible” towards their work than single workers by mill management. Marriages between mill employees are not uncommon: of the seven married women who participated in the semi-structured interviews, three also had husbands working in the mill.

Each woman has 1.3 children on average, which is much lower than the average fertility rate for women aged 34 years of age in Lao PDR of 2.6¹² (LSB, 2015). There was an average of 4.7 people per household, which is slightly lower than the average household size in Lao PDR of 5.3 (LSB, 2015). These lower figures reflect the semi-urban nature of Paklay and the sampled cohort which represented the Lao-Tai ethnic group: fertility rates are higher in rural areas and amongst non-Lao-Tai, where educational opportunities for women are lower and cultural norms that encourage large families are more pronounced (LSB, 2015).

4.2.2 Length of employment and roles

On average, the sampled women had worked at the factory for 4.1 years, with four women having reached seven years, which implies that the women employed value secure employment and that worker turnover is low. This low turnover, combined with the policy of the mill to prioritise the employment of married women, reduces the income-earning opportunities for local youth in the district.

Like other studies of female employment in wood processing (Section 2.3), all 33 women performed roles that required attention to detail, rather than physical strength, with sanding and coating being the most common in the survey (Table 4).

Table 4: Most common roles in the mill for women

Women (N=33)	Frequency
Sanding and coating	14
Assembly	7
Sizing	7
Surface planer	4
Adhesives	3
Quality control	3

Note: In some cases, employees performed more than one role in order to ensure that they remained fully occupied.

This reflects the preference by mill management for women to undertake finishing jobs, since they “pay attention to detail, are more patient and less wasteful of wood.” By contrast, men do the jobs that require heavy lifting and operating machinery. Gendered norms were reflected by this statement from mill management:

We want to give women easier work: because they have a womb they are more fragile. But even though their roles in the mill are different, they are equally respected.

¹² 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 census data.

Wages for finishing jobs were considered less skilled than those working machinery jobs and attracted lower starting wages.

In general, women don't have a background of working on or fixing machinery, so they are not put in charge of machinery straight away.

As well as fulfilling their normal duties, three women were also production line supervisors, which attracted a higher wage.

4.3 Worker income and expenditure

This section addresses Research Question 2a:

What is their income due to this employment and how has this been spent?

4.3.1 Income

The daily wage for the 33 female workers ranged between 195 and 390 THB (average 244). Table 5 presents descriptive statistics for their income, divided into normal time and overtime (which is paid at 1.5 times the normal rate). Only one female worker reported doing no overtime at all. It shows that the mean income for a female worker, including overtime, is 83,428 THB (equivalent to US\$225).

Table 5: Descriptive statistics for female worker income (N=32)¹³

Category	Mean annual (THB)	SD	%	Min. (THB)	Max. (THB)	Median (THB)	Mean Annual (USD) ¹⁴	Mean Monthly (USD)
Normal time	73,172	15,287	88	58,500	117,000	66,000	2,365	197
Overtime	10,257	5,077	12	0	23,400	10,800	332	28
TOTAL	83,428		100				2,697	225

The normal time monthly wage of US\$197 (or \$225 including overtime), is slightly above the reported average wage of the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector of DOPLA (2019) of \$179/month. It also compares favourably with the average monthly wage of \$150 received by migrant workers to banana plantations in Bokeo (Ling, 2015), and the mandated minimum wage in Lao PDR of 1.1 million LAK/month, or US\$124.11 (Vientiane Times, 2019).

As explained in Section 3.4, income data was also collected for 21 male workers during the study (Table 6). The daily wage for male workers ranged between 235 and 510 THB (average 349), which is 43% higher than the female workers. This represents a normal time monthly wage of \$282, which is much greater than the average wage for the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector. On a monthly basis, men earn 38% more than women.

¹³ One respondent was removed during data cleaning due to errors and inconsistencies.

¹⁴ Source: Oanda.com, 30/6/2019.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for male worker annual income (N=21)

Category	Mean annual (THB)	SD	%	Min. (THB)	Max. (THB)	Median (THB)	Mean Annual (USD) ¹⁵	Mean Monthly (USD)
Normal time	104,643	27,253	91	70,500	153,000	105,000	3,383	282
Overtime	10,906	9,263	9	0	35,235	8,460	353	29
TOTAL	115,549		100				3,736	311

This difference in wages can be explained by the different roles that men take in the mill (and the perceived value of these roles). Ten of the 21 men took on roles that were not done at all by women, with five being sawyers, three responsible for machine maintenance, one forklift driver and one kiln operator. Three of the men surveyed were also supervisors. Of these ten positions, seven attracted a wage of over 400 THB/day (or higher than the best paid woman)!

4.3.2 Expenditure

As noted in Section 3.3, productive investments help to build human and physical capital (such as education, housing and business investments), whilst consumption covers food and consumer goods. Table 7 provides a breakdown by category of actual expenditure for the 32 households. It does so firstly on the basis of mean expenditure, and secondly by counting the number of households who spent money on a particular category.

Overall, 59.4% of actual expenditure is used for consumption, with the number one item being rice and other food, both in terms of total amount (at 17,524 THB/year representing 21.0% of all income) and number of respondents (where it ties with water/electricity at 90.6%). The next highest consumption expenditures were much lower, being for water/electricity (3,376 THB/year), truck/car transport (2,548) and beauty products (2,032)¹⁶.

Investments, representing 22.3% of expenditure, were focussed on home improvement (5,972) and education (5,886). There were only limited investments in agriculture, mostly for farm inputs (seeds, fertilizer, labour)¹⁷, and there were no reports of investing in agricultural machinery such as tractors. Savings, at 18.3%, made up the remainder, and most women¹⁸ reported that they participated in informal group savings schemes, in which a regular amount per month is saved with a group of co-workers or friends, and withdrawn to fund large purchases when the need arises.

¹⁵ Source: Oanda.com, 30/6/2019.

¹⁶ Beauty products were added as a category after the pilot surveys, when their relative importance was realised. There is societal pressure on women to look their best for social engagements (such as weddings, festivals).

¹⁷ It could be argued that the purchase of annual inputs for the production of consumed food is actually a consumption cost, rather than an investment.

¹⁸ The count of five does not reflect the total number of participants in group savings schemes, because money withdrawn from the scheme was allocated according to the purchase.

Table 7: Female worker expenditure by category, and distribution (N=32)

Category and Item	Mean Exp. (THB)	% Total (Exp)	No. who reported item	% Total (Count)
<i>Investment</i>				
Improve/build house (add value)	5,972	7.2%	13	40.6%
Transport - truck/car (for agriculture, business)	-	0.0%	0	0.0%
Buy land	1,109	1.3%	1	3.1%
Education (school, university fees)	5,886	7.1%	19	59.4%
Health (medicine, hospital costs)	886	1.1%	13	40.6%
Agriculture machinery (e.g. tractor)	-	0.0%	0	0.0%
Crop investment (including seeds, fertilizer, irrigation)	1,340	1.6%	8	25.0%
Livestock investment (including animals, fencing)	1,008	1.2%	7	21.9%
Tree plantations	80	0.1%	1	3.1%
Hire farm workers	1,984	2.4%	11	34.4%
Business (shop, restaurant)	308	0.4%	2	6.3%
TOTAL INVESTMENT	18,574	22.3%		
<i>Savings</i>				
Cash	4,899	5.9%	9	28.1%
Bank	4,812	5.8%	9	28.1%
Group savings scheme	4,954	5.9%	5	15.6%
Gold	246	0.3%	1	3.1%
Lent to relatives	354	0.4%	1	3.1%
TOTAL SAVINGS	15,266	18.3%		
<i>Consumption</i>				
Rice and other food	17,524	21.0%	29	90.6%
Clothing and footwear	1,853	2.2%	16	50.0%
Wedding/funeral/temple (including invitations)	1,725	2.1%	20	62.5%
Household durables (TV, fridge)	263	0.3%	3	9.4%
Electronic (phone, computer)	1,075	1.3%	9	28.1%
Transport- truck/car (convenience)	2,548	3.1%	8	25.0%
Transport - motorcycle (convenience)	1,077	1.3%	5	15.6%
Gift to relatives (not lend)	1,075	1.3%	10	31.3%
Beauty products	2,032	2.4%	22	68.8%
Water/electricity	3,376	4.1%	29	90.6%
General consumption (specific consumption unknown)	16,877	20.3%	32	100.0%
TOTAL CONSUMPTION	49,425	59.4%		
GRAND TOTAL	83,265	100.0%		

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=32).

The pattern of expenditure in this study, may be contrasted with that of Ling (2015)¹⁹, on the expenditure for migrant Hmong workers undertaking labour on banana plantations in rural Bokeo (Figure 3).

