



ACCESS OF  
**ETHNIC MINORITY WOMEN**  
TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION SERVICES

**Situation analysis of women from Dao  
and Muong ethnicities in Da Bac, Hoa Binh**



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was prepared under the partnership between the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Vietnam (UN Women) in an effort to promote policies and programs on gender equality for ethnic minority areas in Vietnam. Since 2018, UN Women has received financial support from Irish Aid Vietnam to assist the Committee of Ethnic Minorities Affairs in the development and implementation of ethnic minority policies towards gender equality and empowerment. Every year, in addition to cooperating with government agencies, UN Women cooperates with civil society organizations to promote the voice of and enhance information sharing among networks of civil society organizations to advocate for the development and implementation of gender-responsible policies in ethnic minority areas.

This report has been written while Vietnam is rushing to complete the 'Master Plan on Socio-economic Development of Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas 2021-2030'. ISDS and UN Women hope that the report will contribute a perspective on ethnic minority women's access to public administration services, thereby confirming that programs for ethnic minority women under the National Plan on Socio-economic Development of Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas for 2021-2023 should continue to invest in ethnic minority women and girls to increase education, learning, and employment opportunities, especially vocational education opportunities, and promote social mobility for women. Investment programs for

infrastructure improvement such as electricity, rural transport, telecommunication networks, and schools are also indispensable in increasing the access of ethnic minority women to public administration services and socio-economic resources. This study also confirms that positive changes in public administration reform, such as the one-stop-shop mechanism, digital public services, and infrastructure improvements are necessary, but not sufficient to enhance the power and autonomy of ethnic minority women. In the future, further interventions are needed to transform traditional gender stereotypes that hinder the advancement of women and strengthen gender inequalities, especially the gendered power relations in decision-making, to ensure the promotion of substantive gender equality in socio-economic development programs.

ISDS and UN Women would like to thank the representatives of local authorities, social organizations, and women and men in Da Bac district, Hoa Binh province for providing us with information on the local public administration services situation and for sharing their valuable stories. The report was finalized after a consultation workshop held in Hanoi, with the participation of representatives of social organizations and agencies, women from the study area, authority representatives, and research institutions interested in this topic.

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# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEMA	Committee of Ethnic Minority Affairs
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EM	Ethnic minority
FGD	Focus group discussion
ID	Identity document
IDI	In-depth Interview
ILO	International Labor Organization
ISDS	Institute for Social Development Studies
LURC	Land use right certificate
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PA	Public administration
PAPI	Public Administration Performance Index
UN Women	The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The law of Vietnam stipulates that all citizens have equal access to public administration (PA) services. The State has an obligation to ensure that all citizens can access PA services to exercise their rights and protect their legitimate interests. In recent years, PA services in Viet Nam have been significantly improved thanks to the government's attention and commitment. However, due to a number of socio-economic and cultural barriers, ethnic minority (EM) women still encounter difficulties in inheriting the fruits of these improvements.<sup>1,2,3</sup>

To better understand the current status of EM women's access to PA services, and to determine its impact on the participation of these women in poverty reduction activities and their ability to benefit from basic social services, in order to propose suitable support for this particular group, the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS) has been commissioned by UN Women to conduct an in-depth study in Hoa Binh province. The findings of this study will be shared with government authorities, international organizations, and other stakeholders. It advocates for a gender-responsible implementation of Vietnam's Master Plan on Social-economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous areas (2021-2030),

while not exacerbating existing gender inequality issues in EM areas.

The study was conducted in a rural commune and a town in Da Bac district, Hoa Binh province. This is one of the areas that the Vietnamese government has received Irish Aid's support in implementing the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction 2016-2020. In particular, one village of the resettled Dao people, and one sub-zone of predominantly Muong ethnic residences in Da Bac have been selected for the study.

The research results show that EM women in the study area have more access to PA services. Women usually perform 'simple' PA procedures related to document certification such as CV verification for job applications, or poor and ethnic minority household verifications; residency registration; birth registration; school enrollment; marriage registration; death registration; etc. Whereas, services with more complex procedures related to larger, more important assets such as land use rights, business registration, or large loans are often performed by men, while women (or the wives) merely accompany them to sign the paperwork. In general, men still play the dominant role in performing PA procedures in the family. The cases of women performing vital

1 CEMA (2020). The socio-economic situations Report of 53 Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam 2019.

2 UN Women (2019). Policy recommendations to advocate for Gender equality in ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam.

3 Jones, N., & Thi Van Anh, T. (2012). Politics on gender and social protections in Viet Nam: Opportunities and Challenges. London: Overseas Development Institute.

PA procedures only occur in families where the husband is away or busy.

Younger women, women living in urban areas, and women with higher education often conduct the PA procedures themselves. Meanwhile, older women, women living in rural areas, poorer women and women with a lower standard of education have little access to PA services. They rely heavily on their husbands or children to perform PA procedures, with some never having conducted a PA procedure on their own. Muong women living in the town often access PA services more independently than Dao women living in rural communes. Many EM women have yet to recognize the importance of PA services, especially regarding the protection of their rights to land and other properties. This could put them at risk of being deprived of their rights to property or land in situations of conflict or uncertainty.

Numerous barriers still exist for EM women in accessing PA services. These include gender stereotypes, capacity barriers (related to language and access to information technology), and an inadequate perception of the importance of PA services, especially those related to land use and property rights. Accessing online public services will also be a challenge for many EM women, as many do not own a smartphone with an Internet connection. Even for those who do own an Internet-enabled device, the Internet connection in remote, mountainous areas (often inhabited by EM communities) is quite poor. The cost of using the Internet, especially for poor and near-poor households, can also make EM women hesitant to access this service. The complicated execution of online PA procedures can also be a problem, particularly for older women.

Positive changes from educational and socio-economic development policies that prioritize

EM communities; local officials' initiatives to increase access to jobs and loans; the one-stop-shop mechanism and other PA service reforms; and shifting public perceptions towards gender equality are creating more opportunities for EM women, especially young women, to enhance their capacity and access to PA services. However, more supporting policies are needed for older or disadvantaged women, especially in the provision of online PA services. Women with disabilities remain an 'invisible' group in policies to manage and provide PA services in Viet Nam.

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## Conclusion

This study on two groups of EM women, Dao and Muong in Da Bac, shows that they have and are changing to keep up with the rapid socio-economic and technological changes taking place in their hometowns. They can be seen as two typical cases, illustrating how EM women can gain autonomy and actively participate in the process of poverty reduction, changing the lives of themselves and their families in the process. Factors that enhance EM women's effective access to PA services include: (i) Convenient PA services at the grassroots level with friendly and supportive staff; (ii) Convenient infrastructure, including transportation and Internet connection; (iii) High education levels and increased socialization help women to quickly grasp PA procedures, becoming more confident and active; (iv) The role of authorities and social organizations in creating a welcoming environment for women to confidently take the initiative in production and life in general, and; (v) Positive socio-cultural and economic changes that promote gender equality in public awareness and facilitate women's advancement.



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## Recommendations

Programs for EM women in the National Strategy for Sustainable Poverty Reduction, or the Master Plan for Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas 2021-2023, need to continue to invest in education, learning, and employment opportunities for EM women and girls, especially vocational education opportunities, and in promoting social mobility for women. In addition, infrastructure investment programs such as electricity, rural transport, telecommunications, and schools are also indispensable in facilitating better, stress-free access to PA services for women. In particular:

- 1) Strengthen information technology capacity (Internet, Google, social media, smartphones, and online public services) among EM groups. This can be done through:
  - a) Improving infrastructure to facilitate convenient and efficient Internet access (in mountainous and remote areas far from the commune center).
  - b) Setting up community-based volunteer groups consisting of young, well-educated, tech- and net-savvy women to support older women, women with disabilities, and unskilled women using smart devices to search for information and access online PA services.
  - c) Sensitization and instruction on using online PA services should be integrated into informatics lessons or extracurricular activities at schools, so that EM boys and girls can get acquainted early with online PA services.
- 2) Build specific activities/programs to support disabled people and EM women with disabilities to access PA services where they can benefit directly from online support programs in vocational training and other social security services.
- 3) Improve access to local PA services to ensure women feel more confident when communicating with government officials or in social interactions in general. This will also reduce their dependence on the Internet or smartphones. This can be done by guiding women to ride motorcycles and get their motorbike licenses to help them become more independent and make it easier for them to reach PA service agencies.
- 4) Modify loan procedures, probably through digitalization, to reduce barriers for women when applying for loans in circumstances when the husband is head of the household, or when another family member cannot be present at the time of the loan. For example, family members' participation and authorization could be done online, with endorsement by PA officials and loan providers.
- 5) Strengthen activities that 'bring procedures to the people', learn from loan programs for hunger eradication and poverty reduction, or from those that issue ID cards for local residents in their neighborhood.
- 6) Reinforce communication activities to transform traditional gender norms, especially on gender roles and decision-making power.

- 7) Increase communication activities to improve the awareness of EM women about their land rights, such as having their name in the red book, joint property ownership during marriage, inheritance rights, etc. and the importance of legal procedures in handling land and assets.
- 8) Viet Nam has 53 ethnicities living in different regions across the country, each with their own unique cultural and social characteristics and distinct development conditions. Therefore, before implementing an intervention for EM women, it is crucial to conduct an assessment of the intervention area in order to design suitable and effective support programs.



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

The law of Vietnam stipulates that all citizens have equal access to public administration (PA) services. The State has an obligation to ensure that all citizens can access PA services to exercise their rights and protect their legitimate interests. In recent years, PA services in Viet Nam have been significantly improved thanks to the government's attention and commitment. However, due to a number of socio-economic and cultural barriers, EM women still encounter difficulties in inheriting the fruits of these improvements.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

Public administration is the use of public resources in the implementation of activities to fulfill the designated function, responsibilities, and obligations of an organization and/or individual in order to provide PA services as regulated by the law.<sup>7</sup>

A PA procedure is the process and instruments involved in carrying out services, including the bureaucratic requirements determined by governmental agencies and/or authorities regarding a specific task related to an organization and/or individual.<sup>8</sup>

Public services are activities that serve the basic needs and other legal benefits and rights of citizens and/or organizations, authorized directly or indirectly by the Government to ensure social order, collective benefit, and social justice.<sup>9</sup>

In Viet Nam, a PA service is a public service and often includes the following areas: (1) The provision and notarization of personal documents and certificates such as ID, birth/death certificates, marriage certificates, and

4 CEMA (2020). The socio-economic situations Report of 53 Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam 2019.

5 UN Women (2019). Policy recommendations to advocate for Gender equality in ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam.

6 Jones, N., & Thi Van Anh, T. (2012). Politics on gender and social protections in Viet Nam: Opportunities and Challenges. London: Overseas Development Institute.

7 Phạm, D. (2011). Basic rules in national administrative governance. Vietnam Law Magazine. <http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/basic-principles-of-state-administration-4429.html>; Alfaro, Jaro A. (2010). Public administration reform. Vietnam Law Magazine. <http://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/reforming-public-administration-3651.html>; Ngô, T.C. (2013). Public administration reform in Viet Nam: Situations and Solutions. <http://scholarly-journals.com/sjba/archive/2013/Nov/pdf/Can.pdf>; Painter, M. (2005). Public administration reform in Vietnam: foreign transplants or local hybrids? Socialism and Legal Change in Asia, Canberra. <http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p125661/pdf/ch1210.pdf> [https://www.undp.org/content/dam/vietnam/docs/Publications/25527\\_05\\_PARECONDEV\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.undp.org/content/dam/vietnam/docs/Publications/25527_05_PARECONDEV_FINAL.pdf)

8 Clause 1, Article 3, Decree no. 63/2010/ND-CP [http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class\\_id=1&mode=detail&document\\_id=95074](http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&mode=detail&document_id=95074)

9 Ministry of Justice (2018). Current situation of performing tasks and public administrative services in legal aid management and transfer capacity to qualified social organizations and individuals. <http://trogiupphaply.gov.vn/nguyen-cuu-trao-doi/thuc-trang-thuc-hien-nhiem-vu-dich-vu-hanh-chinh-cong-trong-quan-ly-tro-giup>

driving licenses; (2) The provision and notarization of business registration and practicing licenses; (3) The collection of financial contributions to the State budget and fund, and; (4) The handling of administrative violations and complaints/accusations from citizens.

Accordingly, PA services in Viet Nam contain a number of unique features. These include: (1) PA services are regulated by the law and implemented by governmental public administrative bodies; (2) The services are non-profit making; (3) All citizens have equal access to PA services and the State is responsible for ensuring the access of all citizens to PA services to secure their legal rights and benefits, and; (4) The services are under State management.<sup>10</sup>

Commissioned by UN Women, ISDS has conducted an in-depth study with EM women to analyze the current situation of their access to PA services and to understand how being able to access these services has influenced their participation in poverty reduction activities.

The study's findings and recommendations will be shared with government agencies as well as social and international organizations. It aims to promote gender equality and gender-responsible implementation of the Master Plan on Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas 2021-2030, while not exacerbating existing gender inequality issues in EM areas.

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) To discover how EM women in different age groups and from various socio-economic

backgrounds access local PA services (electronic forms included), mainly related to legal documents such as: (i) Land use rights (land use right certificate, land/house transfer, inheritance); (ii) Personal identification documents (ID cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates, notarization); (iii) Business registration and practicing licenses, and; (iv) Trust fund/loans to improve livelihood/employment/education.

- 2) To learn about the knowledge of EM women on PA services, policy, and relevant legislative documents and procedures.
- 3) To identify the cultural and social barriers hampering EM women's access to PA services, with a focus on those related to domestic power relations, traditional gender norms, and local customs.
- 4) To identify ways to empower EM women and their agency through active participation in socio-economic activities to escape poverty (in the cases of more well-off women as positive outliers, who proactively participate in PA services to access financial resources and, in turn, increase their agency, social mobility, and power in decision-making in the family).
- 5) To learn about local poverty reduction policies and programs in order to identify their advantages and disadvantages in supporting the access of EM women to PA services.

The study's findings will contribute towards the overall advancement of EM women in Viet

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10 Ministry of Justice (2018). Current situation of performing tasks and public administrative services in legal aid management and transfer capacity to qualified social organizations and individuals. <http://trogiupphaply.gov.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/thuc-trang-thuc-hien-nhiem-vu-dich-vu-hanh-chinh-cong-trong-quan-ly-tro-giup>

Nam, through the implementation of gender-responsible activities in the Master Plan on Socio-Economic Development in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas 2021-2030. Some of the possible areas where the study's findings can contribute are as follows, with an emphasis on women's access rights:

- (i) PA services related to loans/credit in poverty alleviation programs to establish a business or encourage entrepreneurialism, especially for household businesses in different sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, animal farming etc.)
- (ii) PA services related to business registration,

including household business in different sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, animal farming etc.)

