

GENDER ISSUES AMONG TAY AND NUNG ETHNIC COMMUNITIES IN CAO BANG PROVINCE

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This study provides some information concerning the gender issues such as roles and responsibilities of men and women, as well as of girls and boys in the Tay and Nung ethnic communities in Cao Bang Province.

The study was carried out in four communes in Ha Quang and Trung Khanh districts where Tay and Nung people are living. These communes are Thuong Thon, Noi Thon (in Ha Quang), and Dam Thuy, Ngoc Chung (Trung Khanh).

A. Overview of target locations of the study

In general, the target locations are all in the mountainous, remote areas of Cao Bang province. Three out of the four communes border China. The transportation is very difficult, only Dam Thuy is accessible by motor road, but the quality of the road is very poor, and can only be used during dry season's months.

Regarding the population, according to the statistical data, by April 1st, 1999, Noi Thon commune had 2,183 people, 100% of them were engaged in farming, allocated into 360 households, most of them are of Nung ethnic group (2,022 people), but there is also a H'mong hamlet (159 people). The commune is divided into seven administrative hamlets, of which the most populous is Ca Tieng, which has 45 households with 272 people, and the least populated is Lung Pung, which has 6 households with 45 people.

Thuong Thon commune had a population of nearly one and a half that of Noi Thon commune. This commune had a population of 3,000 people (479 households), most of the commune was inhabited by Nung people (2,244

people), and some H'mong hamlets (744 people). The whole commune has 29 administrative hamlets, of which the most populous was Tong Cang, which had 36 households with 226 people, and the least populated was Lung Gia, which had 5 households with 24 people.

Ngoc Chung commune had 168 households with 920 people, of whom 121 people were of Tay ethnic group and 799 people were of Nung group. The commune is divided into 8 administrative hamlets, of which the most populous was Bac Po (228 people), and the least populated was Lung Chat (32 people). Among the 8 hamlets, there were 6 hamlets exclusively inhabited by Nung people, one exclusively inhabited by Tay people, and the other one had a mixed population of both Tay and Nung people.

Dam Thuy had a population of five times as big as that of Ngoc Chung. The commune had 915 households with 4,780 people, of which 741 households with 3,454 people were of Tay ethnic group, and 174 households with 1,326 people were of Nung ethnic group. The commune is divided into 26 administrative hamlets, of which the most populous was Ban Cai, which had 72 households with 375 people, and the least populated was Lung Noi, which had 12 households with 63 people.

In the four selected communes for the study, the local people's livelihood depends exclusively on farming, with the custom of planting maize and other crops (Thuong Thon and Noi Thon communes). In Dam Thuy and Ngoc Chung, rice and maize are the main food crops. However, in all of the four communes, the farming production depends wholly on the rainfall, and so farming productivity is very unstable.

On the other hand, the above communes all have potential for developing their livestock and husbandry. However, the local families are poor and do not have sufficient capital or feed for the livestock and husbandry, and so there is also little animal ploughing capacity and fertilizer, and thus the farming productivity is also low.

For the two communes on the rocky mountains (Noi Thon and Thuong Thon) in Ha Quang district, the farming of crops depends totally on the rainfall, and it is difficult to assist in irrigation.

In the two communes of Dam Thuy and Ngoc Chung of Trung Khanh district, the main crop is rice, and so irrigation plays a vital role. The pump stations in Dam Thuy have all broken down since year 1979, and the canal systems for irrigation in both communes have been seriously degraded. If there can be some fund for the restoration and improvement of the local canal systems, it will surely contribute greatly to the poverty reduction among the local people.