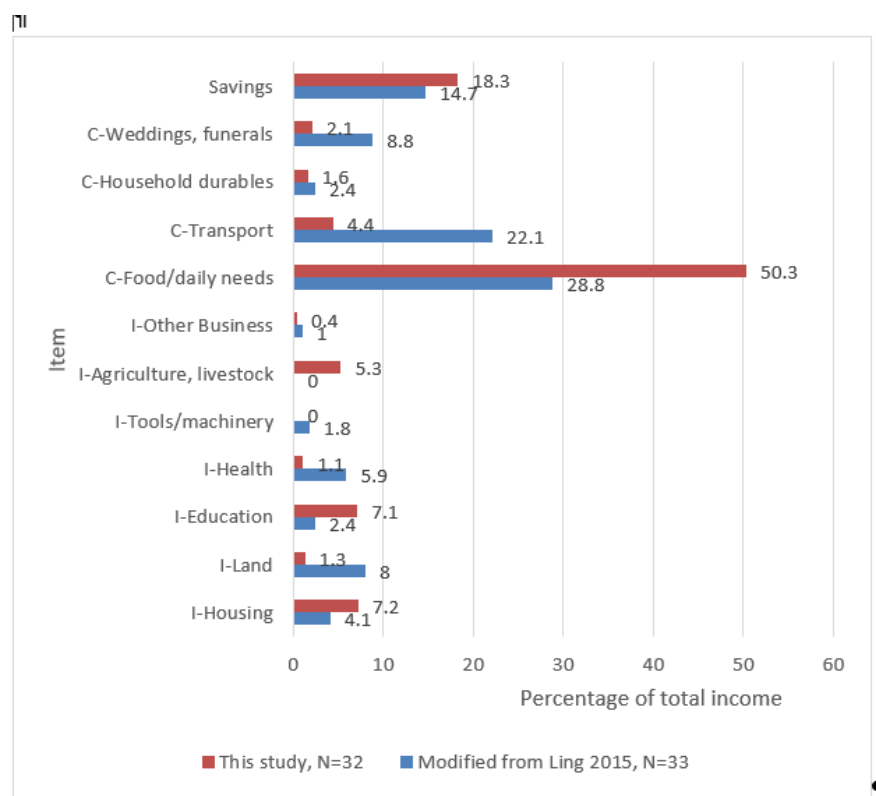


Figure 3: Expenditure patterns for two studies of rural employment

Note: ‘C’ before the category denotes consumption, while ‘I’ denotes investment.

Figure 3 indicates that the Huamchai workers spend a higher proportion of their wage on food and other necessities²⁰ (such as electricity and water), which reflects their urban/semi-urban lifestyles and higher disposable income. Spending on transport was lower for Huamchai workers, since many of those working in bananas represented poor households from mountainous areas who aspired to save for their first motorcycle. Education and housing were greater priorities for urban workers, while rural workers spent a greater proportion on health and weddings/funerals (high wedding costs in Hmong society, which require cattle to be sacrificed, were a motivation for several households to migrate in Ling’s study).

The semi-structured interviews (Annex 3) highlighted the changes to worker livelihoods due to their employment in the mill. The interviews were surprisingly candid, with several women demonstrating a sense of pride about the way their work has improved their own lives and those of their families. There appeared to be a sense of loyalty shown to Huamchai for making this happen.

¹⁹ A difference, which may be significant, is that Ling (2015) measures expenditure at household level while this study measures at the level of individual workers.

²⁰ It is assumed, for the purposes of comparison, that inflation since 2015 equally affected all expenditure categories.

I have been able to fix the kitchen and bathroom with my wage. Now the kitchen is bigger and the bathroom has tiles and is easy to clean (Respondent 8).

I have been able to pay for my son's education so far with my salary. I hope that he will be able to study further, possibly to become a policeman (1).

Without this job I wouldn't be able to survive, because there would be no money to pay for essentials like electricity, school fees, rice/food and clothes for the family (2).

The most important thing is the house. It is not so big but it is home. It has concrete walls and a tiled roof, with hot and cold water. I have also bought a motorcycle for my son. All this has been done with income from the mill (4).

Even so, some women found it challenging to make ends meet, due to the high cost of raising children. One woman had three children (two teenagers) and a husband working away.

My main concern is that the wages are not high enough, because I have only just enough to raise my children. There is nothing left over at the end of the month – fortunately I can buy goods on credit at one particular store without interest, and then repay them when I receive my wage (11).

4.3.3 Discussion

The income provided by the mill is higher than the average wage for rural workers in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector in Lao PDR. However, their living location in Paklay, which is semi-urban, means that their expenses are also higher. The income and expenditure findings highlight the preference for a regular income (in food, utilities, school fees, beauty products, transport) to survive in a modern market economy, that an irregular farm income cannot provide. For most women, it appears that it is simply not enough to work regular hours, and that overtime, rather than being optional, appears to be a necessity that allows women to get through the month.

Women employed at Huamchai have been able to raise their living standards in line with increasing social expectations. Outside bathrooms have been rebuilt inside, which provides greater convenience and cleanliness, as well as hot water. With fewer children, there is a greater investment in education. Weddings and other social functions require visits to the salon instead of simply doing things at home. Food is less likely to be sourced from the farm, and more likely to be purchased for convenience: while more expensive, it makes sense for women who are time-poor.

In a broader sense, the study highlights the positive impact of even a small amount (in this case 80m³/month of roundwood) of local timber processing to the Lao economy. Were the 32 workers sampled to be representative of the normally 230 workers at the mill, then the total input into the local economy would be approximately US\$620,000, or US\$646 for every cubic metre processed,²¹ which in itself generates additional jobs in areas such as agriculture, construction, restaurants and beauty salons. The assertions by Phimmavong et al (2020), who argue that rural employment could be enhanced by introducing favourable plantation forestry policies, appear reasonable.

²¹ At June 30, 2020, when the study was undertaken.

4.4 Effect of employment on the farming system

This section addresses Research Question 2b:

2b. What is the effect of this employment on their household farming systems?

4.4.1 Proportion of farming households in the study

The World Bank (2007:74), defines a rural farming household as one where more than 50 percent of income is derived from agriculture. Given that the majority of women interviewed (representing 23 households, or 70%) are wholly or mostly reliant upon the mill for their income (Figure 4), then under this definition only a minority come from farming households²².

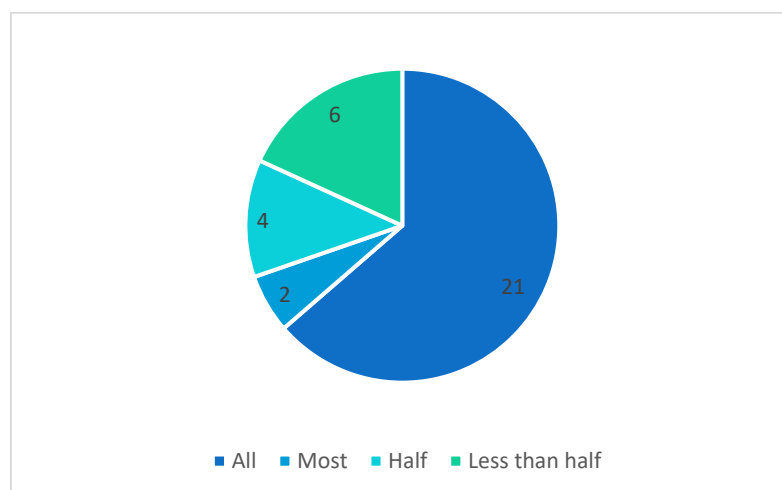


Figure 4: Proportion of household income earned at the factory by each worker (N=33)

In a follow-up question however, 19 women reported having harvested rice on their own land in the previous 12 months, which indicates that some households are still practising subsistence type agriculture for self-consumption. These women were then asked why they would need to work in the mill. The responses are given in Figure 5 (Note: some workers gave more than one response).

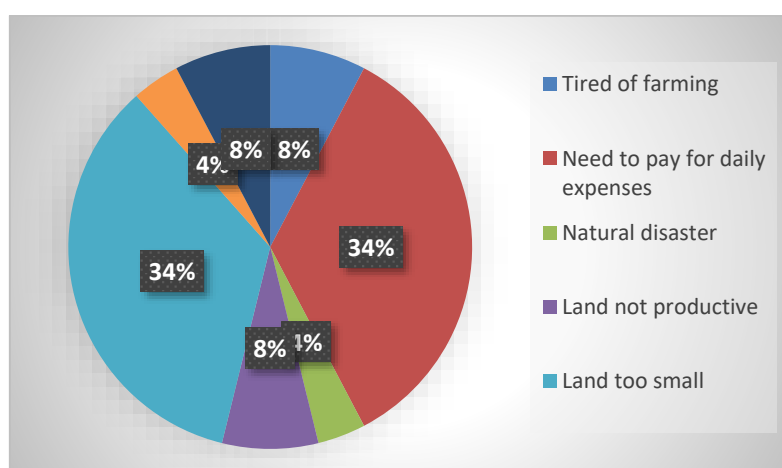


Figure 5: Reasons for farming households to have a worker in the mill

²² We cannot assume that the remainder must be farming households, since some women had husbands who were government officials.

Figure 5 indicates that for the majority of those interviewed, farming is no longer able to provide for daily expenses (34%), or sufficient rice for household needs (also 34%). Only 12% appeared to be confident in the ability of their farms to provide a livelihood (being those who responded “*still have time after doing paddy*”, “*want to have more money*”). Figure 5 is consistent with Table 6, which showed that mill workers are not investing in developing their farms (such as in mechanisation), but rather are spending only a limited amount on inputs to grow rice for household consumption.