- (iii) PA services related to land use rights: The livelihood of EM communities is strongly associated with agriculture and forestry. However, agricultural land is often scarce. Therefore, it is crucial to learn about the PA services related to land use rights of EM women.
- (iv) PA services related to personal identity that can affect opportunities for employment and/or education of EM women, or their access to other PA services.





## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

### 2.1. The integration of gender equality into public service management policies in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has shown strong political commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Until now, Viet Nam has established a relatively comprehensive legal framework on gender equality, staying true to international treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and Convention no. 98 of the International Labor Organization (ILO). Viet Nam's legal framework covers all eight spheres, namely politics, the economy, labor, education, information technology, culture and sport, health, and family. As per Article 26 of the Vietnamese Constitution 2013, male and female citizens have equal rights in all aspects. The National Strategy for Gender Equality 2011-2020, with the overall objective being "to ensure genuine equality between men and women", clarified seven specific objectives together with 22 indicators in order to narrow down gender

gaps in politics, the economy, employment, and education. It also aimed to increase women's access to economic resources and healthcare services, to ensure gender equality in the family, and to enhance State management capacity in gender equality.<sup>11</sup> These objectives and indicators have helped set a direction for the plan of action of the authorities at various levels and allocate budgets for implementation. Moreover, the national program has, in fact, tackled a number of key gender inequality issues in Viet Nam. In particular, rates of domestic violence have declined. Meanwhile, rates of literacy for girls and ethnic minorities have improved remarkably, as have rates of higher education among women – especially in rural areas – rates of women in leadership positions and in politics, as well as maternal health.

Nonetheless, several issues have not been addressed directly with clear indicators, and instead have solely been addressed in the legal documents in their related field. Some examples include equal pay between women and men, the tendency for women to be more likely to engage in informal sectors such as unpaid care work and, therefore, to be more vulnerable from a lack of insurance, and gender equality in land and valuable asset ownership, among others.

11 Prime Minister, Decision 2351/QĐ-TTg, Approving National Strategy about gender equality period 2011-2020

The implementation of social management policies that enhance gender equality, including the provision of public services such as public administration services is, in reality, still subject to considerable limitations.

A report by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in 2012, applying the '3Is' economic-political analytical framework developed by Rossendorf (2005), indicated the major challenges in implementing gender equality policies in Viet Nam.<sup>12</sup> This theoretical framework looked at the implementation of programs and strategies on gender equality in different contexts including the State, business, households, and the public with their different interests and benefits. It also viewed them as gendered and formed by social norms on the values and roles of each gender. This, in turn, influences the behaviors, development capacities, and ways that each gender expresses and contributes to society. The three factors analyzed in the report were: (1) Institutions, including political standpoint, state organization, and policies; (2) Interest, in other words, who benefits from policy changes and power relations between these groups, and; (3) Ideas, trust from the public and political class in the nature and causes of social issues and the State's responsibility in handling them. Accordingly, the barriers hindering the implementation of gender equality policies of Viet Nam include:

- **Institutional barriers:** Notwithstanding the relatively comprehensive legal framework and numerous social protection programs, especially in poverty alleviation, gaps between national goals and actual practice persist. This is due to the lack of collaboration

between governmental agencies in handling cross-sectional issues such as gender equality, limited capacity and autonomy of government at lower levels such as at district and commune levels who directly implement these programs/policies, and the shortage of activities and budget for capacity building for officials. Additionally, despite the direct budget allocated under the National Strategies on Gender Equality, the funding for activities advocating gender equality is insufficient, and there is a lack of detailed guidelines on the focus of resources in implementing policies on gender equality. Moreover, the market economy orientation has widened the gap in the costs and quality of public services, such as education and health, for vulnerable populations.<sup>13</sup>

- **Barriers in interest:** There are significant differences in the interest in and commitment to practicing gender equality between local authorities. Gender equality is still often seen as a responsibility of the Women's Union alone.
- **Ideological barriers:** Even though gender equality has been widely recognized as an important agenda in sustainable development, social norms that hamper efforts to promote gender equality are still prevalent. Some examples are the belief that enhancing gender equality in one aspect will deepen gender inequality in another, the fear that providing financial support will make the poor dependent or that the fund will be exploited by 'undeserving' people, and the norm on domestic labor division

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12 Jones, N., & Thi Van Anh, T. (2012). Politics on gender and social protections in Viet Nam: Opportunities and Challenges. London: Overseas Development Institute.

13 ActionAid (2015). Gender responsive public services: Where is the answer for Viet Nam? Hanoi.

binding men to the pillar role with decision-making power and valuable asset ownership while women must take care of housework and prioritize family over personal interest. Furthermore, policies in Viet Nam have been promoting gender equality by mitigating and/or eradicating gender gaps. However, they have still not progressed to proactively meeting gender-specific needs, or embodying gender sensitivity in the process of designing, planning, implementing, and monitoring policy.

EM women and girls, in particular, suffer from the 'double disadvantages' of being women and being ethnic minorities. Under the influence of the multiple, intersectional forms of discrimination on the basis of sex and ethnicity, EM women and girls are always put at a greater disadvantage in terms of access to opportunities and resources.

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## 2.2. The socio-economic challenges influencing ethnic minority women's access to public administration services

Studies have demonstrated that ethnic minorities are faced with numerous correlated challenges. These result in persistent income inequality compared to the national average which, together with other forms of vulnerabilities, requires a

long-term development strategy based on their specific needs and characteristics.<sup>14</sup> A World Bank report in 2006 summarized various barriers that have an impact on the income gap between EM and Kinh populations, and on the opportunity gap to access economic and social resources of EM communities in general, including access to PA services. These hindrances – including differences in assets, capacity, and status or voice – constrain the development of EM populations, especially women

These hindrances were once again highlighted in the 2019 reports of the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) and UN Women.<sup>15,16</sup> In addition, challenges caused by gender inequality against Vietnamese women in general, as discussed in ODI's report in 2012 (such as income inequality, participation of women in informal sectors, lack of access to social protections, lack of technical training and opportunities for higher-paid jobs, low land/house ownership, and reproductive health risks, etc.) are further exacerbated for women and girls belonging to EM groups, due to distinctive barriers related to EM customs and the prevalence of ethnic discrimination.

Specifically, in terms of employment, the majority of EM people often work in the informal sector, as self-employed or unpaid home-makers, with unstable income and no social insurances.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the proportion of EM women doing unpaid domestic work is twice as high as that of men (52% female versus 26.6% male). Gender stereotypes about the division of household labor place the burden of unpaid care work in EM

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14 World Bank (2009). Summary Report: Development of ethnic minority in Viet Nam. Washington, DC.

15 CEMA (2020). Socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minorities in Viet Nam 2019.

16 UN Women (2019). Policy recommendations to advocate for Gender equality in ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam.

17 Ibid.



households mainly on the shoulders of women and girls. EM women tend to enter the labor force very early, and earlier than Kinh women. At the age of 15, many EM girls are already working like adults, while most Kinh girls are still attending school.<sup>18</sup>

The proportion of EM women receiving training from primary or higher levels is also lower than that of men (8.9% female versus 11.7% male) while, in general, only about 10% of EM people receive technical or professional training. The proportion of EM men who are business owners or work in the formal sectors is also higher than that of women.<sup>19</sup>

The proportion of EM men who can read and write in either Vietnamese or EM languages is still higher than that of EM women.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the high illiteracy and re-illiteracy ratio among EM female workers aged 35 and over have hindered them from participating in vocational training in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries in order to change their jobs and improve their income. EM women have a higher unemployment rate than men (1.43% versus 1.38%).<sup>21</sup>

In terms of education, the gap in accessing quality education between EM and Kinh children increases at higher education levels. Although, by 2019, 96.9% of children from 53 ethnic minorities attended primary school at the stipulated age, this proportion decreased significantly at secondary (81.6%) and high school (47%) levels. As a result,

the percentage of EM school drop-outs also increases at higher education levels, with the main reasons being child marriage and starting work early.<sup>22</sup> A positive sign, however, is that the rates of late-attending and school dropout among EM children have declined steadily in recent years.<sup>23</sup> The National Target by 2025 is to have over 95% of children attending secondary and high school at the right age. For EM children, the target is 60%. These positive changes and strong commitment of the government in reaching universal education for ethnic minorities indicate that language, in particular competence in using the Kinh language, would no longer be a barrier for EM children in future generations. However, it should be noted that most of the current education and vocational training policies for EM students are gender-neutral. This can translate into uneven effects and unequal benefits for each gender since they face different social circumstances and challenges which require more gender-responsive support.

In terms of healthcare, the proportion of EM women attending antenatal care and giving birth at health facilities is much lower than that of Kinh women and the mortality rate of both mothers and infants in some EM groups is also 3-4 times higher than Kinh women.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the limitations of the healthcare system in EM areas, long-standing language and customs barriers, and the inability of EM people to pay for healthcare services, also creates inequalities

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 CEMA (2020). Socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minorities in Viet Nam 2019.

21 CEMA (2020). Socio-economic situation of 53 ethnic minorities in Viet Nam 2019.

22 UN Women (2019). Policy recommendations to advocate for Gender equality in ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

in access to medical services (including access to healthcare-related PA services) for EM women. Moreover, the high rate of child marriage also threatens the health of mothers and children and limits the access of EM girls to education and career opportunities, making them even more vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

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### 2.3. “One-stop-shop” reform in public administration procedures

A one-stop-shop office is an administrative agency of the State. It allows citizens to submit applications for administrative procedures and receive results in the same place (one-stop-shop mechanism), simplifying the procedure and preventing corruption. The one-stop-shop model was initially tested in 1995 and, by 2015, 99% of provinces and 97% of communes across the country employed the model.<sup>25</sup> All one-stop-shop offices apply an interagency one-stop-shop mechanism with collaboration between horizontal and vertical levels of governmental agencies to provide all administrative procedures in one place.

A one-stop-shop office at the district level would normally handle the majority of PA services while a communal office would deal with more basic matters (with an annual average of 5,000 cases). These services include providing civil status and personal identity documents (such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, ID cards, and

residency books); authorizing and notarizing papers, insurance, and social security documents (health insurance, social insurance, poor household certificates, merit certificates, social welfare beneficiaries etc.); land management (registration/transfer of land use rights); business registration; construction permits; and tax and fee collection.

One-stop-shop reform in all provinces has helped vulnerable populations to access basic social services and social protections. This, in turn, improves the State’s capacity to ensure the human rights of all citizens such as the rights to benefit from social security services and the rights to birth registration. Nevertheless, in remote areas, more support from the State is required to overcome the logistical challenges in accessing PA services, such as by increasing transport means.<sup>26</sup>

The government has also introduced policies and guidance on how to operate one-stop-shops, ensuring consistent implementation in all areas and levels. Policies guiding the implementation of the interagency one-stop-shop model in public administration in Viet Nam include Decision No. 09/2015, Decree 61/2018, Decree 92/2017 amending Decree 63/2010 on the management of public administration services, and Circular 01/2018 instructing the implementation of Decree 92. The principle of prioritizing citizen satisfaction has been underlined in these policies. Of these, Decision 09/2015/QĐ-TTg (replacing Decision 93/2007/QĐ-TTg) is the highest legal foundation for all regulations related to interagency one-stop-shops. It covers organization mechanisms, recruitment criteria, training, technical and ethical requirements of officials, work schedules,

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25 Blunt, M., & Davidsen, S. (2017). One-stop-shop in Viet Nam: Changing the Face of Public Administration for Citizens and Businesses through a Single Door to Multiple Services. World Bank.

26 Blunt, M., & Davidsen, S. (2017). One-stop-shop in Viet Nam: Changing the Face of Public Administration for Citizens and Businesses through a Single Door to Multiple Services. World Bank.

equipment and working condition standards, to forms for specific procedures, working hours, and fees if applicable. The Chairperson of the Provincial People's Committee is responsible for monitoring the formation of an interagency one-stop-shop for all administrative levels with high autonomy (to approve changes in organizational system, in budget issues, and to undertake inspection and monitoring at district and commune levels to propose suggestions to higher levels).

The issue of gender equality is mentioned in Decree 61/2018 on implementing interagency one-stop-shops in handling administrative procedures. Specifically, Article 4, Decree 61 requires public administration services to ensure fairness and equality between those who apply for the service, and to prioritize service users' satisfaction as the indicator evaluating the effectiveness of the one-stop-shop. Furthermore, Decree 61 also specifies support for marginalized populations such as EM communities. For the first time, it requires translation for EM dialects when needed (Clause 1e, Article 8). Furthermore, Clause 4, Article 9 also stipulates that there needs to be extra support for vulnerable populations, such as women and ethnic minorities, when evaluating the effectiveness of public administration.

Nevertheless, there is a gap in detailed guidance in the allocation of budget and other resources, as well as in the instruments needed to carry out this support. Other regulations aiming to ensure the rights and convenience of citizens in accessing PA procedures state that waiting areas must be at

least 50% of the total size of the one-stop-shop. This must be at least 40m<sup>2</sup> at commune level, even in remote areas (Article 13, Decree 61, and Article 9, Decision No. 09/2015). Meanwhile, the counter must be in a position where all citizens can reach it easily (Clause 1, Article 13); citizens only have to return once for additional documents (Clause 2, Article 13, Decision No. 09/2015); all information related to application submission and results – including responsible agencies, procedures, required documents, forms, processing duration, result time, and fees if applicable – must be made visible on the official government websites at national and provincial levels, and listed publicly at all local one-stop-shops (Clause 1, Article 3, Decision 9/2015, and Decree 92/2017)<sup>27</sup>

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## 2.4. Citizens' evaluation of public administration services in Viet Nam

The Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) is the largest sociological survey in the country. Each year, PAPI monitors the implementation of PA evaluated by the experience and feedback of citizens, aiming to improve the effectiveness of local government public services. The eight evaluation indices of PAPI on PA services are: (1) The participation of local residents at grassroots levels; (2) Publicity and transparency in decision

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27 Decree No. 63/2010/ND-CP on management of public administrative procedures; Decision No. 09/2015/QĐ-TTg promulgating the regulations to implement one-stop-shop mechanism, interagency one-stop-shop mechanism at local public administration offices; Decree No. 92/2017/ND-CP amending and supplementing articles in decrees related to the management of administrative procedures; Decree No. 61/2018/ND-CP on implementing one-stop-shop mechanism, interagency one-stop-shop to handle administrative procedures; Circular No. 01/2018/TT-VPCP on the implementation of Decree No. 61/2018/ND-CP dated 23/04/2018 of the government on implementing one-stop-shop interagency to handle administrative procedures.

making; (3) Accountability; (4) Corruption control in the public sector; (5) PA procedures; (6) Provision of public services; (7) Environmental governance, and; (8) Electronic governance. Indices seven and eight were added in 2018.