The statistics of food production calculated into husked rice (1998) in the four communes is shown below:

<i>District</i>	<i>Commune</i>	<i>Total food production calculated into husked rice (tons)</i>	<i>Average food production per capita (kg)</i>
Ha Quang	Thuong Thon	994.7	332
	Noi Thon	864	362
Trung Khanh	Dam Thuy	1,582.6	284.4
	Ngoc Chung	231.8	252

With regard to living standards, according to the reports by the communes, based on the 1998 survey data on poor households to formulate a project for hunger elimination and poverty

reduction in the localities, the poverty percentage in the four communes was not too high.

<i>Commune</i>	<i>Total number of households</i>	<i>Number of households living with hunger</i>	<i>Number of households living in poverty</i>	<i>Percentage of households living in hunger and poverty (%)</i>
Thuong thon	475	93	30	25.89
Noi Thon	358	91	21	31.28
Dam Thuy	915	17	117	23.38
Ngoc Chung	168	30	11	24.40

Nevertheless, in fact, when we asked the local people about their living standards, especially the Nung ethnic community in the communes, the hunger and poverty percentage could be as high as 50% of the total number of households in the communes. For those

households with an average income of 15kg of un-husked rice per capita per month or less, which are considered poor, life is already extremely difficult, not to mention those households regarded as living in hunger (12kg of un-husked rice/person/month), because all of the

family's expenses are paid from this modest income. That is why hunger eradication and poverty reduction is an urgent task, which needs to be tackled comprehensively in all levels and sectors, centrally to locally.

Regarding the infrastructure, now only 10% of the people in Dam Thuy can have access to the national electrical network, the other 3 communes have not even got electricity, and no visual or audio appliances, i.e. television or radio.

In all of the four communes, the headquarters of the People's Committees were built some years ago, the buildings are of grade 4, and have been degraded, which need to be repaired.

At the centres of the communes, there are primary schools, and some sub-schools with mixed classes in remote areas to help children living far away from the centres. However, all of the school facilities are makeshift buildings, which negatively affects the quality of the learning and teaching by the pupils and teachers respectively.

In the four selected communes for the study, Noi Thon (in Ha Quang) and Ngoc Chung (in Trung Khanh) do not have a health clinic, but the healthcare services have to be temporarily put in the Committee's headquarters. In general, the healthcare services are poor and there is not enough basic medicine to serve the community. The number of skilled medical staff is also insufficient.

Except for the case of Dam Thuy, the other three communes are all located in the rocky mountains, sources of living water and irrigation are all dependent on the rainfall. During the dry season, the local people have to get water for their daily living from the "water mines". During drought years, some communes had to face with

water shortage for 3 to 4 months. Therefore, it is necessary to have more investment in the new construction and repairs of water reserve tanks for the rainy season.

With the current status of economic development and infrastructure as mentioned above, making a living, to the people in the four target communes, especially to women and girls, is extremely difficult.

B. Production activities and women's status:

1 Farming:

In Thuong Thon and Noi Thon communes, the main farming activity of the local Nung people is to cultivate maize and soya. These are the two major food crops to serve for the people's daily food. The people here are cultivating cross-bred maize seeds of TSB2 and BIOSIT. An advantage of these two maize seeds is high productivity (2,030kg/ha in Thuong Thon commune, and 2,410kg/ha in Noi Thon commune), but the disadvantage is that the corns can be easily attacked by woodworms, and so cannot be stored for long, and that is why the local people have not dared to cultivate maize in large quantity. Moreover, the cross-bred maize seeds often require good care technically and an abundant amount of fertilizer, and so the poor households who cannot afford to buy fertilizer, or do not have technological knowledge, often finally have to return to using local seeds with low productivity.

Among the 24 households involved in the in-depth interviews in the four communes of the two districts, the people who have received training in terms of cultivation and husbandry techniques are mainly men and representatives of the commune's authorities. With that practice, the number of female participants in the training in the communes is few. For the women of Tay

and Nung ethnic groups, due to the limitations in their literacy and social conscience, if they are not invited in person with names identified, they often ask their husbands or sons to go on their family's behalf. In order to improve this, the women in the above communes have expressed their hopes to be able to participate in the training courses, not at the People's Committee, but through reality and through practice on the field. The agricultural extension officers can both give theories and instruct them on the practical work.