4.4.2 Constraints to viable family farming

Insights into the challenges of maintaining a viable family farm were gained from the qualitative data, and included factors such as: numerous siblings needed to share a limited plot, a lack of irrigation infrastructure (farms are rain-fed) and low crop prices.

I left school at 13 to work on the family farm. It relies on the rain only, so in some years there is not enough rice to eat. In any case the farm cannot provide for six siblings. Now only one sibling stays on the farm to help our parents (10).

My family still has paddy land on the other side of the river. I can take days off for planting and harvesting, but have to hire labour to do these tasks. I cannot be a fulltime farmer because I have to earn money to support the children (13).

I used to farm before working here and we had paddy land and upland fields. However, the paddy land was done together with my brothers and sisters and the total output was insufficient for all of us, while the government appropriated our upland maize fields because we didn't have permanent or temporary title (11).

For one respondent, working close to home at the mill was more convenient than going to the farm.

Before working at the mill, I farmed fulltime with my sister on our family land and we shared the harvest. We would get about 100 bags rice in a normal year. At that time my husband worked in construction, but work wasn't regular and neither was our income. The farm was located on the other side of the Mekong river [in Vientiane province] and so it was hard to manage since we had to go over by boat. Work in the mill is much more convenient because it is close to the house (6).

Of the 13 qualitative interviews, only one person expressed a desire to return to farming, although she acknowledged that it is probably out of reach.

My dream is to be able to have enough money to buy cattle, but where I live now there is no place to raise them. There is no community livestock area in our village, and those wanting to do so must have their own land and fence it properly. I would never borrow money to buy cattle because it would mean using our house as collateral – I would never risk doing that (11).

There is a belief that the government should do more to generate off-farm employment as an alternative to farming.

The government needs to provide more opportunities to local women for paid employment, since many people need to have work. There should be more companies like Huamchai (4).

4.4.3 Discussion

While the majority of households representing workers still farm their land for rice production, their future does not appear to be assured. Existing farms are rain-fed and of low productivity, a situation likely to remain unchanged given climate change as well as rising land prices in semi-urban areas such as Paklay. Unlike some other South-east Asian countries (see Laiprakobsup, 2019), government support in the form of subsidies or irrigation infrastructure, which might encourage them to stay on the land, is limited. The respondents offered no viable pathways to improve their productivity with the wages from the mill, since there appeared to be no investments in agriculture, such as for mechanization (see Table 6)²³. Compounding this lack of investment is the finding that workers are averaging only 1.3 children each, and that education is given a high priority by their parents – this makes it even more likely that wage labour will provide a pathway off the family farm. It would appear that the proposition of the “persistent farmer” (Rigg et al, 2016) is unlikely to apply in this case.

Note however, that these findings must be seen in the context of the Lao-Tai ethnic group, and may not be transportable to other settings. Compared to other ethnic groups in Lao PDR, Lao-Tai women have greater levels of education, marry later, have fewer children and are constrained by fewer traditional and cultural norms, which allows them to more readily find off-farm work and a pathway out of agriculture. Their peri-urban location, on the outskirts of Paklay, may only enhance this transition.

4.5 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?

4.5.1 Satisfaction with working conditions at the mill

Figure 6 averages eight measures of working conditions 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.

The women were satisfied (average score above 3) with their wages, training, flexibility, OHS and number of working hours, and less satisfied with policies for social insurance, pregnant/nursing women, and opportunities for promotion.

The qualitative interviews provided some additional background on the satisfaction of women with the company policies. Of the 13 women interviewed, 11 believed that the company policies were fair towards men and women, even though it appears that gender stereotypes prevail and are reinforced.

The policies of the company towards men and women are fair, because they take the different abilities of men and women into account. I like that I am able to take time off when I need to (9).

Men are given the more difficult and heavier work, so it is fair that they are paid more (4). Men do the harder work in the mill and take a greater risk, as they are more likely to get injured. Therefore, the company policy is fair (5)

²³ In southern Laos, Manivong et al. (2014) observed increasing farm mechanization to compensate for the loss of labour as their children went to Thailand, but this may be due to better farming conditions.

I have men working in the same section as myself, but they are paid less than me because they have less experience (1).

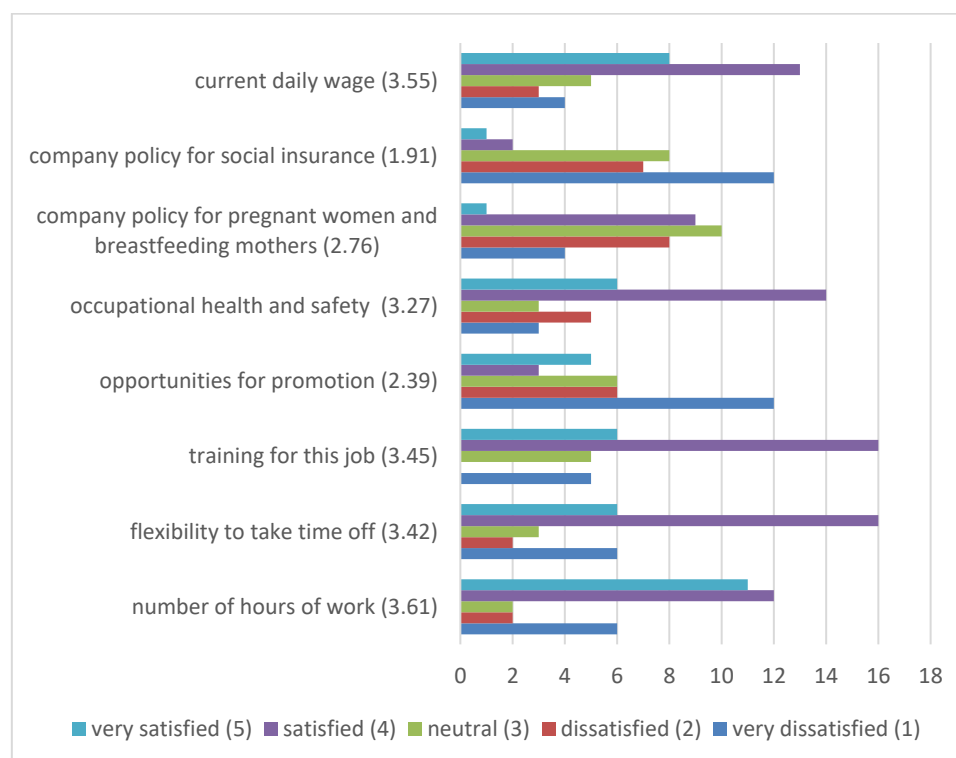


Figure 6: Satisfaction with working conditions at the mill

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=33).

Incentives for good performance, such as regular pay rises, were valued by the women and reinforced their loyalty to the company. This contrasts to the workers in Vientiane garment factories described by Phouxay and Tollefsen (2011), who were denied pay rises or promotional opportunities despite years of service.

Those working well can get higher wages – I have received a wage raise every year (11).

I was very proud when the company increased by daily wage for good performance by 30 baht/day. If I have a chance to become a supervisor I will (6).

Workers were satisfied with the flexibility of the company in allowing them to take time off when they needed. Given that women are already satisfied with their working hours and wages, it appears that they do not perceive their positions in the mill as insecure. The statements by mill management, which highlight their preference for married women as employees, reinforce this assertion.

Of the working conditions in Figure 6, social insurance was given the lowest score (1.91). Some insights gained from the qualitative data are given in Box 1.

Box 1: Social Insurance. Is it worth it?

The Lao government has promoted social insurance schemes within the private sector since 2001, but the level of take-up nationwide is low. The Social Security Law (No.34 NA), which covers both sickness and retirement benefits, requires a contribution of 11.5% of salary/wages, of which the employer is meant to contribute 6%, and the employee 5.5% (this is a slightly different ratio to that given by Huamchai management, which is 6% for the employer and 4% for the employee). As noted in Section 4.1, Huamchai appears to have given up offering social insurance because of a lack of interest, despite its obligations under the Law.

During the interviews, women seemed confused about the conditions for accessing social insurance. Some reported that it was necessary to be a Trade Union member (see Section 4.5.2) before such a benefit was available, while others thought it only covered illness. Several respondents stated that they would take it if it was offered by Huamchai, but only if they didn't have to contribute themselves.

I have heard of social insurance, but my section has not yet been offered the chance to be members. If I have an opportunity to join, I would be interested, but only if Huamchai pays the whole cost (1).

Others decided that they didn't need to join the scheme.

Because my husband is a government worker, our family gets free coverage at hospitals – therefore there is no immediate necessity to buy social insurance (12).

A 43-year-old woman, married with one son, gave a detailed response about why she didn't need social insurance.

Before I was in the social insurance scheme, and had to contribute 80,000 kip/month. But I didn't get sick, and so I felt it was a waste of money and decided to withdraw. My husband withdrew at the same time – in fact many people withdrew at the same time, but “we didn't get our money back.” Last year I needed to have my appendix removed. Even though I wasn't insured, it didn't cost much at the district hospital in Paklay (a bit over one hundred thousand kip, [\$13]), since the government now has subsidised health care at the local hospital. Before an operation like this would have cost well over one million kip. I remain confident that withdrawing from the social insurance scheme was the correct thing to do (4).