The latest PAPI survey was conducted in 2019, taking the total number of citizens involved to 131,501 since 2009. Women made up about 53% of the respondents, with ethnic minorities accounting for 16%. What stands out is that the report revealed major issues in the governance and PA in Viet Nam within the last decade (from 2011 and 2019) that have impacted on the access of people in general, and EM women in particular. These issues are E-governance in reforming PA procedures, land use rights, gender equality, and especially in the election and management of local authorities.<sup>28</sup>

Specifically, notwithstanding the significant efforts and commitment of the government in simplifying PA procedures, including both the implementation of one-stop-shops and E-governance in recent years, the overall performance of PA procedures has remained low over almost a decade (from 2011 to 2019). Dissatisfaction comes mainly from individuals rather than businesses. This is partly due to the slow and unharmonious roll-out of E-procedures (E-governance scored lowest among all eight aspects). Very few respondents actually accessed the government website to search for information and/or to submit applications online.

Meanwhile, digital PA procedures play a crucial part in the national strategy to improve the quality of PA services. They help to simplify the access and implementation of PA procedures (for those with Internet access), while also mitigating corruption

and bribery and improving the transparency of information.

Regarding land use rights, complaints about bribery when obtaining a land use right certificate (LURC) were still common in the aspect of corruption control. Poverty continues to be the leading concern based on the respondents' opinions. Noticeably, the PAPI report pointed out a correlation between the lack of social insurance and worries about poverty. This was mainly found among vulnerable populations; such as among those working in informal sectors like agriculture, freelancers, family businesses, and other jobs with unstable incomes and without access to social protections. The majority of vulnerable populations are women and ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, how EM women access and use public administration services was not discussed in the report.

Hoa Binh province, one of 16 provinces with the highest overall performance score in PAPI 2019, has been selected as the research site for this survey. The province's scores on PA procedures, corruption control, and PA service provision increased slightly from 2011 (by about 0.6 points in each aspect). However, the three remaining scores, namely accountability, citizens' participation, and transparency decreased in the last decade.

Among the PA procedures, Hoa Binh scored the lowest in terms of those related to land, and the highest in those related to construction permits and personal documents. What stands out is that the aspects where Hoa Binh scored the lowest were E-governance (especially the sub-indicator on access to government websites to search for information and online responses of officials), accountability (especially the sub-indicator on

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28 CECODES, VFF-CRT, RTA, UNDP. (2019). Effectiveness index of governance and public administration at provincial level in Viet Nam: Measuring people's experience. Hanoi.

officials' response to citizen complaints), and transparency (regarding publicity of the budget and access to information on State policies).

The results of the evaluation of PA services in Hoa Binh province match the situation of Da Bac district, according to the report of the district People's Committee on the implementation of administration reform from 2015 to 2020.<sup>29</sup> The authorities in Da Bac district have carried out activities to improve the PAPI index, including:

- **On transparency:** The district has organized nearly 600 workshops to disseminate law and policies for 79,229 attendants (14% of the total district population), and enhanced education on law for key communes with high rates of law violation cases.
- **On PA procedures:** A review was carried out to eliminate overlapping and outdated procedures, all approved administrative procedures were publicized in national data resources and at all one-stop-shops, and 100% of local government agencies applied one-stop-shops with transparent procedures. From 2015 to 2018 the district received, on average, around 2,500 cases a year. However, the number of cases dropped sharply every year in all report periods (by 14% - 45% a year). In particular, in 2019, the number declined by 77% from more than 2,000 in 2018 to only 482 cases. Almost all cases were resolved with none left unattended.
- **On E-governance in implementing PA procedures:** Online public services are currently categorized into four levels. While level 1 only provides information about

required documents for online procedures, level 2 allows users to download and print relevant forms for document submission. At level 3, users can register to fill out online forms but still have to pay a fee (if applicable) and receive results at a one-stop-shop. Level 4, however, allows users to complete all the steps including application submission, paying fees, and receiving results via post without having to go to an administrative office in person.

Da Bac district (and Hoa Binh province in general) has a website for online administrative procedures and has collaborated with a postal service to send results to increase access to online administrative procedure levels 3 and 4. However, until now, the district has only received 27 cases at level 3 (in the first half of 2020) and no cases at level 4. At communal levels, the number of cases at levels 3 and 4 is extremely limited (14 and 24 cases, respectively). These mainly pertain to birth certificates; death certificates; marriage certificates; notarization; and interagency procedures to obtain birth certificates, residency registration, and health insurance for children under 6 years old at the same time; religious activity registration; and social protection registration for social welfare beneficiaries such as invalids and martyrs. Procedures related to land use rights and business registrations (mostly in agricultural produce, food and beverages, and karaoke) are available at levels 3 and 4 at district level. Procedures for inheritance and the transfer of valuable assets are not available online in Da Bac district.

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<sup>29</sup> Report No 351/BC-UBND dated 17/8/2020 of Da Bac district People's Committee about Implementing Decree No 05/NQ-TU dated 13/5/2016 of the Standing Committee of the Provincial Party on enhancing PA reform in Hoa Binh province, period 2016-2020, missions, responsibilities, solutions period 2021-2025 of Da Bac district People's Committee.

- **On accountability:** The district has publicized an address to receive complaints from citizens on the quality of public services at the one-stop-shop at district and commune levels. However, according to the district report, the local authorities received no complaints during the report period (2015-2020).

The Da Bac district's report on the five-year reform of administrative procedures also identifies major challenges. These include a shortage of human and budgetary resources in implementing the reform of PA services, and the limited technical capacity of officials in implementing E-governance and digitalizing administrative procedures. The district has also set out the goals for the reform of administration in the next period (2021-2025). This concentrates on the thorough roll-out of the one-stop-shop mechanism and modernizing PA services via E-governance. Specifically, Da Bac district aims to reach 100% of communes with effective online websites, and to have 80% of PA procedures resolved by one-stop-shops. It also aims to have 100% of online public services provided at level 2 and 30% at levels 3 and 4. The district will reinforce sensitization for citizens about procedures at levels 3 and 4 and ensure 80% citizen satisfaction with PA services.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, reports such as PAPI (2019) and ActionAid (2019) have provided effective models to measure the effectiveness of PA services based on the experience and feedback of service users. Nonetheless, these reports do not focus on the specific experience and needs of EM populations, especially women and young girls. They are also lacking discourse about the socio-economic and political barriers (and opportunities) typical for EM women and young girls in thoroughly explaining the situation, challenges, and support in eliminating the obstacles in accessing PA services.

By looking at EM women and children in their specific socio-economic situations, and the opportunities and challenges that they face at policy, infrastructure, and cultural levels, our study hopes to bring forth a more comprehensive picture of the issues that this vulnerable population encounters in accessing PA services. It also aims to highlight the role which access to PA services plays in the empowerment of EM women and young girls. Based on our findings, a number of recommendations will be proposed to address the root causes of obstructions hampering the access to PA services of EM women and children.

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30 Report No 351/BC-UBND dated 17/8/2020 of Da Bac district People's Committee about Implementing Decree No 05/NQ-TU dated 13/5/2016 of the Standing Committee of the Provincial Party on enhancing PA reform in Hoa Binh province, period 2016-2020, missions, responsibilities, solutions period 2021-2025 of Da Bac district People's Committee.

# 3

## METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Data collection tools and analysis

The research applies a literature review to obtain an overall understanding of the existing information on the topic, and a qualitative data collection method including in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) in order to gain insights into the research area. A number of participatory assessment techniques were included in the FGDs. Issues including gender-based labor division, the values of the husband and wife in households, and roles of relevant institutions and organizations were not included in the FGD due to time limitations and also because they can be found in numerous other recent studies on gender in Viet Nam. Therefore, participatory assessment techniques were not used in the data collection process for these issues.

Below are some participatory assessment techniques employed by the research team:

- A checklist of administrative procedures and a matrix table describing what and how female participants knew of or used administrative procedures, required documents for those procedures, and the family member responsible for handling the procedures.
- Assessment or opinion cards for each participant, which were then discussed

and summarized as collective opinion with agreement from the whole group.

- Gender power ladder scale: To learn about the power relations between men and women (often between husband and wife) in a family – the scale helps participants (male and/or female) assess the levels of decision-making on issues in their family life.
- Key case studies and timelines in some IDIs with women in specific situations to gain a more in-depth understanding of the barriers and opportunities they face in accessing and using PA services, as well as opportunities to improve their livelihoods.
- Images and observations were also used to provide a more detailed description of the research site and living conditions of the female participants.

Based on the objectives of the research and literature review, the research team designed IDI and FGD tools and guidelines for participatory assessment. Guidelines for IDIs and FGDs consist of three main components: (i) Knowledge about PA services and PA procedures of EM women; (ii) Access to and use of PA services of EM women, and; (iii) Needs for access to PA services of EM women. Moreover, an introduction to the research objectives, the protocol on confidentiality, and questions for verbal consent and demographic information of the participants were also included in the data collection guidelines.

The set of guidelines to collect data for this research included:

- FGD guidelines for women and men
- IDI guidelines for women
- Interview guidelines for key stakeholders (representatives from the People's Committee, Women's Union, policy banks, and/or land officials)
- Checklist of PA services
- Checklist of demographic, socio-economic, infrastructure information, and services of the research site
- Power ladder scale (in decision-making) guidelines

The assessment tools were developed and revised by the research team members and experienced experts from ISDS. The research proposal, data collection tools, and fieldwork plan have been reviewed and approved by the ISDS Institutional Review Board in human subject research. Before conducting fieldwork, all research team members received thorough training on each interview guideline and implementation procedure.

Each and every research team member practiced strict ethics during an IDI and/or FGD. They provided clear explanations about the research objectives; ensured the confidentiality and voluntary participation of the participants; obtained verbal consent for participation, tape recording, and photographs; and ensured the privacy of interview/discussion locations. After each day's fieldwork, the research team had a meeting to discuss lessons learned to improve the guidelines and divide work for the following day. Furthermore, the research team also complied with regulations to prevent the spread of COVID-19. All participants were given and required to wear face masks and sanitized their hands before joining the interviews.

## 3.2. Research site and sample selection

The research was conducted in Da Bac district, Hoa Binh province. Hoa Binh is one of the four provinces for which the Vietnamese government has received Irish Aid's support in implementing the National Target Program on Sustainable Poverty Reduction 2016-2020.

In particular, one rural commune and one urban district in Da Bac were selected for the study. The aim was to find out whether women in these two settings with different living and development conditions, in fact, hold different levels of knowledge and access/usage of PA services. With the support of Fatherland Front officials in Hoa Binh province and Da Bac district, a resettlement neighborhood of Dao people, and a subzone mainly dominated by Muong people in Da Bac district were selected as the study areas.

FGDs were conducted with groups of Dao and Muong women of varying living standards (poor, middle income, and high income) and age groups (18-24, 25-34, and 35-50).

Moreover, FGDs were also conducted with men from the same EM groups to obtain a different perspective on the access to and usage of PA services of women in their communities, as well as to understand their thoughts on the roles and decision-making power of women and men.

IDIs were conducted with some women with poor and high living standards of these two EM groups. Women with special situations such as those with disabilities, women whose daughters had disabilities, and women who were single due to divorce or widowhood were also invited to participate in IDIs. The women with special



situations participating in this research were from another remote neighborhood located 18 km from the commune center. Additionally, representatives from local authorities and the local Women’s Union were also interviewed as knowledgeable contributors.

The assessment took place in the first week of September 2020. It included 10 FGDs, among which two were with men, and 22 IDIs with a total of 89 participants, of which 21 were male. Details of the research participants are presented in the table below:

**Table 1. Research participant details**

	<b>Town</b>	<b>Rural commune</b>	<b>Total participants</b>
FGDs with women aged 18-24	1	1	12
FGDs with women aged 25-35 <i>(poor and high living standards)</i>	2	2	24
FGDs with women aged 36-50	1	1	14
FGDs with men aged 20-55	1	1	17
<b>Total FGDs</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>67</b>
IDIs with women <i>(poor, single, with disabilities, living far from the commune center)</i>	8	8	16
IDIs with officials	2	4	6
<b>Total IDIs</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>22</b>

Among the interview participants, there were two male groups aged 20-55. One was from Toan Son commune and the other was from the subzone in Da Bac district. The purpose of the FGD with men was to learn about their perspectives about the access to and usage of PA services of EM women and their viewpoints on gender and women’s roles. Both women and men from Toan Son commune are from the Cha neighborhood, which is predominantly occupied by the Dao people. Women and men from town are mainly Muong people, with some Tay.

Of the female participants, Muong women from the town have relatively high educational attainment compared to Dao women from the commune. Most of the younger Muong women finished high school while the majority of the older Muong women finished secondary school. Regarding Dao women from the commune,

those with a high-school education make up only a third of the total number. Another third finished secondary or primary school, while the remaining third did not finish primary school.

About two-thirds of the female participants know how to drive a motorbike, even though not all have obtained a driving license. Some women shared that the test for a driving license is difficult, especially the theory test part where they have to use a computer to answer.

Concerning technology literacy, over 90% of the participants have a mobile phone. However, not all of these are smartphones with an Internet connection. Many women, especially the older group, use simple mobile phones mostly for calls. The use of the Internet and social media via a mobile phone mostly occurs among younger women.

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### 3.3. Limitations

The research fieldwork was delayed compared to the initial plan due to COVID-19 and social distancing restrictions. Furthermore, as heavy rains and storms were taking place in the Northern mountainous area, the research team was advised by the local authorities not to choose communes too far from the district center for safety and to avoid extreme travel difficulties.

The EM women participants in the research are mainly Dao and Muong women, who are not too isolated or different from the Kinh people and other ethnic groups such as Tay and Thai. Therefore, these women do not face language and communication barriers as much as women in other EM groups who live in more remote and higher lands in the Northern mountainous areas. This created a more supportive environment for the discussions/interviews. However, it could imply that some other difficulties which can be commonly faced by women from other EM groups may not be reflected.

Although Da Bac is a remote district of Hoa Binh province with difficult living conditions, it is still a lower-land area. As a result, the research findings may not fully reflect the status quo of access to and usage of PA services of other EM women who live in farther and more remote areas with more difficult travelling and living conditions and bigger language and communication barriers.

