The struggle for food and livelihood security: changing gender hierarchies in the wake of changes in climate and forest management and protection regulations

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This study examines changes in gender relations when a previously remote and self-sufficient ethnic minority community in a mountainous forestry part of Central Vietnam faces food and livelihood insecurity caused by collective impacts of climate change and regulatory changes and exacerbated by rapid socio-economic development.

Gender hierarchy of the community were seriously challenged with middle-aged men who could neither fit into the traditional role of provider in the wake of these disruptive forces, nor compete for jobs in the mainstream economy and with women and girls who were forced to take up new responsibilities in the agrarian economy to ensure their family’s survival. A study conducted in 2019 noted a phenomenon of “lost young men” who were attracted with modern entertaining technologies, hesitated to work in the fields, and yet finding themselves unable to compete for employment with those who have more education or, in some cases, better social connections or skills. In this context, young women and girls have been given better access and opportunities to education and to empowerment later on. Although the challenging changes have created serious new problems and made the population more open to exploitation, they have also opened up new possibilities for women to increase their social status. The study also noted the eagerness on the part of many young women and the reluctance on the part of many young men to respond to new opportunities for study and full-time employment. It, however, may signal that gender hierarchies and strongly-held concepts of masculinity and femininity in a highly patriarchal culture have not changed as much as might be expected, even under intense pressure.

The study, using both qualitative interview and quantitative survey research methods, and supplemented by additional research visits over the years and comparisons with other similar cases. The study thus aimed to draw lessons that will be relevant to contexts where climate change is having a major negative impact, and together with other factors can force previously remote, poor communities whose livelihoods are reliant on natural resources into a new and in many ways unequal relationship with the mainstream cash-based economy.