My niece also works at Huamchai, and had a problem with her womb that the local hospital couldn't treat. Under the subsidised policy, she would have had to go to Sayaboury provincial hospital for treatment. But she felt that it would be better to go straight to Vientiane for better treatment, even though she would have to pay full costs. After that she decided to withdraw from social security also (4).

Figure 7 assesses interest in gaining promotion (the second lowest score, at 2.39), by asking the women whether they wished to have a different job at the mill.

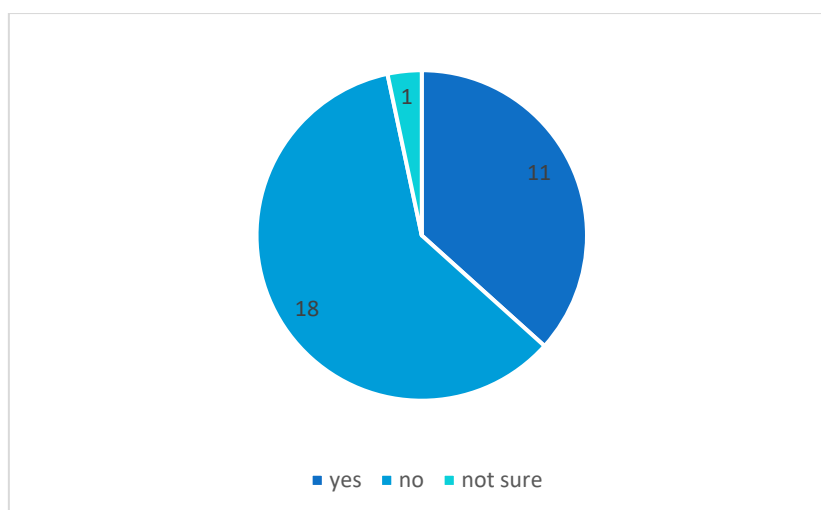


Figure 7: Interest in having a different job at the mill

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=33).

Eleven people (or one-third) expressed an interest having a different job, although none specifically requested to take supervisor positions, or as machinery operators, which might attract a higher daily wage (Table 8). This may reflect inherent shyness rather than a lack of ambition – it could not be fully explored in a quantitative interview.

Table 8: Type of position desired by female workers

Yes responses (position) N=11	Yes responses (number)
Planing	2
Furniture assembly	3
Detailed work	2
Lighter work	1
Up to the mill to allocate	3
TOTAL	11

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=11).

The company policy towards pregnant women and nursing mothers was also not widely endorsed (2.76), since women are not paid maternity leave as casual, rather than permanent workers²⁴. Some workers accepted that it was a personal responsibility which they should manage themselves, while others felt that they are disadvantaged without some financial support.

Women have to plan for pregnancy, by saving money in advance (8).

There is no special policy towards pregnant women. If there was a small payment it would help them to cover the time they need off (5).

²⁴ Under the Labour Law (Article 98), “Before and after giving birth, women workers shall be entitled to at least one hundred and five days of maternity leave.”

A female supervisor observed:

There should be a policy to support new mothers, since now they receive nothing. They cannot take their young children to the mill²⁵ and if there is no one to care for them (like a grandmother) then they need a long time off which is financially draining (7).

4.5.2 Capacity of the Lao Federation of Trade Unions to improve working conditions for women

The Lao Federation of Trade Unions is a mass political organisation to represent the rights and interests of workers, which has been established, led, and educated by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.²⁶ Huamchai first established a factory Trade Union unit in 2017, and paid the initial registration fee for selected workers with good work records. A union representative (or unit head) was elected by the membership and collected 5,000 kip/month which was supposed to contribute towards ceremonies or meetings. Annex 4 provides some perceptions of the Trade Union by workers.²⁷

The ability of the Union to advocate on behalf of female workers is now unclear. Fees are no longer being collected and there appears to be little interest from ordinary workers in becoming members, due to a lack of perceived benefits.

Most of us are not interested, since the company doesn't pay our membership fees and we have to pay ourselves. I am not sure about the policy of the company because we work without a contract²⁸, but I do know that we all receive our wages according to our positions and on time every 15 days.

Female, 28 years old and not a Trade Union Member.

It also appeared difficult for women to speak out about working conditions with either the Union or mill management since there is a fear that 'troublemakers' might be targeted. With few other full-time employment opportunities for women in Paklay, positions at Huamchai are highly sought after.

Even though there are trade union meetings once per year I have not raised this issue, because the company also participates²⁹. When the union representatives ask if anyone has something to propose, everybody stays quiet (7).

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

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 modified to reflect their status as fulltime workers.

My husband helps a lot around the house. If he comes home first then he will start the household duties. There is no tension between us on these issues (1).

²⁵ It is presently company policy not to allow workers to bring children to the mill because of the dangers posed by machinery.

²⁶ Lao Trade Union Law, No. 323/PO, 25th December, 2017.

²⁷ Ms Somleutai, in a report dated 17/6/2021.

²⁸ The issue of contracts was addressed in Section 4.1.

²⁹ Apparently it is normal practice for a company to participate in Trade Union Meetings, according to a provincial Trade Union staff member (interviewed 17/6/20121).

My husband helps with the housework, because he has weekends off (10).

None of the qualitative interviews demonstrated dissatisfaction with the distribution of household duties – just an acceptance that everybody had work within the household and that such duties needed to be done by somebody.

I do most of the housework because my husband also works nights as a guard in the factory [in addition to his regular day job], with his main role being to protect the mill from fire (4).

My son helps in the paddy fields, but I have to do most of the housework since my husband drives a truck and is often away (11).

While seemingly positive, some caution is needed in transporting these findings more generally, since this study only involved the Lao-Tai ethnic group. Other studies have shown that “the division of labour between men and women in ethnic minority communities is stricter than in Lao-Tai groups, and this division often burdens women with more work than men” (FAO, 2018).

4.5.4 Intention to continue working at the mill

Interestingly, all 32 respondents forecast that they would be continuing to work at Huamchai in one year from now, and that 26 (or 81%) expect to be still there in five years (Table 9). Staying another five years will push many into their forties, given that given that 15 of those sampled are now aged over 35.

Table 9: Stated intention to continue working in Huamchai in future

Answer	In one year from now	In five years from now
Yes	32	26
No	0	1
Undecided	1	6
TOTAL	33	33

Source: Worker questionnaire (N=33).

The reasons that workers choose to stay with Huamchai are given in Table 10.

Table 10: Reasons that workers expect to still be working at Huamchai five years from now

Reason	Number
Still need to have regular income	10
Work location is convenient (close to house)	6
Gives me something to do	5
There are no other work options	2
Opportunity to build a career	1
Better than doing farming	1
TOTAL	25

Source: Worker questionnaire. Multiple answers permitted. Five of the 26 workers answering yes did not answer this question.

As might be expected, the need for a regular income was the most common reason cited for continuing to work at the mill, and again highlights that farming can only provide lumpy (or irregular) income. The convenient location in Paklay was also popular, since women did not have to spend time travelling.

Before I joined Huamchai I worked in a furniture factory doing polishing. The work there was OK but Huamchai is closer to my house (1).

There was only one person who expected not to be there in five years' time, being presently aged 42 and thinking of retirement. The six who were 'unsure' cited raising a family, a return to stay with parents or worries about health/hard work as reasons why they may not continue. The low turnover of employees does not offer much hope to young people who wish to pursue a career in the mill, or for those who wish to be promoted to supervisors (perhaps this is why 'opportunities for promotion' rated lowly on the Likert scale for satisfaction – Figure 6).

4.5.4 Discussion

The research question:

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

assumes that there are some constraints to the gender balance in the Lao wood industry which need to be addressed. However, this assumption needs to be unpacked before the question can be properly answered. Firstly, as the literature review found, Lao women already play an important role in the Lao timber industry, where they are valued for their attention to detail and make up a significant proportion of employees in processing factories. Secondly, 'improved gender balance' may be understood differently according to the cultural context. Does it mean that both sexes should have equal access to all positions based on merit or quota and the working conditions that come with that choice, or are women prepared to trade off equal access in return for less risky, lighter or more flexible work. Further, there are likely to be differences between the different ethnic groups, based upon traditional norms and expectations.

Figure 6 identifies three areas in which women felt less satisfied, and which could be a starting point for improving gender the gender balance. The first is social insurance, but given that the policy of the company appears exactly the same for men and women, then it is difficult to make specific recommendations from a gender perspective, other than providing more clarity as to the benefits such insurance would provide.

The second concern is limited opportunities for promotion, perhaps as a supervisor, although improvements may be difficult to achieve given the limited turnover of workers. Here further research is needed to understand the work units and how they are managed by the company. Perhaps a supervisory position requires a greater commitment in terms of time, which then reduces flexibility to take time off. Or perhaps promotion is based on age or length of service, and women on average have fewer years than men.

The third is the policy towards pregnant and nursing women, and here it appears that such women are unfairly disadvantaged. Given that many appear to survive from month to month, then having a child represents a financial hardship – women may choose to come back too early, which may put their health at risk and leave their baby relying on powdered milk. Ideally, perhaps, women should

become permanent employees, rather than casual ones, so that they would have 105 days of maternity leave under the 2013 Labour Law.