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### 3.4. Key features of the research site

Da Bac is a mountainous district in Hoa Binh province. It is among the biggest districts in terms of size yet still remains a remote area with difficult living conditions. Da Bac is 15 km from Hoa Binh city but reachable only via difficult roads. The population of Da Bac district is about 58,000 people who belong to the five major ethnic groups, namely Tay, Muong, Dao, Kinh, and Thai. Recent years have seen an emergence of families from the Xo-Dang ethnic group who migrated from Tay Nguyen. Da Bac district shares its border with numerous communes by Hoa Binh lake and is home to many resettlement groups due to the Hoa Binh hydropower construction project some decades ago. Da Bac district consists of 16 communes and one town with a total of 122 neighborhoods/subzones. Most communes of the district are still investment subjects under Program 135.<sup>31</sup>

The infrastructure of Da Bac has received relatively comprehensive investment. The national electricity system now covers all communes, big roads for cars have reached commune centers, and inter-neighborhood roads have mostly been concreted.<sup>32</sup> Over the years, Da Bac district has overcome difficulties to move toward the goal of poverty eradication and sustainable development. Credit programs providing concessional loans for poverty alleviation and manufacture investment, political

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31 Five year report on the implementation of conclusion 01/KL-ĐCT dated 20/8/2015 of the Fatherland Front Committee of Da Bac district, dated 5/6/2020.

32 Five year report on the implementation of conclusion 01/KL-DCT dated 20/8/2015 of the Fatherland Front Committee of Da Bac district, dated 5/6/2020.

mass organizations, and policy banks have been enforced. Besides strategies to develop agriculture and forestry, fisheries, tourism, and entrepreneurialism, the development of industrial zones in Hoa Binh province, especially those near Hoa Binh city, has attracted a large labor force and created many jobs for local district residents, particularly those of working age, thus improving the income of numerous households.<sup>33</sup>

However, Da Bac district continues to face many challenges. For example, climate change is causing natural disasters such as heavy rains, flash floods, and tornadoes which have a devastating impact on the socio-economic conditions of local residents. The 433 roads connecting Hoa Binh city to Da Bac town have been in construction for many years causing difficulties for people to travel and also for the development of the whole area. The rainy and stormy seasons are when travelling is most difficult as the roads can become impassable. For instance, the 2017 storm left the road network in the area with catastrophic damages.

Da Bac town is the center of development in the district. The district has two neighborhoods of Dao people that have just been merged with the town and are its two least-developed areas. The livelihoods of people in these neighborhoods come mainly from agriculture and small business. In recent years, the socio-economic conditions of the local residents have improved significantly. What can easily be seen is the increase of job opportunities, not only in the district and province area but also in other provinces. For instance, many women living in Da Bac town work far from home, mostly in foreign-invested companies in the industrial zones of Hoa Binh, such as Hoa Binh glass and Bandai company. A small number

of women migrate to work abroad in Korea and Taiwan through a network of relatives.

Activities such as job introduction, training, loans etc. for local residents have also been enhanced by the local authorities through networks of political and social mass organizations, especially the Women's Union and policy banks.

Toan Son commune is located 7 km from Da Bac town with five neighborhoods and a total of 2,700 residents.

The commune has five ethnic groups, namely Tay, Muong, Kinh, Dao, and Thai. The two neighborhoods of the Dao people are roughly 10-17 km from the commune center. For administrative procedures, people from these neighborhoods have to travel a long distance to reach the commune center and district town. Toan Son commune is striving to achieve the standards of the New Rural Development Campaign in 2020. Therefore, the infrastructure of the commune, including roads and PA services, is receiving good investment.

The research took place in the Cha neighborhood, a community of mostly Dao people living near to the commune center. This makes it convenient to access the communal People's Committee, where the one-stop-shop PA service is located.

Farming is the main production activity of local residents in Toan Son commune. Their income mostly comes from the farming of fruit trees such as grapefruit, guava, dragon fruit, and bamboo shoots collected from the forest. In recent years, some women in the commune have started working for companies in Hoa Binh city. A small number migrate to China for work via informal channels.

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33 Report of Da Bac district number 286/BC-UBND dated 26/6/2020.

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## Administrative procedure reform

Since 2016, Hoa Binh province in general, and Da Bac district in particular, have been rigorously implementing administrative procedure reform.<sup>34</sup> Many initiatives to renovate administrative procedures, especially in utilizing information technology in the governance and provision of legal documents, have been prioritized to create a friendly and convenient environment in which to handle administrative procedures for local residents. Hoa Binh province has now developed an online system on PA procedures for local residents. Similarly, the one-stop-shop model has been used in Da Bac district since the beginning of 2019. Since its implementation, local residents and businesses have been able to use PA services at levels 3 and 4 (registration, filling forms, paying fees, and receiving results online), which saves

travel and waiting time. Officials are currently waiting for training from the province to operate this online system.

Telecommunication and Internet systems have also been upgraded and now cover almost all villages and communes. Relevant departments and People's Committees in towns and communes have been equipped with computers with broadband Internet connections and the electronic one-stop-shop's interagency software.<sup>35</sup>

In reality, the one-stop-shop has been homogeneously implemented since 2018<sup>36</sup> at the district level. In the research town and commune, the one-stop-shop PA service office has been upgraded and updated lists of required documents and guidelines on PA procedures have all been printed and made visible for the local residents to read and acquire information when arriving at the office.

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34 Report No. 351/BC-UBND dated 17/8/2020 of Da Bac district People's Committee about Implementing Decree No 05/NQ-TU dated 13/5/2016 of the Standing Committee of the Provincial Party on enhancing PA reform in Hoa Binh province, period 2016-2020, missions, responsibilities, solutions period 2021-2025 of Da Bac district People's Committee.

35 Hoa Binh Magazine (2020). Da Bac district applying successfully information technology in government agencies. <http://baohoabinh.com.vn/28/137253/Huyen-Da-Bac-ung-dung-hieu-qua-cong-nghe-thong-tin-tr111ng-co-quan-Nha-nuoc.htm>

36 Ibid. 4

# 4

## KEY FINDINGS

### 4.1. Access to and usage of public administration services

#### 4.1.1 Ethnic minority women access and use public administration services more than before

Research participants all agreed that there has been a positive change in recent years with an increase in the number of EM women going to PA services themselves. In the town, women are even considered to go to PA services more than men. This change was said to have occurred within the last five years, which is when the socio-economic development strategies and PA reforms of the local government were enforced.

Women participating in this research listed many PA services that they have used. Most relate to notarizing papers and issuing personal documents such as ID cards and separating residency books. Younger women often mentioned services related to their children's education, such as issuing residency certificates, poor and EM household verification etc., those related to civil status for job or school

applications, or procedures for personal issues such as marriage certificates, birth and death certificates, residency books etc.

Some women mentioned accompanying their husbands or relatives to apply for procedures on land such as to split the red book; conduct land transactions (buy, sell, or transfer land use rights); and to apply for business registration. The number of women who engaged in these procedures is not very high.

The majority of female participants, when discussing the PA services that they used, gave quite detailed explanations of the required documents and the location where they needed to go to carry out such procedures. This was mostly the one-stop-shop located at the commune or town People's Committee.

One of the PA procedures which caused some confusion is the one related to inheritance and testament. One possible reason for this could be that testament is not too common in the area.

In comparison to women, men often appeared to have better knowledge about PA procedures regarding required documents and where to go. Besides the PA services listed by women, men also mentioned procedures that were less known by women such as obtaining a driving license and vehicle registration. In particular, men are more knowledgeable than women in

listing procedures related to the transfer/sale of land use rights and splitting the red book. Meanwhile, women only talked about the red book – LURC –but did not know the procedure to obtain it. Obtaining vehicle registration, especially for cars, is still mostly conducted by men. Moreover, men also stated that they were more often the ones who carried out procedures related to land transactions, as they usually have their names in the LURC and/or are the heads of the household.

To account for why many women are using PA services, many female participants in the FGD said that, because their husbands were busy at work or worked far away, they had to go instead. Some women said, “I go because my husband doesn’t go”.

Additionally, another interesting reason that women participants from the town raised related to men hesitating to communicate. The men in their family (husband/sons) do not want to deal with complicated matters, do not pay attention to details, and are less diligent in communication, so they often do not like or are not suitable to handle PA procedures like women do:



“In my areas most of the men don’t like to go out, they don’t like to communicate” (FGD with women, Muong, 31-36 years old, town).

“...for example for school we need to verify that we are ethnic minority, or from poor households so our children can benefit from policies at school, but mostly only women go obtain that for the children... Sometimes I joke that now women are taking the lead, my other female friends said



*the men are too lazy to go out and don’t want to deal with those petty matters... Many families think these things are petty.”* (Women’s Union official, town.)

“Sometimes women are better at talking so they can handle administrative procedures better than men.” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)

“...it’s best that I go deal with these papers because I can check what is missing, my husband doesn’t pay attention and might miss something. The husband only goes when there are important papers needing his signature.” (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)

“...We woman are not shy to go to the officelike men. Back then I didn’t know I told my husband to go but he came back said it was very embarrassing for him.” (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)

“Women my age or younger nowadays are very up to date, for us ethnic minority people here when it comes to paperwork or going to the government offices, the men don’t want to so it’s mostly women who go.” (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, high living standard, town.)

“My husband only works and earns money, otherwise he doesn’t know anything in the household.” (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)

Another reason is that men are not as careful and meticulous as women. Thus, women can handle PA procedures better than men. There is also a mindset that men only deal with big and important things:



*"... because we women are more meticulous so we do more things. Men only take care of big things, these petty matters are mostly for us. What I mean is because I am more meticulous so I handle household works, for these procedures I will go if I'm not busy. If I'm busy my husband will go." (FGD with women, Dao, 18-25 years old, rural.)*

*"I see that women [handling administrative procedures] never encounter any problems... Men eventually still run into this or that problem, it takes too long... My mother gets it done faster than my father." (FGD with women, Muong and Tay, 18-24 years old, town.)*



*procedures." (FGD of women, Dao, 35-50 years old, rural.)*

*"In my case, my children are too small and no one else can look after them so my husband often goes." (FGD with women, Dao, 18-25 years old, rural.)*

*"Personally I have to deal with so many things at home already so that's something my husband can do. If my husband is busy I can also arrange to go. I don't mind it, I know how to do it." (FGD with women, Dao, 18-25 years old, rural.)*

*"It's mainly my husband who deals with it because he knows more. I don't really want to go to those offices. Especially to the bank to take loans or something, it's only my husband. My husband is a freelancer and he has more time. I have my young children to take care of." (Woman, Muong, 39 years old, town.)*

Research findings in the two areas also show that women living in town appear to use PA services more than women in the research commune, especially Dao women. This is reflected by many Dao women living in the rural commune and Muong women living in town sharing that even though EM women are using PA services more than before, men still are the main users.

Below are some of their quotes on who often deals with PA procedures in the family:



*"Women have not gone to school, don't know the language so it's only husbands who handle the*



*[women using PA services] "...more, of course, back then they didn't really go."*

*[why?] "Because the society is getting more civilized, they are better educated. The society is developing more and more and people are more exposed to the outside. Women back then only knew to farm." (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)*

Nonetheless, many male participants in the FGD still thought that men were the main users of PA services in the family and women mostly only go when the men are away from home. The cases when women handle PA procedures are mainly because there is no man in the household (widowed, divorced, or men working far away):



“Only men go. Mostly men... If there is no man then the women go. If the husband is busy, the wife can go. If the husband is not busy then the husband goes.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

“Generally there are also women. But that woman is widowed, she is the household head so she has to go. Otherwise in normal families the husband often goes. Unless the husband is too busy or works far from home then the wife has to go.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

“There are things that the wife can't deal with because I'm the pillar. For example profile for children to go to school, the wife can go and the husband can also. That's not fundamental. There are fundamental things that need household head then we can't change. For some other things if the husband is busy then the wife can go. For example if there is a problem with our family's residency book like the writing fades away or something then almost 100% I will have to go.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)



“...the procedure to take loan. Whoever the loan is under the name of, that person has to go. For example if the loan is under the husband's name and the husband is busy on the disbursement day then he needs to write an authorization letter.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

A number of men in town discussed the equality in who handles PA procedures, which partly demonstrates the positive changes in gender roles in household labor division. Below are some answers when asked who often handles PA procedures in the family:



“The majority are men. If the husband doesn't go then the wife goes, if the wife is busy then the husband goes. Basically it's quite equal, doesn't have to be this person or that person... The family has husband and wife, the kids are small, whoever has free time can go...” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)

“Now it's more equal. Whoever has time in the family will go. Both are the same. We know where to go already. If husband is busy then wife can go.” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)

The case of single women as sole pillars of the household: Many women are in special situations due to divorce or widowhood where they have to be the household pillar without the support of a husband. They have to access PA services themselves, which has made them more knowledgeable and confident.



Below is a comment from a middle-aged woman about the roles of husband and wife in handling PA procedures:



*"...other families have both husband and wife then surely the husband will go more. Women will*

*go sometimes, but mainly still the husband goes. Husbands are the family pillar so they often handle that. In my case there is no pillar, I am the family pillar so I have to do everything." (Single woman, Dao, 42 years old, rural.)*

### Case study 1. Women who are 'forced' to change

Ms. N is 45 years old, of Muong ethnicity, and she has been divorced for nine years. She is currently living with her two children. Her oldest child, a daughter, has finished university and is working at a company. Meanwhile, her son has gone to serve in the army. Ms. N was introduced to her husband and got married at the age of 20. He was from the same neighborhood and was often violent towards her and the children when drunk and losing at gambling. So she decided to file for divorce even though her husband did not agree and threatened her. She talked about the process:

*"...actually that year I didn't know how to prepare the application, I wrote the application then brought it to court but court didn't accept hand-written application... I went to the court in the district, they gave me a printed form that I only had to fill in, I decided to get divorced myself... The first time I went to submit the application in court, I was so embarrassed and shaky... I stood at the gate for a long time, then I thought my life was already at the point, I gathered my courage to go inside. Then I met an official who lives in my neighborhood, I gave him the application, but it was handwritten and back then they didn't process that, so they told me to go upstairs to buy the printed form, then I filled that in myself".*

However, that time, Ms. N did not succeed in filing for divorce. Her husband's family came to reconcile and encouraged her to tolerate the situation, raise the children, and keep the family together. She ended up going back to court to withdraw her application. She continued to endure her husband and his violence until her first child finished 12th grade, after which she decided to apply for divorce again, years after the first application. In the end, she left empty-handed with her two children.

Ms. N continued to share her experience in applying for divorce, *"...the first time I was very embarrassed. After one or two times I got used to it". She said that the procedure was, in fact, quite simple even though she only finished 5th grade, "...they have already the form so I only need to fill in that form". After divorce, she went to town to split from the husband's residency book. She thought it was important to split as, "I have my own residency book, I can live more comfortably and it is easier to deal with any other paperwork".*

After a few times, Ms. N had grown used to the PA procedures and it felt normal, *"...if I didn't know I just needed to ask then they would show me... Basically [women] have to know [about administrative procedures]. Otherwise it's quite difficult".* Afterwards, her household was listed as poor, so she went to obtain poor household and EM verification to apply for a scholarship for her daughter to attend university. She also became more familiar with going to the bank to send her daughter money.