The shortage of animal capacity in the farming is also a hindrance to the cultivation activities among the Tay and Nung groups in Cao Bang province. For the recent years, the Government has been helping poor households to get soft loans through the banking system to assist them in developing husbandry. However, due to the lack of knowledge and frequent diseases, husbandry activities have not brought about much effect. The veterinary officers in the communes do not have necessary skills, simply because they have not been trained properly. They have only attended a training course of between a week to ten days at the district's authority. With that way of training, when they come back to their localities, they can only give vaccinations to some livestock at best. To make things worse, vaccines for disease prevention in livestock and poultry are insufficient, due to the shortage of budget, of storing equipment and facilities, while the breeding is done just under the house, in unhygienic and smelly conditions. Diseases are common and can spread quickly, which does not only do harm to the husbandry but also affecting human health. Because of the old thinking of gender-based labour division, heavy work (e.g. ploughing and raking) is normally the responsibility of men. In families which have sufficient animal capacity, and when

they need to hurry to catch up the time, the wife and the husband may do the ploughing and raking together.

Unlike the men of Nung ethnic group, the men of Tay group rarely share with their wives in such work as carrying fertilizer, getting water, collecting wood, and taking care of crops.

2. Irrigation:

In the two communes of Thuong Thon and Noi Thon, because there is no irrigation system and the location is in the rocky mountains, the local people have to cultivate maize, soya and other crops instead of rice.

On the contrary, the fields in Ngoc Chung and Dam Thuy communes of Trung Khanh district are very much dependent on the irrigation systems. At present, the water supply to the rice paddies in Dam Thuy mainly comes from the traditional water-wheel system, taking water from the Quay Son river and directing it along the canal system to the paddy-fields. However, so far the 49 water-wheels made of bamboo and the canal system in Dam Thuy have been degraded seriously. In 1998, Dam Thuy commune received 31 tons of cement from the government to upgrade irrigation system, therefore, rice cultivation has been supplied with sufficient water although it is not stabilised.

The situation was the same more or less with Ngoc Chung, due to the fact that 59,2 ha of cultivated land on one crop rice depending on rainfall, two third of cultivated land was changed to grow maize depending on good weather to get high yield. The irrigation of Ngoc Chung as well as Dam Thuy was degraded, during the dry season, almost all of the "water mines" runs out, and to make things worse, when some little water can be pumped up to the surface, most of the water is lost through leaking in the canal system. The pressing need of the people in Ngoc

Chung is to receive financial assistance to equip some water pumps, and have sufficient cement, lime and sand to upgrade the canal parts that have been degraded.

In practice, if the problem of irrigation is solved through some financial assistance to the above mentioned items, it is certain that the cultivation of rice paddies as well as maize and soya in Ngoc Chung and Dam Thuy will bring about high effectiveness, helping the local Tay and Nung people improve their food security, which contributes greatly to the hunger elimination and poverty reduction.

Regarding irrigation, the search for water sources (water mines) to ensure water for the farming activities is the responsibility of both men and women in the community. All members of the community who are capable of working should also be involved in other related activities like directing water flow, building dykes, maintaining and repairing the canal, etc.

In some locations, getting water for farming from the mines is the responsibility of men, but the demand for irrigation has become pressing for both men and women. Particularly for women, if there is water, they will not have to worry too much about getting water for their fields, and at the same time they can use the water for washing, bathing after a hard working day; they will not have to go far to get drinking water, etc.

3. Rural transportation:

As mentioned before, in the four communes of the study, only Dam Thuy has a motor way connecting the commune with the district, and so transportation is relatively good during the dry season, meanwhile the three other communes are all located in the rocky mountains, transportation is very difficult, especially the part between the district centre of Trung Khanh to Ngoc Chung commune (8km long), which is very narrow,

sinuous, on one side it is rock, on the other side it is abyss.