These, and other issues, might be clarified were there to be more clarity in the employment conditions, including written contracts, which are a requirement for legal entities (such as Huamchai) under Article 77 of the 2013 Labour Law. This Law does not adequately address the rights and conditions of casual labourers³⁰, like the women employed at Huamchai, but presumably some might be better served by becoming permanent employees, if this were possible. However, some sensitivity is needed to ensure that women's needs would be met by becoming a permanent employee, since they may become subject to differing tax rates, less flexibility in working hours or compulsory social insurance. Although the question of transitioning to permanent employment was explored with the women during the semi-structured interviews, they were unable to provide a definitive answer until its full implications are understood. In any case, modified contract arrangements should be subject to a trial period with a limited number of participants until such implications can be realised.

³⁰ Including for example, how long they may be kept as casuals before offering them full-time employment.

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 socio-economic backgrounds and identity-status markers of female employees at the Huamchai teakwood processing factory in Paklay?

The typical female employee at Huamchai is aged in their mid-thirties, is married with children and has completed school to lower secondary level. All were recruited locally – there were no migrant workers. 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. What is their income due to this employment in and how has this been spent?

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. The study also illustrates the flow-on effects of mill employment to the local services sector – more jobs in Paklay may keep young people in the area, instead of needing to relocate to Vientiane or Thailand.

2b. What is the effect of this 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 productively were low. Wage labour for women at the factory is providing a pathway off the family farm.

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

This question proved difficult to answer definitively given the limitations of this study (Section 3.7), although some interesting findings did emerge. Firstly, women are already playing an important role

in the Lao wood industry, where they are valued for their attention to detail in finishing tasks – a simple answer to this question would then be to increase the level of value adding. Secondly, the principle of ‘equal remuneration for work of equal value’ is not well understood in the context of this study – the question might be asked, since women (or a majority of women) have a preference for less risky or lighter work, should light work be accorded less ‘value’ than heavy work? Thirdly, formal qualifications which might lead to higher wages do not appear to be a prerequisite for employment for both men and women. Fourthly, this study may be of limited transportability, given the differences in traditional norms and expectations of different ethnic groups, and more studies in different contexts are required.

Women felt generally satisfied with their work and roles at the company, as indicated by the expectation by all of them (except one) that they would still be with the company in five years’ time. Pay rates (even though they were lower than men), working hours and training were 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. However, the ability of the Lao Trade Union to advocate on behalf of women at the mill appears limited, since there is little interest from women in its activities.

5.2 Implications of the research

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 point which has already been well described by Smith et al (2018). Providing a pathway for rural youth to gain wood-processing skills at vocational training schools, with the contribution of industry experts and academics would benefit the sector.

It appears that Huamchai could do more to improve the understanding of women about their labour conditions and enable them to take an informed choice to develop their roles in the wood industry. These areas need to be discussed further with the women, but might include for example, having clear non-gendered job descriptions and announcing vacant positions in a transparent manner which would allow all people to apply on the basis of their skillset and interest, rather than their sex. The importance of social insurance as a form of savings for retirement could be emphasized (either with the government scheme or a private scheme), particularly as women are having fewer numbers of children that can support them into old age. More support could be given to pregnant and nursing women to reduce their financial disadvantage when they need time off work. 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.

5.3 Future research possibilities

While this research has covered a range of topics, its findings must be seen in the context of the Lao-Tai ethnic group, and may not be transportable to other settings. Therefore, there is an opportunity to replicate this study in other contexts, such as Sun Paper in Savannakhet or the Chinese teak mills in Luang Prabang, which are both Chinese owned and employ a higher proportion of ethnic minorities. The newly opened Burapha plywood mill in Hin Heup, which is expected to employ over 300 people at full capacity (including many women) will also provide an interesting comparison in terms of working conditions for employees.

As noted in the research limitations (Section 3.7), the gender component of this research was unable to be explored in sufficient depth is shallow from a technical viewpoint, since for practical reasons (time and budget) it does not seek to gather the views of men - the improvement of gender balance in the workplace implies changes for both men and women. Gender studies are evolving, and a greater understanding using ethnographic approaches is needed of the drivers that constrain women in the Lao context³¹. The finding that at least some women are willing to trade off higher pay in return for lighter work needs to be compared with western studies, which have shown that women (and increasing men) with children are found to be willing to trade off higher pay in return for 'temporal flexibility'—that is, jobs with more flexible hours. As Fessler (2018), notes:

Closing the gap ultimately requires that employers take the need for work/family balance seriously, and change their pay structures.

A review of legislation related to employment and gender within the Lao government (including policy and strategy, regulations, instructions, orders) and its practical implementation and monitoring would be useful to understand the gaps, and how these could be closed in order to benefit women. Questions might include: How are women involved in the legal dissemination process at district level? Is the wood industry conscious of its obligations to gender equality, and is this being monitored? Is there a point at which length of service entitles a woman to permanent, rather than casual employment, should she wish to do so? How could the Trade Union become more relevant to the needs of working women? The findings could be used to improve services to women from government and employers.

Finally, there is an opportunity to review industry employee requirements, not just at Huamchai but across the country, to assess how well wood science graduates from technical colleges or universities (men and women) are able to meet the needs of their employers, and what is needed (in terms of improved curriculums, better inductions for new staff, on the job training) in order to increase the efficiency of the wood processing sector in Lao PDR.

³¹ One example might be the issue of sexual harassment, which was not specifically addressed in this study.

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Annexes

Annex 1: Interview notes from stakeholders

Interviews with DAFO (Mr Khamfan, Head), and two forestry staff, LWU (Ms Chanping), LSW (Mr Souliathong) and Mr Thanasith (Huamchai mill), Paklay, 30/6/2020 (am)

Paklay has seen an increase in cash cropping of cassava now total about 22,500 hectares. Also maize=5,000, paddy = 14,000, hai = 500.

Area of maize is reducing due to damage by Fall Army worm. The area of teak is reducing (old plantations are not being replanted) since the returns to cassava are greater. Teak was a useful crop for unproductive land – but now lot more land is productive. Based on the estimated area and age classes, Huamchai considers that there is only enough teakwood left in the district for another 8 years of production at its mill. They do not take wood from neighbouring Vientiane province as it would be uneconomic and wood quality is poorer due to sandy soils. They have considered asking government for a concession area to plant teak.

DAFO has still not implemented Decree 247 on Plantations, and continues to use the existing orders of the provincial governor, which requires pre and post-harvest inventory, moving permissions to be witnessed by provincial level staff. The reason is that Decree 247 has not been formally disseminated to DAFO, and so they “continue to implement the existing system.”

Other factories in Paklay are the cassava processor, but only operates between October and January during the harvesting season. Employs over 100 people. There were previous more than 20 sawmills in the district, but now only 4 left – this has reduced the level of local employment.

There is a greater demand for employment than positions available. Huamchai often receives inquiries from people in Luang Prabang for employment, but they prefer local people. About 700 people from Paklay returned from Thailand (there are 69 villages): equal numbers of men and women.

LSW has policies to promote OHS and social insurance. Masks should be worn in dusty places, but many people are lazy to use them. Despite LSW making numerous visits to the mill, there is presently nobody who contributes to social insurance (since it would cost them money). LSW will take the names of those seeking work and tries to match them with employers.

Rural employment policies for women by the LWU focus on improving incomes through agriculture, and trying to resolve family disputes which adversely affect women (violence against women, negative effects of alcohol consumption).

Interview with Huamchai, 30/6/19 (pm). Mr Vilaysak (Director) and Thanasith

Huamchai started in 2005 processing waste wood from other mills in the district. The Thai parent company buys the products based on the orders it sends to the mill. Minimum size accepted is 11 cm diameter of heartwood.

Previously (April 2018), they were making pellets for export to Thailand @\$100/tonne, but this proved uneconomic due to high transport (and ferry) costs (relative to the value of the product) and because

both the Lao and Thai governments charged border taxes. They now give their sawdust away to a biofertilizer company in Sanakham: there was always the risk of fire when it builds up.

COVID19 meant that the mill was closed for two months. Now Huamchai is gradually scaling up production again with strict protocols in place (temperature testing, masks, hand washing). Previously had 230 workers (about 130 women), but now have only 120 (42 women). There are ten Thai workers (3 women). Mostly people are local Paklay residents – a small number (4-5%) have moved to Paklay to work and stay with relatives or rent a house. The longest has been employed for 8 years. There are no statistics kept on ethnicity.

There are only four permanent staff on salaries. The rest are paid a daily wage, paid every 15 days (according to the Buddhist calendar) and are regarded as casuals. Wages start at 190 baht/day for women (previously 150) and 200 baht/day for men. Daily wage increases are made according to work performance and experience. Working on a day off (a Buddha Day) attracts an overtime payment of 1.5 times day wage. Overtime is often added to the day for those in the furniture division when orders need to be completed – typically one hour in the morning (7-8 am) and another hour in the afternoon (5-6pm).

The company looks for skills rather than qualifications, and provides further on the job training. Only four staff have graduated with specialist wood skills, while others have been recruited from other mills. Those who demonstrate skills can be upgraded to welders, drivers. Production Line Supervisors, who manage about five people, have talents as leaders and have the trust of the other workers. There is a training budget at the company– the mill would be interested in sending employees for training at NUOL on kiln management.