Regarding procedures related to LURCs, Ms. N said that, after the divorce, her husband sold their house but did not share anything with her and the children. The house where they live at the moment belongs to her deceased sister-in-law, who passed away before any land use papers were transferred to her. She expressed concerns about how to issue these papers and whether the sister's family (the owners of the house) would interfere.

Nowadays, Ms. N is very competent in using social media to contact her children and to search for job opportunities, *“I often go on groups of builders in our country. I am a bricklayer so I search for jobs on the website of Hoa Binh province, wherever suitable I will go.”* Her children showed her how to use the Internet and she became accustomed after a few times.

She noticed that, in her neighborhood, it is mainly women who handle PA procedures. She said, *“Men barely go, they are not that proactive. They go work in the construction and so on but they can’t write, it’s all women. When I go I only see women who go.”*

Discussing whether women need to thoroughly understand PA procedures, Ms. N stated that women need to know to take the initiative, such as in procedures related to land use rights, *“if women don’t know they will face great disadvantages.”*

Speaking of using online services, she shared that it is easy for those who use the Internet daily, but for those who do not use it often, like herself, it could be difficult. However, Ms. N believes that, if she is guided one or two times on how to use it [via phone], she will be able to. She said that online services will be a lot more convenient as they save travel time and effort.

She feels much (around 80%) more confident than before, *“After my divorce, I had to do everything so I know very well, I know more than before... I feel that life is easier and more confident... Back then even in neighborhood meeting I was shy and didn’t dare speak up but now I am more daring and able to voice my opinion... [women] need to be independent, active, diligent, to make life easier for themselves, everywhere we go we are more independent, don’t have to rely on other people, it’s easier”.*

Ms. N is one of the many women who have been ‘forced’ to change because of their circumstances, which have made them become more proactive and confident in life.

In addition to the differences between women in the rural area and the town, the research findings also indicate a chasm between the two generations: Younger women who have been handling PA procedures by themselves – from obtaining birth certificates to school enrolment for their children to notarizing papers

– as opposed to older women who rely mainly on their husband and children to deal with PA procedures. Moreover, some women have almost never dealt with PA procedures themselves. In this research, they are mainly women in the older age groups, with lower educational attainment or who never went to school.

## Case study 2.

Mrs. L is 55 years old and of Dao ethnicity. She said that her husband is the main person dealing with PA procedures, and now that her children have grown up, she also counts on her son or daughter-in-law to handle those procedures when her husband is not at home. Her responsibility is only to sign the papers that her family members tell her to sign, or participate in meetings. The less she participates, the less confident she feels and the more she devalues herself. She shared about the other family members handling administrative procedures as follows:

*"He [her husband] often goes, I don't go... He and the children handle them [marriage certificates]... He split the residency book. I signed but I didn't know what papers they were... I don't often go to interact with other people."*

*[To split the residency book]: "He did it... I didn't go, I didn't know anything."*

*"I only went to the communal People's Committee for meeting, otherwise I have never gone to do any procedures, I don't have the knowledge."*

*[Talking about her daughter-in-law]: "She knows about all the procedures, I don't often go so I don't know anything."*

Other middle-aged women, mainly of Dao ethnicity in the rural commune, also shared similar thoughts:



*"...[husband] is the household head, he has to go." (FGD with women, Dao, 35-50 years old, rural.)*

*"Here it's mainly husbands who go [to handle administrative procedures]. The husband goes but before still have to discuss both husband and wife. In some cases the husband is illiterate so the wife will go. Or if the husband is busy then the wife goes." (FGD with women, Dao, 35-50 years old, rural.)*

*"...before I didn't get to go to school much, because of my limited education I feel shy, I don't want to go outside." (Woman, Dao, 40 years old, rural.)*

Older women, mainly in rural areas, living in poverty, and with lower educational attainment are often those who do not or barely have access to PA services. Instead, they often rely on their husbands, children and children-in-law, or relatives (such as fathers or fathers-in-law) to help deal with PA procedures:



*"I have always asked my relatives to deal with the procedures because I don't have a lot of knowledge and I am shy. Like the ID card, I asked my relatives to fill in the form, I only had my picture taken and people brought the ID card to my house." (Widowed woman, Dao, 52 years old, rural.)*

*"It's my husband who often goes to the commune. I have only finished 2nd or 3rd grade, my writing is not very good." (FGD with women, Dao, 30-48 years old, rural.)*



*“Us women didn’t get to go to school in the past, we are illiterate so it’s only the husbands who handle the procedures.” (FGD with women, Dao, 36-50 years old, rural.)*

Many women only know to ‘sign their name’ and many do not care about the procedures and their rights or benefits. This places them in a vulnerable position and at risk of being deprived of their rights (assets, resources etc.).

### **Case study 3. Women who rely on their husbands to handle PA procedures can be completely passive in the face of a family crisis**

Ms. M, a 52-year-old Dao woman, was faced with extreme difficulties when her husband passed away suddenly. Her husband had been in charge of all PA procedures, even for the red book and pink book. She only knew how to do farming and housework. After the death of her husband, Ms. M was very confused and did not know how to deal with paperwork related to the land use rights of the hillside piece of land she thought was given to her family to use for 50 years. She was informed that this land had been seized by another company (that she did not know of until told by the commune official). She did not know where the pink book (land papers) was as her husband had taken care of all papers and procedures. Ms. M also wanted to receive loan support to upgrade her house but she did not know how:

*“This house is very dangerous, I don’t dare staying in this house in heavy rains, I have to stay in the neighbor’s house. So I went to ask and the commune said my house is in the list. But then I asked the village leader, he said our house is not in the list and has not been registered. I’m sure when my husband was alive he registered already. [Q: What about if you register again now?] I don’t know. I don’t wish for anything more, just want money to fix the house, but I don’t know how.”*

Ms. M wants to take out a loan to run a business but is afraid that she won’t be able to pay it back, *“I want to but I’m afraid if it doesn’t work then how do I pay back, I’m already so poor”*. After her husband’s death, she asked her brother to take her to get a new ID card as her old one was from 1990 and unusable. She also started to learn to drive a bike to take her children to school and transport goods for money, *“Since I learned to drive, it has helped a lot. If I don’t know how to drive, it would have been so difficult. Now I can drive myself to the district to handle paperwork for my children, I don’t have to ask other people to help.”* Discussing land and house papers, she said, *“I just left it like that, haven’t gone to reissue anything. I don’t know what will happen in the future.”*

## **4.1.2 Women who encounter difficulties in accessing administration services**

### **Women with disabilities**

Women with disabilities seem to be unable to access PA services. Generally, in highland areas, services for people with disabilities have not received much attention. Citizen reception

rooms at commune and town levels are inaccessible for people in wheelchairs or people with a visual impairment. The life of people with disabilities in general, and disabled women in particular, primarily depends on the help of their relatives and caregivers. In addition, people with disabilities still face much discrimination from the public, and even from their relatives, about their capacity. Their access to PA services also depends on the help of their family members/guardians for instance when applying for school, notarized papers for social protections

etc. Many people with disabilities do not have personal documents/identification due to not knowing about or having access to related PA services. As a result, they become invisible to many social services, including loan programs, or PA services related to land use rights. Disabled

women participants in the research are in the 25-50 age range but are not married. Therefore, women with disabilities are unfamiliar with procedures related to marriage and children such as marriage certificates, birth certificates, and school enrolment for children.

#### Case study 4. Women with disabilities face difficulties in accessing PA services

Ms. N is a 30-year-old woman with disabilities in Da Bac. She has been supported by the authorities to sign paperwork at home, such as poor household or disability verification. However, in the past, to get an ID card, she needed help from her relative to take her to the police department. Ms. N learned about financial procedures mainly through her relatives. She wants to be more proactive in handling procedures, especially regarding land use rights and asset (residency book, red book) ownership so that she can take control in life and not have to depend on her family. Nonetheless, she has not received any information about online procedures and it has not been implemented in her locality. There has not been any special support from the authorities in disseminating information or assisting her to conduct procedures at home. She said:

*"...at the moment, I have to ask my parents and family to handle them for me. It's hard for me to go to these places so it's extremely challenging for me to deal with these... Over there I will have to go up three floors, can you imagine that's already hard for normal people, for people with disabilities how hard it must be to go up those three floors."*

Ms. N's access to PA services has been made possible mainly with help from her relatives. Other women with disabilities who participated in the interviews shared similar stories:

*"Before I was dependent on my parents so my parents handled them, there were not so many papers back then. Later on I have my children and grandchildren, then they handle these papers... It's hard not being able to drive. Whenever I go I have to ask my grandchildren to take me there and back." (Disabled woman, Dao, 49 years old, rural.)*

#### Poor women and women from remote villages far from commune centers face difficulties in traveling to the commune center for PA procedures

Women from remote villages far from commune centers also shared their difficulties in having to travel a long distance, sometimes more than 10 km, to reach the commune center for PA procedures, especially poor women without motorbikes. If they lack some papers, they will then have to go back and forth a few times and

incur additional costs for gas. Many people have to ask relatives or acquaintances to drive them so it becomes a struggle:



*"Those who don't go often (to deal with PA procedures) perhaps don't know how to drive, or are illiterate, or it's better for the husbands to go, or the husbands often go to the committee... After a few times then we know more... I find that I know more and become less nervous after*



*a couple of times.... back then the economy was low so there was no bike like this. Nowadays everyone can go, it's easier to go." (Woman, Muong, 32 years old, town.)*

### 4.1.3 Knowledge about public administration services of ethnic minority women is still vague and fragmented

Both Dao women in the rural commune and Muong women in the town, regardless of their age group and income, were able to list a number of basic PA procedures. These included notarization; personal documents and residence management registration (birth certificates, ID cards, marriage certificates, CV notarization, residency book registration, and temporary residence registration); social security related procedures (health insurance, poor and near-poor household verification and loans); and land use rights related procedures (red book, green book). Some also know about business registration procedures.

Research participants all considered that red books are mainly registered in the name of the husband even though the Law on Land has stated that the names of both a husband and wife can be included.<sup>37</sup> In fact, according to local authorities in the commune/subzone, the new red books include both names. The local government has policies encouraging residents to reissue the red book so that it includes both names. Nonetheless, the number of those reissued books is very limited. One of the main reasons is because the red book is often

mortgaged to take out a loan from the bank. Therefore, husbands are often responsible for land-related procedures rather than wives:



*"Of course the husband because the books are all under men's names. A while ago here I went to sensitize people to include both names in the book but the families seem to not have many conflicts here or something so even though some families have reissued but many still left it like that, they don't want to reissue so the person who has name in the book has to go [handle procedures]." (Women's Union official, town.)*

*"[re-issuing the red book] 25-30% only... it's hard because many red books are mortgaged at the bank." (Local authority, male, town.)*

*"Men often handle papers related to land because the papers are under their names." (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)*

Even though female participants could list some basic PA procedures, their understanding of the concepts of 'administrative procedures' and 'public administration services' seem to be very vague, even for those who have regularly used PA services. Very few people can clearly explain what PA procedure, PA reformation, and one-stop-shop mean. Dao women in the rural commune or Muong women in the town both expressed confusion when asked about these procedures, even though they themselves have handled one or more administrative procedure.

<sup>37</sup> Article 27, Marriage and Family Law 2014.

Compared to women, men appear to have a better understanding of administrative reform and the one-stop-shop. Some men living in town said that they often searched for information online, using Google, for example to search for required papers to issue birth certificates for their children, while only a few women search for information on the Internet.

### Who to ask?

When residents need to use administration services, or have questions about them, they often seek guidance from their neighborhood or village leaders and Women's Union officials, followed by relatives and other acquaintances for their experience in where to go, who to meet, and what papers to prepare for a specific administrative procedure. In other cases, they go directly to the People's Committee where the administration services are located to ask. Some even approached the chairperson of the People's Committee to ask where they needed to go for a specific procedure:



*"If you don't know you can go to the People's Committee to ask, or ask the chairman." (Woman, Dao, 55 years old, rural.)*

*"At first I didn't know anything, I went to town, they told me to go here and there. Now whenever I want to do something I ask those who have done it before me, or the close by officials, or my family members to know what I need." (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)*

*"... just go to ask in the commune, for example when I need I go to ask them, they will tell me what papers*



*I still need, then I will prepare that. Many times I think I have enough but they will tell me what is missing." (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)*

Although guidelines on the process of administrative procedures are publicly listed in the one-stop-shop, most women participants reported that they did not read these guidelines but directly asked the officials working there. A woman even stated that, when she needs to follow up with a specific procedure, she just goes straight to the People's Committee office and meets the chairperson to ask.

### 4.1.4 Limited facilities and resources to access public administration services online

The fact that many women own smartphones nowadays is an advantage for accessing PA services online. Nonetheless, only a small number of women, especially younger women aged 18-25, have in fact looked up administrative procedures online. Some women indicated that they often searched for information by using Google instead of going to the website of the PA services. They highlighted the challenges associated with searching for information online as there are too many sources, they do not know which ones are accurate, official, and updated. A woman described her feelings about having too many information channels:



*"... sometimes it's too chaotic. (Laugh). Too much information, no idea what is what. I am very confused." (Woman, Tay, 28 years old, town.)*

A noticeable positive change is that, although the number is small, some women who have businesses in the town area have been using the online platform for tax declaration and payment. This trend reflects the progressive tendency of businesswomen in keeping up with modern information technology. They are, indeed, the positive outliers who can inspire other women to become more independent and dynamic.

The majority of women, nevertheless, are not familiar with searching for information and handling PA procedures online. They are hesitant when it comes to electronic procedures, partly because they have never done it before and are not used to the platform and devices, and partly because they feel safer going in person to the one-stop-shop to handle the procedures directly with an official:



*"For example if someone tells us to work on a contract on the phone or the computer, we would feel quite nervous, unconfident, afraid that we will press wrong, we won't dare to." (Woman, Muong, 32 years old, town.)*

*"There might be some inconveniences, for example the Internet drops, without the Internet I will not know for sure if my application has been sent and if it will be approved. It's more practical for me to physically go to the office, I give them my application, they will notify me. Basically there are some advantages but also disadvantages." (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)*

*"Generally speaking now I am not as active as the younger ones. I use the*



*phone mainly to go online to watch news, and nowadays we work and talk with friends on Zalo." (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, town.)*

Nevertheless, the research respondents emphasized the convenience of online PA services, stating that searching for information online helps save travel time and is handier:



*"It is handy that I won't have to go, but the downside is I'm not too sure if I do it right or wrong. That's what I'm afraid of." (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, town.)*

*"It is very convenient, I don't have to go there, I can stay at home." (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)*

*"... if I know how to do it (using online procedures), it will be more convenient because I won't have to go." (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, rural.)*

Men appear to be more proactive in searching online for information about PA procedures, as well as watching more news about PA reform on TV. Therefore, men have a better understanding about the advantages of one-stop-shop reform. Nevertheless, the most common method of finding out more information – for both women and men – is still to ask directly at the People's Committee or to ask their relatives who have had experience before. They also shared that only middle-aged or young people use smartphones, and that the usage rates between women and men are similar.