Transportation is a high hurdle to the economic and cultural integration of the above communes. The exchange of goods for their life and daily living is also difficult. None of the three communes has a market. Commodities and services are only available in the district centre of Trung Khanh (for Ngoc Chung commune) or centre of Ha Quang (for Thuong Thon and Noi Thon) once every 5 days, and the distance they have to cover ranges from 7 to 14km. Most of the expenses of the local Tay and Nung people depend on their exchanges and sales of things like: corn, potatoes, chickens, wood bunches, etc., and so when they go down to the market, all have to carry a heavy load, but on their return, they normally can only have enough money to buy a little fat meat, a bottle of fish sauce, a kilo of salt, a litre of kerosene, etc. Meat and fish for the local ethnic people are luxuries, and even those who can afford do not dare to buy them and store in the house, because preservation is unavailable. In order to have bigger exchanges of agricultural products, the upgrading of rural transport roads for these communes is an urgent task. If the transport roads are improved, the local people can use means of transport like motorbikes, bikes,... instead of walking on foot as currently. The transport roads can also improve the cultural life and the literacy of the local people. Many people said that their children could be sent to high school, secondary school if the school is located near their living place. At present, it takes the pupils in Noi Thon and Thuong Thon studying at high school 4 hours (longer time from Noi Thon) to go to school (both to and from school). For secondary school pupils, when they reach grade 10, they have to stay in the boarding school or hire a place, because the school is tens of kilometres far from their houses. This is why, the higher the

education gets, the smaller the number of pupils from the ethnic minorities is, particularly schoolgirls. It is similar for the pupils from Ngoc Chung commune, from primary education upward, if they want to go to school, they have to walk a distance of 8km of rocky road every day to the district centre of Trung Khanh. Therefore, the number of pupils who really have the strong will to overcome this difficulty is very small. This problem is a big hindrance to the socio-economic development and literacy improvement in the localities.

4. Seasonal farming calendar and labour division within the family:

Analyzing the seasonal farming calendar in the selected communes, we could see that in order to fulfill such a heavy work load, the local Tay and Nung people do not have any truly relaxing time. Normally, the fourth and twelfth lunar months are considered “leisure” in farming, but the local people spend this time collecting and storing wood, or collecting manure, or repairing farming tools, etc.

Farming calendar and gender-based responsibilities according to the study in the four communes

Month (lunar calendar)	Thuong Thon (Ha Quang)	Noi Thon (Ha Quang)	Dam Thuy (Trung Khanh)	Ngoc Chung (Trung Khanh)
1 st month	Cultivation of spring soya: men (M), women (W) Planting taro: M, W	Soil preparation to cultivate maize: M Planting soya: W	Planting maize, soya: M, W Rice seeding: W	Soil preparation for spring-summer crops: M Planting maize, soya: W
2 nd month	Planting spring maize: M, W	Soil preparation to plant maize: M	Transplanting spring rice, taking care of maize: W Planting maize in the mountains: M	Cultivation of maize and beans: M, W
3 rd month	Taking care of maize: M, W, Children (C)	Clearing weed in maize fields: W, Girls (G)	Taking care of maize, planting potato and manioc, preparing rice seedlings: W, C	Taking care of maize, rice seedling: W Soil preparation for sowing rice seeds: M
4 th month	Taking care of maize: M, W Rice seedling: W	Collecting wood: M, W	Taking care of manioc, clearing weed for spring rice: W, C	Soil preparation for rice cultivation: M
5 th month	Harvesting soya beans, spring maize: M, W Soil preparation for summer soya: M	Planting sweet potato combined with maize: M, W	Summer rice transplanting: W, C	Ploughing: M Rice transplanting: W Harvesting maize and soya beans: M, W
6 th month	Harvesting maize, planting soya, potato and peanuts: M, W	Harvesting maize: M, W Planting soya: W	Harvesting maize, soya beans and summer rice: M, W, C	Harvesting maize: M, W Ploughing the field: M Planting bean, peanut, taking care of young rice: W, C