It is company policy not to employ anyone under 18. They prefer workers to be a bit older and more responsible, and would only employ an 18 year old if it is the child of an existing worker. New workers over 45 are not employed (they retain existing workers over 45). They can check the background of potential employees, since they only need to employ from the local area. There are no figures on average years of service, but guesses it is probably about the same. There are several people employed who have finished university and couldn't get a job – now they labour at the mill.

Differences in men and women.

Women are preferred for all the detailed jobs, since they pay attention to detail, are more patient and less wasteful of wood (higher recovery rate). Men do the jobs that require heavy lifting and operating machinery. In general, women don't have a background of working on or fixing machinery, so they are not put in charge of machinery straight away. "We want to give women easier work, because they have a womb they are more fragile." Even though their roles in the mill are different, they are equally respected.

Women are better at dealing with local officials (such as police) than men, since they are more patient and diplomatic.

Women and leave

Q: Do women need to take more leave than men for personal reasons (eg for funerals)? What is the company policy on this?

A: There is no firm policy on holidays for workers. If people need to take leave they can (within reason) – they just don't get paid. If people need to take time off to plant their fields (say 7 or 15 days) then they can do this. Pregnant women do not get paid maternity leave as they are not considered to be employees.

Labourers don't want to pay for insurance, with one reason being that they want flexibility to be able to choose their hospital (eg in Vientiane, Thailand). No labourers have social insurance?

Opportunities for women:

"We always seek to employ women, but for suitable tasks. Gender is important, but we have a different sense of its meaning to western countries. We respect the role of women in the local traditions of Laos."

There are 3 women who have risen to the position of foremen in the company (promoted from labourer), of whom at least one has men under her authority. She is able to demonstrate leadership.

Constraints

There are no constraints within the company to the advancement of women.

Annex 2: Structured Questionnaire

Rural Employment

1. Date ວັນເດືອນປີ

yyyy-mm-dd

2. Name of Interviewer ຜູ້ສຳພາດ

3. Phone number ເບີໂທລະສັບ

4. Age ວາຍ

5. Gender ເພດ

- ☐ Male ຊາຍ
- ☐ Female ຍິງ

6. Education qualification ລະດັບການສຶກສາ

- ☐ Primary ປະຖົມ
- ☐ Lower secondary ມັດທະຍົມຕົ້ນ
- ☐ Upper secondary ມັດທະຍົມປາຍ
- ☐ Vocation school ວິຊາຊີບ
- ☐ University ມະຫາວິທະຍາໄລ
- ☐ Did not go to school ບໍ່ໄດ້ຮຽນ

7. What ethnicity are you? ເຈົ້າເປັນຊົນເຜົ່າຫຍັງ?

- ☐ Lao, Leu (Lao Loum) ລາວລຸ່ມ
- ☐ Khmu/Prai (Mon Khmer) ຂະມຸ
- ☐ Hmong/Iu Mien (Lao Soung) ມົ້ງ, ອື່ນມ່ຽນ

8. What is your marital status? ສະຖານະພາບສົມລົດຂອງເຈົ້າແມ່ນຫຍັງ?

- ☐ Single ໂສດ
- ☐ Married ຕັ້ງງານແລ້ວ
- ☐ Widowed/divorced ເປັນ ໝ້າຍ / ຢາຮ້າງ

9. Number of people in your household ຈຳນວນຄົນໃນຄອບຄົວ

10. Number of children ຈຳນວນຂອງລູກ

11. What is your job at the factory? ເຈົ້າມີໜ້າທີ່ຮັບຜິດຊອບຫຍັງຢູ່ໂຮງງານ?

- ☐ Production manager ຜູ້ຈັດການສາຍງານການຜະລິດ
- ☐ Foreman ຫົວໜ້າສາຍງານການຜະລິດ
- ☐ Sawing ເລື່ອຍໄມ້
- ☐ Convey waste wood off cut and sawn timber ຄັດເລືອກໄມ້ເສດຜ່ານສາຍຜານສັ່ງໄມ້
- ☐ sorting timber for drying/ timber stacking ກອງໄມ້ ກ່ອນເຂົ້າເຕົາອົບ
- ☐ kiln dry operator ຄຸມເຕົາອົບໄມ້
- ☐ surface plainer ກົບໜ້າໄມ້
- ☐ Sizing ຕັດຂະໜາດໄມ້
- ☐ edging ແລ່ນຂອບໄມ້
- ☐ Mixing adhesives and apply adhesives ປະສົມກາວ ແລະ ທາກາວ
- ☐ assembling ປະກອບໄມ້
- ☐ Sanding and coating ຄັດຫະດາດຊາຍໄມ້ ແລະ ໂປໄມ້
- ☐ Painting ທາສີໄມ້ ຫຼື ລົງສີ
- ☐ packaging ຫຸ້ມຫໍ່ຜະລິດຕະພັນ
- ☐ quality checking (QC) ກວດກາຄຸນນະພາບ
- ☐ Storage/materials distributor ແຈກຢາຍເຄື່ອງມື ແລະ ເກັບມ້ຽນເຄື່ອງຊຸບປະກອນຕ່າງໆ
- ☐ Shipping ການສົ່ງສິນຄ້າ
- ☐ Forklift driver ຄົນຂັບລົດ ຟອກລິບ
- ☐ Cleaning ອະນາໄມ
- ☐ Machinery maintenance ບຳລຸງຊ່ອນແບງເຄື່ອງຈັກ
- ☐ Accounting ບັນຊີ
- ☐ Procurement ຈັດຊື້ວັດຖຸດິບ ຫຼື ເຄື່ອງຊຸບປະກອນຕ່າງໆ

General comments on Q 11 ຄຳເຫັນທົ່ວໄປກ່ຽວກັບ Q11

12. Did you have experience/skills in wood processing before you came to work here? Please explain.

Click here to upload file. (< 5MB)

13. How many years have you worked at the factory? ທ່ານເຮັດວຽກໃຫ້ກັບໂຮງງານນີ້ໄດ້ຈັກປີແລ້ວ?

14. Average income per day THB ລາຍໄດ້ສະເລ່ຍຕໍ່ມື້ (a)

15. Income per month THB (25days) ລາຍໄດ້ຕໍ່ເດືອນ (a*25 = b)

16. Number of months worked in past 12 months ຈຳນວນເດືອນທີ່ເຮັດວຽກໃນ 12 ເດືອນຜ່ານມາ (c)

17. Normal Income per year THB ລາຍໄດ້ຕໍ່ປີ (b*c)

18. Number of days worked overtime in the last 12 months (d)

19. Overtime income for past 12 months

Calculate at 1.5ad

20. Total income for year (normal + overtime)

21. What proportion of your household income comes from your work at the factory during the last 12 months?
ອັດຕາສ່ວນຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນທ່ານແມ່ນມາຈາກການເຮັດວຽກຂອງທ່ານຢູ່ໂຮງງານໃນໄລຍະ 12 ເດືອນຜ່ານມາມີແນວໃດ?

- ☐ All of our household income ລາຍໄດ້ທັງໝົດຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ
- ☐ Most of our household income ລາຍໄດ້ສ່ວນໃຫຍ່ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ
- ☐ Half of our household income ເຄິ່ງໜຶ່ງຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ
- ☐ Less than half of our household income ຫນ້ອຍກວ່າເຄິ່ງໜຶ່ງຂອງລາຍໄດ້ຂອງຄົວເຮືອນຂອງພວກເຮົາ

22. Actual use of your income ການນຳໃຊ້ລາຍຮັບຂອງທ່ານໃນຕົວຈິງ

Use separate form

23. Did your household grow rice in the last 12 months on your own land? ຄົວເຮືອນຂອງທ່ານປູກເຂົ້າໃນໄລຍະ 12 ເດືອນຜ່ານມາຢູ່ໃນດິນຂອງຕົນເອງບໍ່?

- ☐ Yes, paddy rice ແມ່ນແລ້ວ, ເຂົ້ານ້ຳ
- ☐ Yes, upland rice ແມ່ນແລ້ວ, ເຂົ້າໄຮ່
- ☐ Yes, paddy and upland rice ແມ່ນແລ້ວ, ເຂົ້ານ້ຳ ແລະ ເຂົ້າໄຮ່
- ☐ No ບໍ່

24. If yes, why do you need to work here? ຖ້າແມ່ນ, ເປັນຫຍັງທ່ານ ຈຳ ເປັນຕ້ອງເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ນີ້?