It is noteworthy that women with disabilities, in spite of their invisibility in accessing PA services,



are more proactive in using the Internet to search for information (mostly by smartphone). They also appreciate E-governance more as it will allow them to access PA services more easily. This platform will be especially useful for people with mobility issues. A woman with severe mobility impairment, who has finished her education and currently has an online job with a decent income, expressed her thoughts about the online PA services:



*"It is handy. For example nowadays I see that everyone has smartphone, so everyone knows better... For example if someone tells us to work on a contract on the phone or the computer, we would feel quite nervous, unconfident, afraid that we will press wrong, we won't dare to." (Woman, Muong, 32 years old, town.)*



*"... very good, very positive for people with disabilities because it's hard for them to travel, now they only have to fill in the forms online... So now if there is a website to register for ID card, or for passport, or to obtain health certificate by asking for doctor's consultation and filling in the form then that would be excellent... That's why I really wish there would be a website for people with disabilities to obtain all public administrative procedures, also how to help people with disabilities in the mountainous areas, in rural areas like ourselves here, to have more interaction with the outside, to know more about technology." (Disabled woman, Muong, town.)*

Many of the research participants raised issues such as, if the online PA services are implemented in the locality, many people would still not be able to access them as they only have basic phones without an Internet connection. They were also worried about the high costs of Internet service, especially for families with a low economic condition. Furthermore, unstable connections and complicated procedures are among other concerns of many, especially older women:



*"The advantage is that people won't have to travel too much and save time. But the problem is that they don't have Internet in remote areas, they won't know." (Woman, Muong, 39 years old, town.)*

*"If the person has smartphone, it will be more convenient. But many local people here don't have money, don't have smartphone, so I think it's not that easy." (Woman, Dao, 33 years old, rural.)*

*"There are still many issues in accessing procedures on the Internet for women. Because firstly one needs a smartphone, secondly there needs to be Wi-Fi in order to connect. Now only the younger generation has*

#### **4.1.5 Barriers in accessing online public administrative procedures for ethnic minority women**

Acknowledging the convenience of online procedures, the research participants still showed hesitation, a lack of confidence, and fear in using this service:



*smartphone, those aged 40 and older don't use that so it's harder for them. Another thing is because the educational level of older women is limited so to implement such service will be challenging." (Man, credit team leader, rural.)*

Even though most female participants possess a smartphone, those who can use the device fluently to look up PA procedures are mainly in the younger age group (18-24). The rate of smartphone ownership among Dao women in poor or middle-income households is only about 50%. Older women often prefer to obtain information about PA procedures directly at a one-stop-shop or from their relatives, and they do not encounter many difficulties this way. Online PA procedures have not been implemented in the locality. Besides, the instability of the Internet connection and the lack of equipment such as computers, even for one-stop-shop officials, are other barriers hindering the implementation of online procedures:



*"I estimate that there is only 30-40% of women who have smartphone. They mainly have the black and white phone to call. Only younger women have smartphone, the older ones also want to have but it's not that common... To move to online procedures is extremely convenient, but there will be many difficulties because the rate of women with smartphone is still low, and not many families have the Internet." (Women's Union official, rural.)*

#### 4.1.6 Limited knowledge about the importance of public administration services in land ownership

Almost all women agreed that understanding PA procedures is necessary. However, very few realized the crucial role of these procedures, and the consequences of not knowing about or accessing them, especially in land ownership.

Most of the women surveyed stated that knowing about PA procedures means that they do not have to travel back and forth. This helps to save time and makes the completion of the procedures much easier. The procedures considered important for women are usually related to their children (applications for school enrolment, school fee reduction, and residency registration for their children); personal documents such as ID cards; and rights (loans, insurance, and poor household or disability verification). Many women said it is helpful to know about the basic PA procedures as, when their husband is away, the wife can handle them. Some stated that they feel more confident knowing these procedures:



*"...now there is much paperwork so the more we know about the PA procedures the better... I think we need to know all procedures related to personal papers... For example ID card, residency book. Those two need to be brought with all the time... Not knowing that will make it difficult. When they ask and we don't have it, it's useless." (Woman, Thai, 56 years old, town.)*



“... I think women should also know how to handle those procedures so many times if the husbands can't go, we can go instead.” (Woman, Dao, 30 years old, rural.)

▶ “Knowing about them means when the husband can't go, we can go. If we don't know, when we have to go to handle them nothing will be done, so we also need to learn.” (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, poor households, rural.)

▶ “All the procedures are important. In the future I will have to go to split the residency book for my children, I have to deal with this paperwork often so I also need to know.” (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, poor households, rural.)

▶ “Women need to know some procedures such as to issue the residency book, to obtain the birth certificate for our children, to make application for school for the children, to withdraw application for the children. Surely all women must know. Other women who don't know have their husband or children do it for them.” (Single woman, Dao, 42 years old, rural.)

Some women are aware of the consequences of not knowing about procedures related to land use rights and not having their name in the red book together with their husband:



“[Is there any downside of having only the husband's name in the red book?] Yes. For example in case of divorce I will lose my rights. If that happens, I will have no rights, will not receive anything. All my efforts will be for nothing.” (FGD with women, Dao, 36-50 years old, rural.)

▶ “[Is it necessary to know about procedures related to the red book?]... it's mine and if I don't know about it, I will be in disadvantage. If my husband mortgages that, I will lose my rights, if I don't know anything I won't be able to handle it.” (Woman, Dao, 56 years old, rural.)

Men also agreed that women need to understand and take part in handling PA procedures, especially regarding land issues which directly affect their rights, so that they can manage their assets and the husbands will not be able to mortgage or sell the property:



▶ “For example, in this family, the husband often beats his wife, he took advantage of the wife to go mortgage the red book or sell a piece of land. The wife didn't know anything, there are three or four pieces of land in the red book but one was already sold.” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)

Additionally, many men shared that, if women know more about PA procedures, they can help men, and that also increases their general knowledge. Below are some quotes demonstrating that thought from a FGD with men:



“... because if I can’t go then they can go. For example to go take a loan from the bank, if the wife knows then on disbursement day she can go for me, if she doesn’t know then I will have to go regardless of where I am.”

“If the wife knows then that enhances knowledge for herself.”

“Generally speaking, women also need to know, I am hoping that women would know everything and can handle it better than men.”

“If only the husband knows about PA procedures and the wife doesn’t know, that’s also a difficulty in the family... Often the husband works far from home while the wife stays at home but doesn’t know about those issues, the husband will have to travel home which costs money and time. Now it’s equality between husband and wife, it doesn’t have to be the husband who does this all the time, it’s troublesome for the husband.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

In comparison to Muong women, Dao women appear to participate in meetings and care

about PA procedures less, because they are more occupied with farm work and taking care of children. Some Dao women are not aware of the importance of knowing about and accessing PA procedures, especially in regard to land use rights. Their perception of the issue is simple, in that PA services are only considered important for those with businesses but not for those working in agriculture and forestry:



“Because here we mainly do farm work on the hills, we don’t need to deal with PA procedures. If you need to register a business then you will need to deal with PA procedures, but here we don’t have business to register. We just work with our hands.” (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, rural.)

It can be seen that many EM women, as well as men, are still not fully aware of the importance of PA services related to land, such as land/house transaction procedures. Land is an extremely valuable resource, especially for women. However, it is observed in this research that numerous land/house transactions were conducted solely by verbal agreement and based on trust without any written contracts. This is perceived as a ‘virtuous custom’ of the community. However, it puts women at risk of losing their rights if that trust is broken.

### Case study 5. Only young women live separately

Mrs. T is a 24-year-old Dao woman. She has just moved out to live separately with her husband and young child. Her husband works far from home, only coming back once a month. Her commune is 10 km away from the commune center, making it difficult to travel to the commune People’s Committee to obtain papers for her child to attend the 1st grade. Before going, Mrs. T asked around about what

documents were needed to prepare carefully so as to avoid having to travel back and forth:

*"... he [husband] goes to work, I am alone so I have to go [to handle PA procedures]. Many times I feel bad for my child because it's so hot outside but I still have to take her with me... My parents have their own things to attend to so they can't help look after the kid and I have to take her with me... The roads here are very difficult so I had to ask in advance [about the procedures] so I could be sure."*

In Mrs. T's opinion, PA procedures such as obtaining birth certificates, splitting residency books, notarizing papers etc. are not that complicated. For her, the most difficult procedures are those related to land (red book) because, *"I didn't know anything about it so it was hard."* Mrs. T and her husband bought a piece of land to build a house from a brother-in-law a few years ago but they have not followed through with the transfer of the red book as it was still mortgaged at the bank. The transaction was also only verbal, and Mrs. T is not sure when the land seller will be able to take the red book back. She thought that when they have the red book, her husband will handle the name transition procedure as she has *"limited knowledge"*. To have the names of both husband and wife in the red book will be decided by her husband, and she will follow, *"I am quite easy, to have [name in the red book] or not doesn't matter"*.

Once her child grows up, Mrs. T plans to ask the grandparents to help take care of the child so she can go back to work in Hanoi where she used to work before at an iron shop. That is on the condition that her husband agrees. Otherwise, she will do what her husband wants her to do. In our conversation, it seemed obvious that she would have to listen to her husband. Her husband is two years older and makes all the decisions in the family, even regarding loans, buying land, and purchasing valuable assets like a motorbike. He also handles all procedures. For Mrs. T, her husband is knowledgeable and, therefore, it is better to listen to him. In the power ladder, she placed herself at level 1 (making decisions about a few things) because, *"all family matters are decided by my husband, I only decide a few things myself"*.

Discussing the importance of knowing about PA procedures, she said, *"In my opinion, it is most important that we go out into the society and we know things, how to obtain papers for the children, for the family, and for ourselves. The more we know the better."*

Mrs. T thought that the PA procedures were significantly simpler than before. There are fewer problems, from notarizing papers for job applications, obtaining health insurance and applying for school for the children.

## 4.2. Influencing factors

### 4.2.1 Factors influencing public administration service access and usage of ethnic minority women

Strategies for socio-economic development and the PA reform program in the locality are key factors enhancing the access to and usage of

PA services of the local residents, especially EM women. Particularly important are PA procedure reform programs and the implementation in recent years of one-stop-shops in Hoa Binh in general and Da Bac district in particular (see more in the Research Site section).

The fact that 100% of the roads connecting villages and neighborhoods with production zones, commune centers, and district have been concreted has also created more favorable conditions for local residents to travel and access PA services. The National Target

Program on New Style Rural Area Building, with targets on poverty eradication, universal education, construction of electricity stations, roads, schools etc. has called for greater efforts from local governments to improve the living conditions of local residents in order to accomplish the goal of being a new-style rural commune. The improvement of infrastructure, including roads, telecommunications, and transport has contributed to creating a more convenient condition for local residents to travel to the commune center where the PA office is located. It is more common for local residents in general, and EM women in particular, to own a smartphone and know how to drive a motorbike.

Employment opportunities for women have also increased with the development of industrial zones and vocational training services. Furthermore, employment promotion schemes have reached local levels. These help women and men to access more employment opportunities in companies outside of the district area and even in more distant provinces. Some PA procedures required here are the authorization of CVs for job applications, recruitment, the use of ATMs in payment, and the use of social media in communicating with colleagues etc. The social network of women is widened through working in companies, which makes them more active and confident:

“For example those who work in companies, at home they are very shy and simple, like my sister, she was very shy and doesn’t talk much, but now she is more active.” (Single woman, Tay, 32 years old, town.)

“... about 3 years ago, women go [to handle PA procedures] more because the young generation now is very



active, they use phone, information technology, Facebook, Zalo, they are very fluent at accessing these.” (Local authority, town.)

There have been cases where the husband agrees to stay at home to look after the children in order for the wife to go and work in a company, which signifies that the traditional gender-biased labor division in the family is experiencing a positive shift toward more equality.

#### 4.2.1.1 Simplifying public administrative procedures expands access opportunities for women

Bribery is uncommon when dealing with PA procedures at a one-stop-shop, according to the discourses in FGDs and IDIs with local residents, representatives of local authorities who do not work at a one-stop-shop, and first-hand observations of the research team. Paying for someone else (a non-relative) to handle PA procedures is also almost unheard of. The administrative officials are often acquaintances in town, or have become familiar after a few interactions, which helps women feel less hesitant when approaching them:



“Our commune is close by, we know each other, so I don’t feel so afraid, I can ask if I don’t know something.” (FGD with women, Dao, 36-50 years old, rural.)

“Women now handle procedures more because they are easier, I just need to bring the documents and they will do it for me.” (FGD with women, Dao, 36-50 years old, rural.)

Feedback from local residents about public administration officials is not universal, though many stated that officials are not difficult and help thoroughly:



“There they (officials) are all acquaintances in town, we know each other so it’s not hard, no one is difficult to me.” (FGD with women, Muong, 35-45 years old, town.)

“Currently, they (residents) know quite well, so if the officials are difficult, they will talk back, they will yell right away, any ethnicity is like that. If the officials are not friendly they will cause issues. Especially officials working at one-stop-shop, they have to be careful, specifically with town residents.” (Women’s Union official, town.)

#### 4.2.1.2 One-stop-shop mechanism creates more favorable conditions for women and men to access and use public administration services

Administrative reforms with the one-stop-shop mechanism have received exceptionally positive feedback from both women and men, especially for its simple, fast, and convenient handling of multiple types of procedure and returning results in one place. Both female and male participants shared that they did not face any problems when requesting information and following procedures at the local one-stop-shop:



“Six years ago I had to authorize some papers for a job, I was quite lost and had to ask many places. Now I can just go to that one place [one-stop-shop], it’s handy to ask



there because I don’t have to ask too many times.” (Woman, Muong, 33 years old, town.)

“One-stop-shop (for the last three years) is easier, faster, just need to go to one place to ask, they will guide us what to do.” (FGD with women, Muong, 35-45 years old, town.)

“The past was not as good as today... Now the procedures are easier and faster.” (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, town.)

Men also thought highly of the one-stop-shop:



“The time is shorter and we don’t have to go to many offices to ask for stamp and signature... Now it’s very fast, not complicated, and the procedures are simpler too.” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town).

Besides, PA services in communes have been equipped with technology such as computers and photocopying services. Therefore, residents can save more time:



“Now it’s faster because there is an official there, he makes photocopy and stamp, then we can collect it right away. It’s faster than before. The machines are more modern so surely it’s faster than before. In the past we had to write it ourselves it took longer.” (Single woman, Dao, 42 years old, rural.)