7 th month	Planting sweet potato: M, W	Clearing weed in soya field: W, C	Planting maize, summer-fall soya: M, W Transplanting late summer rice: W	Taking care of summer-fall crops: W, C
8 th month	Clearing weed for soya and taking care of maize, sweet potatoes: W, C	Clearing weed for soya: W, C	Collecting wood, taking care of maize: W	Seeding beans: W Harvesting rice: M, W
9 th & 10 th months	Harvesting soya and other beans: M, W	Harvesting soya beans: M, W Harvesting mixed potatoes and beans: W Cutting grass for cattle: M	Harvesting summer rice: M, W Ploughing the field, harvesting manioc and peanuts: M, W	Harvesting continued: M, W Taking care of vegetables: W Ploughing: M
11 th month	Harvesting sweet potatoes: M, W	Ploughing mountain fields for maize: M	Harvesting manioc: M, W Ploughing: M	Ploughing: M
12 th month	Soil preparation for maize cultivation: M Collecting wood: W	Raking soil for maize cultivation: M Collecting wood: W	Collecting wood: W Soil preparation for maize cultivation: M	Ploughing: M Collecting wood: W

Obviously, in order to fulfill all these work loads, the local Tay and Nung people have to work hard all year round, regardless of their gender. It is more difficult for women because they have to do most of the housework, and also involved in the farming activities. Also facing the lack of food, the health conditions of the local women and children have been

considerably affected. Among the Tay and Nung people, local men normally want to marry women of 3, 4 years older than them (because they consider getting married is having another labourer in the family); also under hard working conditions and having to deliver children, the local women normally look much older than their husbands.

Daily work schedule of Tay and Nung women and men

	Nung women (Noi Thon)	Nung men	Tay women (Dam Thuy)	Tay men
04.00 am	Boil water, cook pigs' mash	Chop wood	Prepare pigs' mash	
05.00	Prepare and have breakfast	Have breakfast	Prepare and have breakfast	Have breakfast
06.00	Go to the paddies or highland fields	Go to work	Go to work	Prepare to go to work
11.00	Return home and prepare lunch	Rest	Return home and prepare lunch	Rest
12.00	Have lunch	Have lunch	Have lunch	Have lunch
13.00 pm	Tidy the house, Do the washing	Rest or drink alcohol with neighbours	Tidy the house, do the washing	Rest
13.30	Back to work	Back to work	Back to work	Go to collect wood or back to work

18.00	Return home, prepare dinner	Help wife to feed the pigs and chickens	Fetch water, prepare dinner, feed pigs and chickens	Have a bathe
19.00	Have dinner, prepare vegetables for pigs' feed	Have dinner, bathe, rest	Have dinner	Have dinner
21.30	Grind maize	Help wife to grind maize	Distill alcohol, prepare pigs' mash and vegetables for chickens' feed	Rest, drink alcohol with other guys
22.00	Have a bathe, do the washing	Go to bed	Have a bathe, do the washing	Go to bed
23.00	Go to bed	Go to bed		

Again, it is emphasized that since every day, they have to do so many things to earn a living, most Tay and Nung families cannot pay much attention to their children's education, and the parents cannot help their children in their learning. Besides that, because of the long distance to school, because they do not want to make it harder for their parents, many children have dropped out from school, especially girls. This has led to the fact that a majority of local girls have become manual labourers and do not have necessary knowledge or social awareness. They get married and have children at an early age, unlikely to get out of the poverty situation that their parents are facing.