- ☐ Land is too small ທີ່ດິນຂະໜາດ ນ້ອຍເກີນໄປ
- ☐ Land is no longer productive ສະພາບດິນເຊື່ອມຄຸນນະພາບ
- ☐ Crop prices are too low ລາຄາຜົດແມ່ນຕ່ຳເກີນໄປ
- ☐ Natural disasters destroyed crops ໄພທຳມະຊາດໄດ້ ທຳລາຍຜົນລະປຸກ
- ☐ Not enough water to grow crops ບໍ່ມີນ້ຳພຽງພໍ
- ☐ Livestock died of disease ສັດລ້ຽງໄດ້ເສຍຊີວິດຍ້ອນເປັນພະຍາດ
- ☐ Need to save for investment ຕ້ອງການປະຢັດເພື່ອການລົງທຶນ
- ☐ Need to pay daily expenses ຕ້ອງໃຊ້ຈ່າຍປະຈຳວັນ
- ☐ Need to repay loan ຕ້ອງໄດ້ໃຊ້ຄືນເງິນທີ່ໄດ້ກູ້ມາ
- ☐ Tired of farming ເມື່ອຍກັບການເຮັດນາເຮັດໄຮ່
- ☐ Other ອື່ນໆ

25. If "Other" what is the reason? ຖ້າ "ອື່ນໆ" ແມ່ນເຫດຜົນຫຍັງ?

26. In my current role, I am satisfied with:
ໃນບົດບາດຂອງຂ້ອຍໃນປະຈຸບັນ, ຂ້ອຍພໍໃຈກັບ:

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree or Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Don't know
my number of hours of work ຈຳນວນຊົ່ວໂມງເຮັດວຽກຂອງຂ້ອຍ	<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 ຂ້ອຍສາມາດເລືອກເວລາ ທີ່ຂ້ອຍຕ້ອງການເຮັດວຽກ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my training to do this job ການຝຶກອົບຮົມຂອງຂ້ອຍເພື່ອເຮັດວຽກນີ້	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my opportunities for promotion ໂອກາດຂອງຂ້ອຍໃນການຂຶ້ນຕຳແໜ່ງ	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
my occupational health and safety ສະພາບແວດລ້ອມປອດໄພໃນການເຮັດວຽກ	<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"/>
Do you think that your current daily wage is fair the work that you do?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

27. General comments on Q26 ຄໍາເຫັນທົ່ວໄປກ່ຽວກັບ Q26

Click here to upload file. (< 5MB)

28. Would you like to have a different job at the factory? ເຈົ້າຢາກເຮັດວຽກ ອື່ນບໍ່ຢູ່ໃນໂຮງງານນີ້?

- ☐ Yes ຕອບແລ້ວ
- ☐ No ບໍ່
- ☐ Not sure ບໍ່ແນ່ໃຈ

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

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

- ☐ Yes ຕອບແລ້ວ
- ☐ No ບໍ່
- ☐ Not sure ບໍ່ແນ່ໃຈ

31. Will you continue to work in the factory over the next five years? ທ່ານຈະສືບຕໍ່ເຮັດວຽກຢູ່ໂຮງງານໃນໄລຍະ 5 ປີຕໍ່ໜ້າບໍ່?

- ☐ Yes ຕອບແລ້ວ
- ☐ No ບໍ່
- ☐ Not sure ບໍ່ແນ່ໃຈ

32. Reason for your answer in Q31 ເຫດຜົນ ກ່ຽວກັບ Q31

Expenditure categories

General category	Specific category (e.g.)	In order of importance	Actual Amount
Investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improve/build house (add value) - truck/car (for agriculture, business) - motorcycle (for agriculture, business) - buy land - education (school, university fees) - agriculture machinery (eg tractor) - crop investment (including seeds, fertilizer, irrigation) - livestock investment (including animals, fencing) - tree plantations - hire farm workers - business (shop, restaurant) - other (specify) 		
Saving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cash - bank - gold - lend to friends/relatives 		
For loan repayment to a third Party	Purpose of loan? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - repay loan to bank/microfinance institution - repay loan to money lender - repay loan to relatives 		
Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rice and other food - clothing and footwear - wedding/funeral/temple (including invitations) - household durables (TV, fridge, phone) - repair house (don't add value) - health (medicine, hospital costs) - truck/car (convenience) - motorcycle (convenience) - give to relatives (not lend) - beauty products - electricity and water charges - other (specify) - general consumption (when specific consumption is unknown) 		
	TOTAL (e)		

Annex 3: Notes from supplementary semi-structured interviews with wage earning women

1. Age, late 30's, married with a 16 year old son, 2/7/2020

She works as a supervisor in the wood joining section, with 6 years of experience. Before she joined Huamchai she worked in a furniture factory doing polishing. The work there was OK but Huamchai was closer to her house. Her husband sells ice cream for a living. They have no agriculture land and so she doesn't need to take time off for rice planting: she will always work overtime if it is offered. She has been able to save money to build a house, which is still a work in progress.

"My husband helps a lot around the house. If he comes home first then he will start the household duties. There is no tension between us on these issues."

Equality: Men and women are treated equally within the company. "I have men working in the same section as me, but they earn less than me because they have less experience." She has not had any formal training – what she knows has been learnt on the job from the technicians. There is no additional money for women who are pregnant, but this is not seen as an issue. She has heard of social insurance, but her section has not yet been offered the chance to be members: "if I have an opportunity to join I would be interested, but I don't want to have to bear the cost myself."

Most significant change: "I been able to pay for her son's education so far with my salary. I hope that he will be able to study further, possibly to become a policeman."

2. Age: 27, Divorced with a young son, 2/7/2020

She has worked at Huamchai for 6 years. Before that she was a farmer. However, the paddy land just relied on rainwater and the rice harvest was insufficient. Lives with her mother (father deceased) - she took the job to earn money, and she is the sole breadwinner.

She uses her income to pay people to grow the rice in 2019 (40,000 kip/day). She also took annual leave of 3 days to organise planting and harvesting.

Her mother is able to look after her 6 year old son while she is at work.

Equality: "Men and women are treated equally in the factory. If people work for a long time they get higher wages." She doesn't have any desire to be promoted to supervisor. She just learnt how to work on the job. She doesn't have social insurance: if there is an accident at the mill then they are responsible. Social insurance appears to be only available for those in the Trade Union (kamaban?). Has nothing in particular to propose to the mill or to government to improve her life.

Most significant change: "Without this job I wouldn't be able to survive, because there would be no money to pay for essentials like electricity, school fees, rice/food and clothes for the family."

3. Age late 30's, divorced with two children, 2/7/2020

Has worked at Huamchai for three years, cutting wood to lengths. Before working here she worked with her parents on the farm growing rice. But paddy not enough for the household, and because she didn't have enough to do she decided to work at the mill. Lives by herself in a house with the two

children. Her son doesn't help around the house, and her daughter is still too young. She attends to the household chores herself.

Equality: "Work is done by men and women, but women receive less than men, even though they are doing the same tasks." She doesn't really know about the wage increase policies of the company. She started on the low wage of 150 THB/day in 2017 (Note: the starting wage for women has since been increased to 190THB/day). Doesn't really know about the company policies for social protection fund.

Most significant change: "I don't really have anything special. I just go to work everyday to earn the money to make ends meet. I don't have anything else that I can do."

4. Age 43, married with one son, 3/7/2020

Both husband and wife have worked at the factory for four years – she works in the planning/finishing section. They also have paddy land, raise livestock, frogs and fish close by their house. "If we have urgent work we are able to take time off: last year I took off about 20 days, which included planting rice and for having my appendix removed." She is always careful to inform the company in advance that she will have time off – "there have been cases where people didn't show up for work without informing the company (three times) and they weren't asked to work again."

The son has already left home so there are only two people in the house. She does most of the housework because her husband also works nights as a guard in the factory, with his main role being to protect the mill from fire (he takes turns sleeping).

Before she worked at a mill in Boten (over an hour away, so she had to sleep there). The conditions at Huamchai are much better "we have a fan each, and cold water" and she doesn't have to sleep away.

Equality: Men are given the more difficult/heavy/risky work, and so it is fair that they are paid more. "I wouldn't be able to do the work that men do myself, since the wood is too heavy." She feels satisfied with her existing role.

Social insurance:

Before she was in the social insurance scheme, and she had to contribute 80,000 kip/month. But she didn't get sick, and so she felt it was a waste of money and decided to withdraw. Her husband withdrew at the same time – in fact many people withdrew at the same time "we didn't get our money back." Last year she needed to have her appendix removed. Even though she wasn't insured, it didn't cost much at the district hospital in Paklay (over one hundred thousand kip – 'sen pay'), since the government now has subsidised health care at the local hospital: before an operation like this would have cost well over one million kip. She remains confident that withdrawing from the social insurance scheme was the correct thing to do.

Her niece also works at Huamchai, and had a womb issue that the local hospital couldn't treat. Under the subsidised policy, she would have had to go to Xayaboury provincial hospital for treatment. But she felt that it would be better to go straight to Vientiane for better treatment, even though she would have to pay full costs. After that she decided to withdraw from social security also.

Proposal to government: Government needs to provide more opportunities to local women for paid employment, since many people need to have work. Need to have more companies.

Significant change: “The most important thing is the house. It is not so big but it is home. It has concrete walls and a tiled roof, with hot and cold water. I have also bought a motorcycle for my son. I have been able to do all this with income from the mill.”

(There was a real sense of pride in this interview about the way she has improved her life. And great loyalty shown to Huamchai for making it happen).

5. Single, 24 years old, lives with parents, 3/7/2020

Has worked at Huamchai 1.5 years in the joinery section. There are six people in the house, including three younger sisters.

She is a graduate of Dong Dok and studied teaching for 4 years. But there are no government positions available in Paklay and “I don’t want to work as a volunteer because it is a waste of time.” Her parents have paddy land but it is reliant on the rain and so yields are variable. She needs to earn money to help them and also support her younger sisters to go to school.