“Now we just need to go to that one place, it’s convenient because



*we don't have to ask many times." (Woman, Muong, 32 years old, town.)*

▶ *"It is convenient because if I don't know where to go, they will show me exactly where to go to get the papers. It is faster now than before. The procedures are shorter and faster... Before we had to write, now they have photocopy machine, it's very fast." (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, town.)*

### **Procedures for returning results are shortened and more flexible**

According to local authorities, residents are guided thoroughly and supported to handle PA procedures quickly. Especially for those from neighborhoods far from the town/commune center, officials will try to process and return results immediately or within the day to save travel time for them. Basic procedures can be completed in one day, while level 3 PA procedures will need time and the results will be returned via post:



▶ *"...the results are immediate, for example if I have to be in a meeting, during break I will come back to sign for the residents, I have done that three times already in this afternoon. Won't leave that until the day after. Unless it is complicated procedure that needs verification such as reconciliation for land conflicts... To go to the post for PA procedures would normally take up to three days." (Local authority, male, town.)*

The procedures have also been brought closer to the residents. For instance, when the police department re-issues ID cards in neighborhoods/villages, every household is informed and the residents only have to go to the communal culture house to complete the procedures. One-stop-shop officials all have university degrees and adequate expertise to support the local residents, with women being prioritized:



▶ *"We prioritize women residents. For example I give them the forms but then I will tell them to stay so I can help show them what to do." (Land official, male, rural.)*

Coordination between mass organizations to sensitize and provide training for local women has also helped enhance their access to PA services:



▶ *"In my area, before there were some people with expired ID card but they didn't dare to go to renew it because they were afraid. But now [Women's Union] can even invite justice officers and police, coordinate with community centers and integrate into meetings... They then talk and explain more, for example the police will talk about the steps required to issue an ID card. That's how they have supported women. Now I see that women also know, if they have to get an ID card they will know to firstly go see the police, each step. That has helped women to know a lot better." (Women's Union official, rural.)*



Nevertheless, some women reported that several procedures remain complicated. This causes difficulties for them, in particular the procedures involved in taking out loans and the theoretical test for a driving license.

Regarding the procedure for taking out loans, the borrower is required to be the head of the household. Heads of household are still mainly men. Therefore, borrowers in many families are still husbands who will have to complete all the forms for the loan (even though both signatures of husband and wife are required). If the husband, as head of the household, works far from home, this could pose difficulties in borrowing for families:



*"I just sign but it's always my husband who acts as the loan borrower." (FGD with women, 25-35 years old, rural.)*

*"Both husband and wife have the rights, so the contract requires both to sign." (Land official, rural.)*

Concerning the driving license exam, the theoretical test for driving a motorbike is multiple-choice and taken online. This poses a huge challenge for middle-aged and older women. For this reason, many women do not hold a driving license even though they are capable of riding a motorbike.

These procedures may need to be improved in order for EM women to access and benefit from current PA services, particularly as technology and the Internet are unavoidable in the provision of these services.

### 4.2.1.3 The capacity of ethnic minority women is improving

**There is a positive shift between generations of women from all ethnicities who participated in the research.** The majority of women in the younger group (aged 18-24) have better educational attainment (mostly high school and at least secondary school), have better access to information via electronic technology (use Google and smartphones fluently), and work more in companies than in agriculture and forestry (more companies have recruited in the area). As a result, they are more knowledgeable, confident, and proactive in social communication, including when handling PA procedures, and benefit from a more equal environment in terms of decision-making power between men and women in the family. This assessment draws upon information from IDIs with women aged over 50 on how they see their daughters and daughters-in-law, the opinions of officials from one-stop-shops, from the Women's Union, and IDIs and FGDs with young women aged 18-24 years old;



*"Now I have a phone, if I don't know how to write a form I can search on Google. Then I might know and don't have to go to ask... I am more confident because I know more... Both my husband and I know then everything will be easier, better for myself, I can handle things." (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, poor households, rural.)*

**Efforts to achieve universal education with EM and vulnerable populations being prioritized have opened up various opportunities to access education. This has contributed remarkably to the improvement of educational attainment among EM women in Da Bac** (the majority of Muong women in town finished secondary and high school while most Dao women in the commune completed primary school, poor households included). Specifically, Viet Nam's Education Development Strategy 2011-2020 of the Ministry of Education and Training has regulated an increase of support and prioritizes education development in difficult living areas and among ethnic minorities. In doing so, it aimed to enhance equality between men and women in accessing education, to eradicate illiteracy, and to increase literacy rates to 96% in 2015 and 98% in 2020 for residents aged 15-60 years old. The Millennium Development Goals for ethnic minorities associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) after 2015 have suggested two indicators regarding EM people. These are universal primary education, and enhancing educational equality between men and women among EM populations, with an aim to achieve high-quality education – a key point in the SDGs.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, national programs on poverty reduction (Programs 134, 135, and 30a) and the National Target Program on New Style Rural Area Building have suggested EM people, people from difficult living conditions, and those from poor households are the main beneficiaries of support to increase access to basic social services such as education and infrastructure development including transport, electricity, school stations etc. This implies that language barriers (especially in writing and in the Kinh language) will be eliminated, and the overall

capacity of EM women will be improved. This will help them to gain confidence to access PA services and become more proactive in handling PA procedures.

The capacity to access information about policies and laws using electronic technology will also help women understand and practice their rights, such as those regarding land inheritance:



*“Now the law is also practiced here, the women will not let it slide, they know about law now, they also demand their rights... They say that sons and daughters are the same so parents have to divide equally, now they are very smart, and the law is published online everywhere.”*  
(Women's Union official, town.)

#### 4.2.1.4 Changes in norms on traditional gender roles have encouraged women to know and protect their rights

As the social mobility of EM women has increased, they now take more initiative in generating income by leaving the village to go and work in companies providing more stable income. The women who stay and do farm work are now proactive in selling produce to earn more money. They are more financially independent and have more social knowledge and social connections, which helps them to gain more confidence:



*“Four, five years ago, women started this trend to sell things in the market. Back then they ate whatever they made, there was no such thing as*

38 ODV (2020). Ethnic minorities and Indigenous people's policies and rights.



*selling... Luckily my commune is close to the city and town so women have changed a lot, they go out more.” (Women’s Union official, commune.)*



*“The society is more developed. People interact with the outside more” (while) “Back then women just knew their farm work.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)*

Local customs and practices of both Muong and Dao ethnicities do not constrain women from travelling far or communicating with society (even though men still have a higher position in the family). Directly handling PA procedures is associated with the positive image of a capable woman who is good at communicating with others, has a wide social network, and is confident and proactive in life. This is a positive model that many women are aiming to emulate:



*“In my opinion, the women who often go deal with procedures or go to sell things in market are often more confident. They are confident everywhere and are more independent in their family life, they often have power in the family more than the other women who barely go anywhere.” (Women’s Union official, rural.)*

A positive shift was observed in the research site when more and more women know and actually handle PA procedures. The fact that more women directly deal with PA procedures is linked to the increased knowledge and participation of women in social life. From the perspective of the men, this is evidence of the progress and civilization of society:



*“The society is becoming more and more civilized, women get to learn more.”*



*[How is a woman considered active and capable here?]*

*“Firstly she needs to know to work, besides the husband, after work has to cook and do washing for her husband and children... besides she has to know “social”*

Men (both Muong and Dao) stated that women need to know about procedures related to their children’s education and need to independently handle procedures to obtain their personal papers, such as driving licenses and personal ID papers. In their opinion, the more women know, the more they can share the burden in their families. The idea of a capable woman is similar for both men and women. Both genders, when asked, suggested that men are “lazier” and let women handle more work. This mindset encourages women, together with their husbands, to participate in the social space and make decisions about important matters. However, it still very much limits women to their main role of child and family caregiver. On the one hand, this liberates women, empowers them, and increases their agency. On the other, it places more pressure on women and gives them ‘double’ burdens as it demands women to be capable of earning an income, taking care of housework, and handling ‘social matters’. This was clearly displayed in the conversations with both Dao and Muong women and men about what a capable woman means:



communication. Basically she needs to be good at everything.” (FGD with men, Muong, 20-55 years old, town.)

▶ “... know how to do everything, they can do everything, they are more clever than others and can solve everything.” (FGD with women, Muong, 25-35 years old, town.)

▶ “An active woman has social connections, friends, she is capable of handling matters in the house and, with relatives, and in the society. A woman who is good at work, after work she is good at farming. She participates in all matters of the family, of the office. She can take care of the farm and raise the animals well.” (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, high income household, town.)

▶ “An active and capable woman is someone who can handle everything that you give to her well. They can balance works at home and in the office, they don’t let anything fall behind, they can complete all. Dynamic.” (Woman, Muong, 39 years old, town.)

▶ “Knowledgeable, she can do social work and housework and farm work, she is good in earning money, taking care of the children, has a job.” (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, poor households, rural.)

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## 4.2.2 Barriers hindering ethnic minority women from accessing and using public administration services

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### 4.2.2.1 Ethnic minority women have low decision-making power

Some traditional gender-role norms and imbalanced power relations between two genders still pervade in the thoughts and practices of both women and men in the two ethnic groups in this research. The majority of women still believe that men are the family’s pillar, tend to work far from home more, and take care of ‘big matters’ in society instead of housework. Meanwhile, women have to fulfill a double role: They have to work and produce (mainly in informal sectors such as agriculture and the family business) and, at the same time, do the majority of the housework.

The men living in town, for instance, have numerous positive thoughts on the willingness of men in sharing housework with women. However, they still express a biased perception on the role of women as the family caregiver. A male participant in the FGD, despite agreeing about women’s advancement, still considered that to be a benefit for family caregiving as, “she can help me so I won’t have to deal with many things. She will be better at communicating and cooking, taking care of the visitors and so on, that will help me a lot.”

These findings echo a recent study on men and masculinities in Viet Nam conducted by ISDS.<sup>39</sup>

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39 ISD (2020). Men and Masculinities in a Globalizing Viet Nam – Key findings from a study and implications on gender equality. Summary report, Women’s Publishing House, Viet Nam.



“Equality needs two people. Husband and wife to discuss, the husband still makes decisions but the family still needs to discuss. Both husband and wife and the children, we have this much money, we buy this kind of bike, more or less. Anyhow the husband still decides.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

“Because I am the household head I have to decide about everything, if I don’t decide, I guess the women also won’t be able to decide.” (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)

Women in the older age groups (from 36 to 50 years old) in both the town and commune rated the decision-making power of women to be lower than that of men. Meanwhile, women in the youngest age group (18-24) rated the decision-making power of the two genders as equal. Younger women in the commune even scored the decision-making power of men to be slightly lower than that of women. This demonstrates that younger women have a more equal perspective about the role and decision-making power of the two genders, while women in the older age groups place the decision-making power of men considerably higher than that of women:

In the power ladder activity of the research, men and women were asked to assess what they thought of the decision-making power scale in the family. Level 5 of the scale means the power to decide everything in the family, while level 1 means the power to decide only one or two things. Figure 1 below presents the scale results of women in the town and rural commune disaggregated by age group about the decision-making power of women and men in the family.

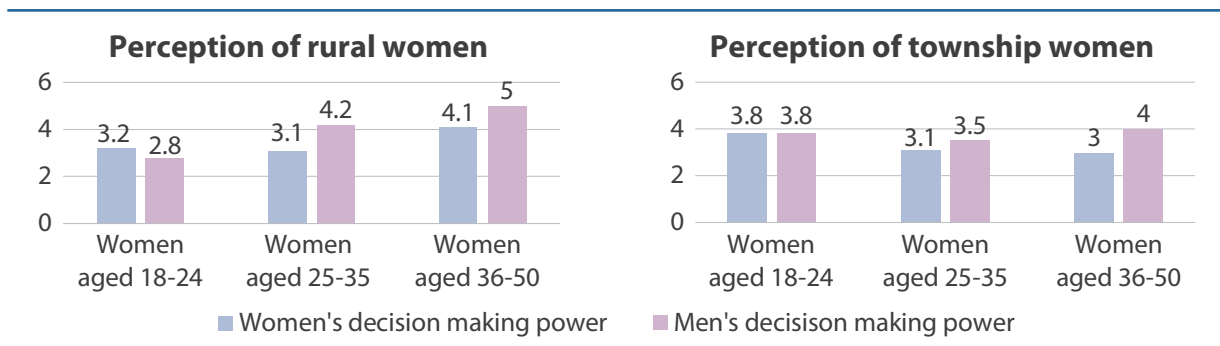


“Men have higher power than us, it’s been like that from before, men are the family’s pillar.” (FGD with women, Dao, rural.)

“He makes more decision about everything. I can tell him but he only listens partly, otherwise he just decides by himself.” (Woman, Muong, 39 years old, town.)

**Figure 1. Women’s assessment about the decision-making power of men and women in the family**

(Scale from 1 to 5, in which 5 means deciding everything; 1 means deciding a few things)



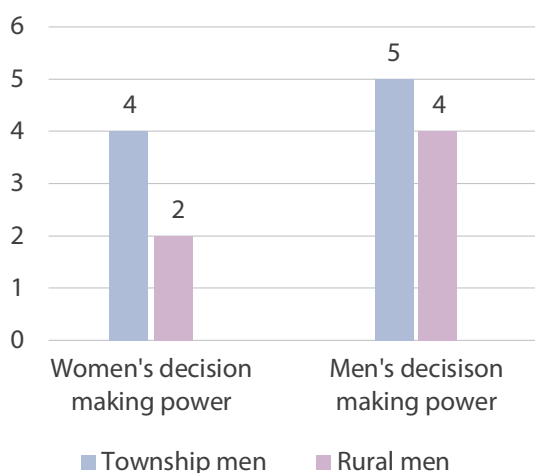
40 Self-assessing power ladder scale: 5 - Deciding everything; 4 - Deciding most things; 3 - Deciding some things; 2 - Deciding a few things, and; 1 - Deciding only 1-2 things.

Men have a similar assessment about the decision-making power of males and females in the family. However, rural men rated the decision-making power of women notably lower (level 2) compared to that of men (level 4). Meanwhile, town men rated the decision-making power of women quite high (level 4). However, this was still lower than that of men at level 5 (see Figure 2 below).