5. Gender issues with regard to the access, utilisation and control of resources, and the hurdles to gender equality in the target area of the study:

As mentioned above, in the four communes of the study, the local authorities have carried out the land and forest allocation to the local households in accordance with the 1993 Land Law. The local households have received the "Red Book" (Certificate of the Rights to Farmland Use), and the "Green Book" (Certificate of the Rights to Forestland Use) on a long-term basis as regulated by the Government. The issuance of the Certificates has confirmed the legitimate rights to land use of the

local people, making them more active in using their land. They can now exchange, lease, buy and sell, transfer their land. Thanks to this policy, the problem of food shortages has basically been solved.

However, it should be noted that in the Red Book and the Green Book, only the name of the household head is mentioned, and in Vietnam in general and among the Tay and Nung ethnic groups in particular, the household heads are mainly men (80% of the households in the rural areas). Thus, in many cases women are the unprivileged. They cannot use their names to put the land as security for getting bank's loans, girls are not given land when they get married, and in case of a divorce, the woman does not receive a share of the family's land property, etc. In fact, in the Tay and Nung regions of the study, the land accessibility is the common right of all members, both male and female, in the family, but the problem is that the daughters are never allowed to inherit estates (houses and land) from their parents, although it is clearly indicated in the laws that women and men have equal rights in this regard.

There is no gender difference concerning the accessibility to resources such as labour, credit, irrigation and drinking water. Men and women have equal rights to work, to access banks' credit, and to utilise water sources within their

community's area. However, labour division still depends much on the gender-based and age-based traditional ways..

There is no difference in laws regarding the accessibility to market information, either. But in fact, women have few opportunities to study and access advanced science and technology, to contact and approach, be updated about the market. The main reason is the traditional attitudes, the selection of participants for training workshops is normally given to men. Another reason is that, due to their sacrificial nature, feelings of inferiority, and shyness, women are always willing to let their husbands and sons take part in the community activities on their behalf.

As for the control of resources, it can be noted that among the Tay and Nung groups in the target location, basically women can discuss important family matters with their husbands, but the final decision, according to the tradition, still belongs to men. Nevertheless, in most of the families, women are the ones who are directly engaged in selling the family's agricultural products, and managing the family's finances, so they take care of all expenditures in the daily life of the family.

The allocation of land use right has been completed in the communes, therefore the education and knowledge building among the people to eradicate the discriminative thinking between women and men in the community and in the family is very necessary, in order to gradually eliminate the inequality in the accessibility to resources and resource use. This cannot be done in just one or two days, and things will be easier when the Tay and Nung people's literacy level is improved.

Through the above presentation, we can see that the biggest hurdles to the gender equality in the target locations in the study are: *first*, the

biggest constraint to Tay and Nung women (especially Nung women) is low literacy level. In the current illiterate population in Vietnam, 70% are ethnic minority women living in the remote areas (50% of the Nung women in these communes are illiterate). Thus, their ability to access scientific and technological knowledge, market information and approach is hampered, especially compared to men's. *Second*, women comprise the main labour force engaged in housework, and the burden of the farming activities reduce greatly their time for learning and improving their knowledge, limiting their participation in the training workshops in the community. *Third*, women cannot register their names in the certificates of land use rights, which limits their ability to access banks' loans (in case security is required), and daughters are not allowed to have their rights to inheritance when they get married. *Fourth*, women are not allowed, or restricted in making decisions for the production and other important matters of the family. And *fifth*, women are more vulnerable to diseases due to bad hygiene conditions and the difficulties in their daily life.

In summary, in order to have real gender equality in the daily life of the Tay and Nung ethnic groups in the selected locations, it is necessary to have assistance from the Government to improve their income as well as their literacy level. To obtain that, in the immediate time, investment in improving the infrastructure like electricity, transport roads, schools, health clinics, etc. is extremely needed. On the other hand, it is necessary to promote the education and knowledge building in the community, in order to encourage the local women to participate in the social activities. Only when the women can have "a decisive voice" in their families as well as in the society, can we really have gender equality.