Equality: “Men do the harder work in the mill and take a greater risk, as they are more likely to get injured. Therefore the company policy is fair.” She has not encountered any cases of harassment or discrimination as a single woman: “if women are polite then there is no problem.”

Company policy: There is no special policy towards pregnant women. If there was a small payment it would help them to cover the time they need off.

Significant change: “With the income I have earned I have been able to support my younger siblings to go to school, bought a motorcycle and fixed our house.”

She hasn’t been able to save any money – still needs to buy rice and pay for electricity.

6. Age 36, with a husband and 17 year old son, 3/7/2020

She has worked for three years, trimming wood. Her husband works there also.

“Before working at the mill I farmed fulltime with my sister on her family land and shared the harvest. The yield is about 100 bags rice in a normal year. My husband previously worked in construction, but work wasn’t regular. Work in the mill is easier because it is close to the house” = convenience. The farm was located on the other side of the river (in Vientiane province) and so it was hard to manage (had to go over by boat) and the area for raising livestock was quite far away. So now she just takes a few days off every year (about 10 days) to plant rice – for harvesting, she pays labour costs.

She has used her income to fix their house. Their son (final year of high school) looks after the house while they are at work – he is able to cook and looks after the chickens.

Equality: Men and women both have the opportunity to increase their wages by being promoted.

She would like to be able to join the social insurance scheme, which would cost her about 50,000 kip/month.

Significant change: “I was very proud when the company increased by daily wage for good performance by 30 baht/day. If I have a chance to become a supervisor I will.”

(A bit off topic but demonstrates that Huamchai have been successful in creating loyalty amongst their workers).

7. Age 43, has husband (also working at the mill) and three children (youngest 15), 3/7/2020

Has worked for seven years (husband also). She is a supervisor in the furniture section. Lives as a nuclear family.

Before working at Huamchai she worked at Kok O state enterprise wood processor for 5 years. She has about two hectares of upland fields behind Paklay and used to farm before going to Kok O, but has no time to do anything now. She lets her relatives grow cassava there.

Company policy: There are two things to be improved.

The most urgent thing is to assist the people laid off because of COVID19, since they haven't had income now for three months (Note: the mill is now employing 122 workers, whereas in 2018 it was employing 230). The second thing is to have a policy to support new mothers, since now they receive nothing. “They cannot take their young children to the mill and if there is no one to care for them (like a grandma) then they need a long time off which is financially draining.”

Even though there are trade union meetings (*kamaban* – mass organisation) once/year she has not raised this issue, because company representatives also participate. “When the union reps ask if anyone has something to propose, everybody stays quiet.”

She is not interested in having a social security card. In any case her husband gets subsidised health care because he is a retired revolutionary soldier.

Significant change: “I have income. Agriculture work is very difficult (*lam bak*). Seven years ago we only had a small house with bamboo walls. Now we have a permanent house with three bedrooms and a motorcycle. All my children have been supported in their education. The oldest is studying to be a teacher, the second son is also working at the mill and my youngest is still at school.”

8. 25 years old, single, 3/7/2020

Has worked for 5 years in the furniture section. Lives with her mother as father has passed away and her older brother is married and has set up his own house.

They don't have any agriculture land, since her mother had to sell it to pay for her fathers healthcare costs when he was sick. Her mother looks after the house and sells BBQ meat out the front in the evenings. Before she worked at the mill she had a job selling things with a company, but she moved back to Paklay to be close to her mother.

Policies towards women: Think they are fair, because men work harder than women.

Q: What about policies for pregnant women?

A: "Women have to plan for that. They would have to save money in advance."

There is nothing in company or govt policies that need to be improved.

Most significant change: "I have been able to fix the bathroom and kitchen with my wage. Now the kitchen is bigger and the bathroom has tiles and is easy to clean."

9. Age 25, Single, 4/7/2020

Migrated to take this job from a village about 50km away (still in Paklay district), and stays with her younger sister in a rented room. Has worked in accounts for the last two years, but she receives a daily wage like everyone else (210 THB/day).

Parents are farmers. She would like to go back and live with them in future.

"The policies of the company towards men and women are fair, because they take the different abilities of men and women into account." She is able to take time off when she needs to.

Significant change: "I use my income to help my parents and buy beauty products. I need to continue this job for now."

10. Age 29, Married with one daughter 8 years old, 4/7/2020

Has worked here for two years, husband is government staff at Governors office.

Before she worked at the Kok O mill, and before that she worked on the family farm (left school at 13). "The farm relies on rain only, so in some years there is not enough rice to eat. We also grow cassava and raise animals."

"I needed to find paid work, because the farm cannot provide for six siblings. Only one stays on the farm to help the parents. We have our own house, but don't own any other agricultural land."

Company policies: Is satisfied with the company policies and can't think of any changes needed.

Significant change: "I am very happy to have this income, because it has contributed to buying land and building a house."

"My husband helps to do the housework – he has weekends off."

11: Age 37, Married with three children (17, 13 and 4), 4/7/2020

Worked for three years.

Before then she worked in agriculture, with paddy land and upland fields. However, she lost control of her upland maize fields before Paklay when the government appropriated them for their own

purpose (Possibly a conservation area). She did not have a temporary or permanent title to them (it was just claimed land). “The paddy land was done together with my brothers and sisters and the total output was insufficient for all of us”.

“We live as a nuclear family in a separate house. My son helps in the paddy fields, but she has to do most of the housework since my husband drives a truck and is often away. “

Policy: Believes the policy of the company is fair. “Those working well can get higher wages – I have got a raise every year.” The company does not employees bring young children to the mill because of the machinery, so she has to leave her 4 year old with her mother. Only long term employees have the social insurance card (seems that newer employees like herself do not have this opportunity) – she would be interested if this became available.

“My main concern is that the wages are not high enough, because my income is only just enough to raise my children. There is nothing left over at the end of the month – fortunately I am able to buy goods on credit at one particular store at no interest, and then repay them when I receive my wage.”

Significant change: “Compared to working in agriculture we have to get up early every day to go to work – there is no time for rest. But I can survive – in agriculture I wouldn’t have enough to raise my family.”

“My dream is to be able to have enough money to buy cattle, but where I am living now there is no place to raise them. There is no community livestock area in the village, and those wanting to do so must have their own land and fence it properly. I would never borrow money to buy cattle because it would mean using our house as collateral – I would never risk doing that.”

12. Age 31, married with one child, 8 years old, 4/7/2020

Has worked here for three years, but she also worked here before she was married. Has her own house.

Husband is a government official working for the Trade Union office. “He helps around the house (they have their own house) and looks after our four cows.” They own some sloping land suited to raising cows but have no other land.

Policy of the company is fair for men and women. “I would like to have another child, but is not expecting the company to support this.” Instead she would work with her mother who sells meat at the market (and then she can work while her mother helps takes care of her child) – this is what she did after the birth of her first child.

She has a ‘trade union’ book that she gets with membership fee of 60,000 kip/year, which provides subsidised health care (she can claim back health receipts). Also, as her husband is a government worker, she gets free coverage at hospitals – therefore there is no immediate necessity to buy social insurance. [Note: a Trade Union membership is only available to those who also are members of other mass organisations such as LWU and Youth Union]

Significant change: “If I didn’t work here I wouldn’t have enough money to live – and build a house.”

13. Age 42, divorced with two children living with her, 4/7/2020

Worked for three years. Before that she moved around selling clothes/things with her parents, but after they stopped doing it she did too. She lives with them in the house (total 7 people).

“Our family still has paddy land on the other side of the river. I can take days off for planting and harvesting, but have to hire labour to do these tasks. I cannot be a fulltime farmer because she has to earn money to support my children.”

Policy of company: She thinks it is a good company to work for – fair for men and women. She was offered the chance to get social security but thinks it is not worth the bother – too many forms and having to claim back money: “It is easier to just pay.”

She sees her work at the factory as not long term. When her children are bigger (and she can leave them) she would like to go back selling clothes again to earn money.

Significant change: “There has not been much change, since before I could also earn money. But the money is essential, every three days I spend 10,000 kip just to buy them internet!”

Annex 4: Notes on Trade Union membership at Huamchai

Ms Somleutai, 17/6/2021

The company first established a Trade Union unit in 2017, and agreed for its workers to become members, paid the initial registration fee and bought them shirts with logos. The Unit head, which had been elected by the membership, collected 5,000 kip/month from the members which should be used to contribute towards ceremonies or meetings.

There was no benefit to being members because we didn't receive anything, and I don't even know whether the Trade Union still exists, because I only paid my fees for one year and now we don't pay anything. I am no longer interested and they can do what they like.

Female, 43 years and male, 44 years, who are not sure of their membership status

Trade Union members can be only those who are supervisors or who have worked for many years with a good work record. Most of us are not interested, since the company doesn't pay our membership fees and we have to pay ourselves. I am not sure about the policy of the company because we work without a contract, but I do know that we all receive our wages according to our positions and on time every 15 days.

Female, 28 years old and not a Trade Union Member

Members of the Trade Union must be hard-working and good workers. They were selected by the Company which then paid the initial registration fee of 37,000 kip and bought each member a shirt costing about 65,000 kip. We were responsible for paying the monthly fee of 5,000 kip, but didn't receive anything.

Female member of Trade Union