**Figure 2. Men's assessment about the decision-making power of men and women in the family**

(Scale from 1 to 5, in which 5 means deciding everything, and 1 means deciding 1-2 things)

**Men's perception about the decision-making power of men and women**



**Household heads are still mostly men and have their name in the land use right certificate (red book)**

In spite of the law regulating that both husband and wife should include their names in the red book (for shared assets after marriage), many families have still not re-issued their red books. This means that the red book and many other related papers are still under only the husband's name. In that case, women cannot take out loans

for business as they do not have their name in the book and have to ask their husband to complete the procedures for them. Both accessing loan services for business and taking out big loans remain cumbersome as the procedures require signatures from all family members who are aged 18 and above. In case of absence, an authorization paper is required (for example, if a member works far from home or has to serve in the army):



*"The red books here are still mainly under the husband's name. Women take care of money but still have to follow the husband's decision. Women working in social work are listened to more by their husband." (Woman, Thai, 54 years old, high income household, town.)*

*"For example if there is a problem with our family's residency book like the writing fades away or something then almost 100% I will have to go." (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)*

*"... the procedure to take loan. Whoever the loan is under the name of, that person has to go. For example if the loan is under the husband's name and the husband is busy on the disbursement day then he needs to write an authorization letter." (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)*


Furthermore, traditional customs of both Dao and Muong people dictate that sons inherit more land than daughters, as daughters will get married. Although, nowadays, many families have started to divide such assets equally for both sons and daughters, this custom is still

prevalent and results in men owning more land during and after marriage than women. Residential houses are still given to sons more often with the assumption that the daughters will get married and live with the husband's family.

#### 4.2.2.2 A group of women lacking social capacity

Dao women encounter a great number of challenges pertaining to economic conditions, education, and local customs compared to other ethnic groups.

Dao women (especially from poor households) have the least access to PA services, mainly because it is their husbands who usually handle these procedures. They are faced with several typical barriers including lower educational attainment (which affects their ability to read and write in the Kinh language when directly dealing with PA procedures), low rates of smartphone ownership (which affects their access to information online and access to online procedures), and low rates of motorbike ownership or use (which limits their mobility). Moreover, Dao women have difficult living conditions with farming as their main livelihood and feel that they do not have time to care about PA services:

 *"I have no time, I have to go farm."*  
(Woman, Dao, 36-50 years old, rural.)

The Dao community still perceives that a son is important to continue the lineage and do not accept a husband living with his wife's family. Therefore, families often turn to adoption if they do not have sons of their own. In a family, only men have the decision-making power for

big matters and own valuable assets, even if women also participate in income-generating activities and contribute economically to the family. Husbands often go to meetings in the neighborhood and obtain information about PA services. However, they rarely share the information with their wife. Red books are usually under the name of the husband, as is motorbike registration. Therefore, the husbands often take care of PA procedures. Their wives are usually shy and hesitant due to their limited writing capacity, lack of transportation, lack of information, and also because they are "busy" (or are bound to) farm work and have little time to pay attention to or deal with PA procedures. Those who do not handle PA procedures are also not aware of the role and value of knowing about these procedures in protecting their own rights. In their opinion, whoever has free time can handle these issues; it does not matter who. Both men and women still hold to the perception that men are the family pillars who have the ultimate decision-making power about borrowing and valuable assets, even though women are not deprived of mobility:



*"There are things that the wife can't deal with because I'm the pillar. For example profile for children to go to school, the wife can go and the husband can also. That's not fundamental. There are fundamental things that need household head then we can't change. For some other things if the husband is busy then the wife can go." (FGD with men, Dao, 20-55 years old, rural.)*

*"...back then we didn't get much education, that's why now when we have to do something, because our education is limited, we are quite*



*shy, I don't want to go outside... Most women nowadays are very modern, only in the mountainous area there are people like us." (FGD with women, Dao, 25-35 years old, rural.)*

Sensitization activities about procedures and specific programs, such as loans for poor households, support for COVID-19, or to re-issue ID cards, in the neighborhoods and villages are still fragmented. There have not been sessions specializing in PA services, instructions on PA procedures, or information on PA reforms for the local residents in general, and for women in particular. Methods used to disseminate information on PA procedures are still inaccessible for women, and especially for EM women. Information and instructions are printed in written forms, which are rarely read by women.

As a result, there remain gaps in the knowledge of EM women about PA concepts, reforms, and especially the role of PA services in their life. Access to information between different ethnicities is not consistent. Dao women in the commune rarely participate in local meetings and do not pay much attention to PA services compared to Muong women in the town, as they are occupied with farm work or taking care of young children. Therefore, it is their husbands who often go to meetings, have information, and handle PA procedures.

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#### 4.2.2.3 Barriers in implementing public administration service policies

Notwithstanding policies prioritizing EM communities and supporting women, in reality, the implementation of these policies still has considerable gaps due to the lack of a sensitization stage to provide thorough

consultation with the residents, especially EM women, about policies and PA services affecting their rights.

Women who wish to expand their business and are in need of larger loans worth hundreds of millions of VND would need to get signatures from all family members aged 18 and above. This has caused difficulties for families where their members work or study far from home, while women participants in the research expressed that they were not aware of or consulted about the authorization procedure (to allow the authorized person to register without authorization papers) to overcome these obstacles.

Large loans from 100 million VND require a mortgage of assets, usually the red book, which is still mostly under the husband's name. The Law on Marriage and Family 2014 stipulates that "land use rights obtained by a spouse after marriage shall be common property of husband and wife, unless they are separately inherited by, or given to a spouse or are obtained through transactions made with separate property". However, this regulation has not been widely practiced despite sensitizations about having both names in the book. One of the reasons is that the red book is often mortgaged for loans in the bank and the borrowers do not follow up to update the red book's content. Most women are still not aware of the role of this regulation in protecting their personal rights, especially those who have not experienced such conflict in reality.

The Law on Land 2013 and the Law on Marriage and Family 2014 both state that having both names of the husband and wife in the LURC is not required if the husband and wife agree to include only one name in the red book. Therefore, it is crucial for women to understand



the role of policies regarding joint property, and to be aware of the possible risks that can hugely affect their rights in case of conflict so that they can proactively protect their rights. These policies will then be effective in protecting rights in reality.

Nonetheless, there is a shortage of in-depth and widespread thematic communication campaigns for EM populations, especially EM women, on the content and values of policies and PA services related to land and other PA services in general. Local officials are the focal point for local residents (usually the neighborhood leaders). They, along with specialized officials (land officials, for example), and the bank staff also need to have adequate knowledge and be proactive in helping local residents, especially EM women. This could include providing more support with typically difficult issues in the

area (an example is updating the content of the mortgaged red book), and to help women better understand their rights in including their name in joint property ownership certificates. Furthermore, the issue of gender equality has been included in the instructions on handling PA procedures. However, these are still vague, which makes it hard for them to be carried out pragmatically. For instance, Decree 61 prescribes that PA services must ensure fairness and equality between different applicants (Article 4), must supplement extra support for more vulnerable groups such as women and ethnic minorities in evaluating PA services (Article 29), and must provide translation for users of ethnic dialects when needed (Article 8). Nevertheless, there have been no explicit instructions for local authorities on how this support can be implemented and how to allocate human and financial resources for such activities.



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Conclusion

Research findings in the two communities in Da Bac district, Hoa Binh province with Dao and Muong ethnic women show that, nowadays, EM women have better and more effective access to PA services, including online PA services. Effective access to and use of PA services also helps women to gain better access to livelihood opportunities, reduces poverty, and also gives them better access to economic development programs to improve their economic power and prosperity. It further contributes to remaking gender relations in the family and society through the image of a knowledgeable, proficient, confident and active woman.

Factors that enhance the effective access of EM women to PA services include:

- (i) Convenient PA services at the grassroots level with friendly and supportive staff;
- (ii) Convenient infrastructure, including transportation and Internet connection;
- (iii) High education levels and increased socialization help women to quickly grasp PA procedures, becoming more confident and active;
- (iv) The role of authorities and social organizations in creating a welcoming environment for

women to confidently take the initiative in production and life in general, and;

- (v) Positive socio-cultural and economic changes that promote gender equality in public awareness and facilitate the advancement of women in general. The study area has seen more positive changes in the division of labor by gender and traditional gender roles, as well as in the power relationship between men and women, especially among young women. This is also reflected in the increased social mobility of EM women: Women are traveling further, participating more in the labor market, and job opportunities are also expanding, creating more economic power for EM women.

The study results show that EM women in younger age groups with a higher education level are also quicker in accessing technology and social media, as well as having more positive gender attitudes than older women in their community. They can be the pioneering group in using online PA services and can, later on, assist women from the previous generations in accessing these services online. Although women are becoming more resourceful, autonomous, and more equal to men in decision-making, and men also seem to welcome the idea of women becoming more knowledgeable, sharing and taking on more family work, it is necessary to pay attention to the

male mentality towards these changes, and not forgetting men in gender-sensitizing agendas to prevent the risk of domestic violence.

However, there still exist gender-biased stereotypes about the capacity of women, reflected in the perception of the different levels of 'importance' of varying PA procedures. For example, for services with more complicated procedures, such as those related to land rights, production resources, and valuable assets, men are still the major service user, while women accompany merely to 'sign'. The effective support from local credit teams has helped EM women gain easier access to various loan sources. On the other hand, it may have also forced women to further depend on the help of someone else (neighborhood leaders), which does not improve their capacity and proactivity in approaching important PA services such as loan programs.

Many EM women still do not have a clear understanding of the concepts of PA services, PA procedures, one-stop-shop administrative reform, and online procedures, as well as how important knowing about the procedures related to land ownership (especially the joint red book) is in protecting their rights. Loan sources, social protections, school applications and insurance for the children are the common procedures which women have more access to and help them better understand their rights in handling PA services.

Training workshops, meetings, and loudspeaker broadcasts in the area (in the neighborhoods located near the commune center) are the methods most suggested by women to help them learn about PA services and PA reforms, which have not yet been sensitized in the locality. The objectives of these programs are to encourage women to gain better knowledge and to become more proactive in handling PA procedures, especially regarding land ownership and loans,

as well as to improve their skills in searching for information, so as to boost their confidence in accessing PA services. What is important is to figure out a suitable method for the engagement of both husband and wife in meetings (separately or together), to mitigate the situation where only husbands go to meetings while their wives are busy with work or taking care of the children. Inviting judicial officers, police, and relevant departments to participate in meetings to provide information and consultations about PA services, or even mobile PA procedures, is an effective means of increasing the access of local residents to PA services.

Positive changes in administration reforms, one-stop-shops, and the online PA services, coupled with the improvement of infrastructure, are necessary. But, on their own, they are not enough to empower the agency and proactivity of EM women. More efforts are required to transform the traditional gender norms that have been restricting female advancement and underpinning gender inequality, especially the power relations between the two genders in decision-making processes in the family.

The fact that EM women have more knowledge, greater access, and can fluently handle PA services may, to an extent, increase the double burden on their shoulders: They must be good at making money, doing housework, and taking care of 'social matters' if their husbands or other male family members do not share the work.

In summary, the study findings show that women from Dao and Muong ethnicities in Da Bac have been adapting to keep up with rapid socio-economic and technological developments in their locality. They can be seen as typical examples, strongly exhibiting the positive shifts that are taking place among EM women. They prove that EM women can change to

become more independent and proactive in the poverty reduction process, transforming their own lives and the lives of their families in the process. Programs targeting EM women under the National Strategy on Sustainable Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction and the Strategy on Socio-economic Development for Ethnic Minorities in Mountainous Provinces 2021-2023 must continue to invest further in EM women and young girls in terms of education and employment opportunities, especially vocational training, and to enhance their social mobility. Moreover, investment programs in developing infrastructure such as electricity, rural roads, telecommunication networks, and school stations also play an indispensable role in creating a more supportive environment for women to easily access PA services.

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## Recommendations

- 1) Improve the capacity of EM populations in using information technology (like the Internet, Google, social media, smartphones, and online PA services). This can be done through:
  - a) Improving infrastructure to facilitate convenient and efficient Internet access (in mountainous and remote areas far from the commune center).
  - b) Setting up community-based volunteer groups, consisting of young, well-educated, tech-and net-savvy women to support older women, women with disabilities, and unskilled women using smart devices to search for information and access online PA services.
  - c) Sensitization and instruction on using online PA services should be integrated

into informatics lessons or extracurricular activities at schools, so that EM boys and girls can get acquainted early with online PA services.

- 2) EM people with disabilities, and particularly women, are 'invisible' in accessing PA services as well as social securities and socio-economic development activities. The implementation of online PA services (especially procedures at levels 3 and 4) and/or support to find online vocational training/job opportunities hold significant value for women with disabilities, specifically those with mobility impairment. Programs/activities supporting people with disabilities and women with disabilities in EM groups to access online platforms on vocational training and online job opportunities are urgently needed.
- 3) At the communal level, people accessing PA procedures directly at the one-stop-shop do not encounter many difficulties and also save time since the volume of applications in communal-level one-stop-shops is quite low. To go in person to the office for PA procedures also helps make women more confident as they have to interact more with government officials and society in general. This is linked to the image of a capable and proactive woman who is confident, speaks fluently, and interacts well with others. At the same time, it makes them more independent as they do not have to rely on the Internet or smartphones. One solution to increase the direct access of EM women to PA services at the communal level is to guide women on how to ride motorbikes and get a driving license. Currently, most women can ride a motorcycle, but not all have a license. Younger women, via activities of the Women's Union and Youth Union, can support older women in accessing and using software to practice

- for the theoretical test on a smartphone or computer, to help them gain confidence and successfully obtain the license.
- 4) Procedures for taking out a loan, which require the signatures of all family members, could be adjusted to be more flexible with the use of online technology. This would allow family members who study or work far from home to easily participate and authorize directly via online meetings with responsible officials. This, in turn, will reduce the difficulties that women face when accessing procedures for loans when household heads are often the husband and other family members cannot be present during the loan terms.
  - 5) Strengthen activities that 'bring procedures to the people', learn from loan programs for hunger eradication and poverty reduction, or those which issue ID cards for local residents in their neighborhood.
  - 6) Reinforce communication activities to transform traditional gender norms, especially on gender roles and decision-making power.
  - 7) Increase communication activities to improve the awareness of EM women about their land rights such as having their name in the red book, joint property during marriage, inheritance rights, etc. and the importance of legal procedures in handling land and assets.
  - 8) Viet Nam has 53 ethnicities living in different regions across the country, each with their own unique cultural and social characteristics and distinct development conditions. Therefore, before implementing an intervention for EM women, it is crucial to conduct an assessment of the intervention area in order to design suitable and effective support programs.





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NƠI TIẾP NHẬN & TRẢ KẾT QUẢ  
LĨNH VỰC XÁC ĐỊNH GIÁ ĐẤT

NƠI TIẾP NHẬN & TRẢ KẾT QUẢ

- LĨNH VỰC MÔI TRƯỜNG  
- LĨNH VỰC KHÍ TƯỢNG THỦY

NƠI TIẾP NHẬN & TRẢ KẾT QUẢ  
LĨNH VỰC KHOẢNG SÀN  
LĨNH VỰC ĐO ĐẠC BẢN ĐỒ  
LĨNH VỰC PHÍ, LỆ PHÍ

NƠI TIẾP NHẬN & TRẢ KẾT QUẢ  
TRẦN THỊ THỦY