



GENDER STRUCTURE IN THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN WOODCRAFT VILLAGES



1. Woodcraft villages – The foundation of Vietnam’s wood processing industry

Woodcraft villages are an important component of the domestic wood processing industry. They not only produce and distribute wood products across provinces nationwide but also generate employment for hundreds of thousands of local workers.

Gender-based division of labor is evident in both workshop ownership and the workforce, reflecting the unique historical, economic, and social characteristics of traditional carpentry villages. While this model has offered certain advantages throughout its formation and development, it also carries inherent risks and limitations – particularly in the context of modern society.

Promoting more flexible labor division and strengthening gender equality are essential for these woodcraft villages to grow sustainably and adapt to evolving trends.

As one of Vietnam’s long-standing traditional crafts, carpentry has existed and evolved over many generations. Today, Vietnam holds a significant position in the global wood and wood product supply chain — ranking as the second-largest wood exporter in Asia and among the top ten worldwide. This achievement is the result of decades of development in the wood industry, to which generations of carpenters from traditional craft villages have made indispensable contributions, laying the foundation for the wood processing sector when Vietnam first opened its economy. While the technology and production scale of these craft villages remain modest compared to industrial processing and export enterprises, their continued presence within the rural socio-economic landscape plays an important role in creating jobs, supporting social stability, and preserving local cultural heritage.

Vietnam is currently home to approximately 340 woodcraft villages, which form an important component of the domestic wood processing industry. These villages not only produce and distribute wood products across provinces nationwide but also generate employment for hundreds of thousands of local workers. Production activities are mainly carried out by household-scale carpentry workshops, ranging from a few hundred to several thousand establishments per village. These workshops are typically small-scale (10–20 workers) or micro-scale (fewer than 10 workers), with production models characterized by manual methods and fragmentation (EFI, 2022). The output from craft village production primarily serves the domestic market, with most woodcraft villages concentrated in the Red River Delta — known for its long history of carpentry — and a smaller number located in the Central and Southern regions.

This newsletter provides basic information on the current labor situation in Vietnam’s woodworking craft villages, with a particular focus on gender structures in the division of labor. Data was gathered through interviews, community engagement, and field observations conducted by the research team in woodcraft villages in recent years.

2. Labor structure in woodcraft villages

In woodcraft villages, the small-scale nature of traditional production means most households set up workshops at home, utilizing available family spaces or other locations within the village boundaries. Labor is primarily sourced locally — either from household members or residents of the same or neighboring villages — with few workers hired from outside. External laborers are typically paid daily and do not work full time; instead, they are called in by workshop owners only when there are orders to fulfill, especially during peak periods such as the year-end or the lead-up to the Lunar New Year. These workers often have other jobs, such as farming or livestock raising.

Compared to the fully manual wood processing model of the past, the introduction of machinery for cutting, carving, chiseling, and other tasks has significantly reduced the number of workers involved in carpentry. Machines have also shortened the training period for new workers, particularly in roles that once required high levels of manual skill, such as carving and sculpture.

In recent years, the accelerating pace of urbanization and the expansion of industrial zones into provinces with a high concentration of woodcraft villages — such as Hanoi, Bac Ninh, Hung Yen, Nam Dinh, and Vinh Phuc — have led to a gradual loss of local labor. Younger generations now prefer stable employment with fixed incomes and safer working conditions in larger companies and industrial factories. Meanwhile, the sharp decline in domestic demand for wooden products amid the post-COVID-19 economic downturn has made it difficult for many small-scale households and workers in craft villages to sustain their livelihoods through carpentry. As a result, many have shifted to jobs that offer more stable incomes, such as retail services, taxi driving, or delivery work. Only long-established workshop owners — those with accumulated financial resources and assets such as land, workshop space, machinery, and a loyal customer base — have been able to maintain production, although their scale of operation has been significantly affected.

Photo 1: Scene of Thuy Lan woodcraft village (Hung Yen), 2025



Source: Forest Trends

The gender-based division of labor is clearly reflected in the roles of business owners and the workforce, highlighting the distinct social characteristics of traditional woodcraft villages. In household-scale carpentry workshops, spouses share responsibilities for managing and operating production and business activities. The husband usually handles technically demanding tasks that require significant physical effort, while the wife is responsible for lighter, supportive roles such as sales and financial or accounting management. For example, during material sourcing, the husband directly purchases timber due to his experience in assessing quality and selecting suitable wood, while the wife manages payments to suppliers. For secondary materials such as sandpaper, lubricants, and accessories — which are widely available and standardized in the market — the wife generally handles procurement, except when there is a change in type or quality, in which case the husband becomes involved in the selection process.

During production, the husband is responsible for recruiting workers, assigning tasks, supervising operations, and ensuring product quality, while the wife handles labor records, calculates wages, and pays workers at the end of the month. In management, the husband primarily oversees workshop activities, whereas the wife manages the storefront, handles accounting and financial tasks, holds cash, makes payments to suppliers, and collects outstanding payments from customers. In business operations, the wife typically maintains relationships with existing customers due to her close connections, while the husband focuses on expanding markets and seeking new clients. Previously, decisions related to product design and production volume were mainly made by the husband; however, the wife now also participates in this process, as her frequent interaction with customers allows her to quickly grasp market trends.

Photo 2: Female workers sanding wooden products at Dong Ky craft village.



Source: Forest Trends

Beyond production and business activities, the gender-based division of labor is also evident in social and community engagements. The husband typically represents the workshop in technical training sessions, meetings with government agencies (such as local authorities, tax offices, and fire safety

departments), and study tours to gain insight into other production models. Meanwhile, the wife mainly attends training sessions related to accounting and e-commerce. At important village events — such as festivals or anniversaries — the formal roles of welcoming delegates or speaking in public are usually taken on by men, while logistical tasks such as preparing tea receptions, presenting flowers, and assisting with hosting duties are handled by women.

Within the hired workforce, the gender-based division of labor is also clearly and systematically present. In general, male workers are assigned physically demanding tasks (such as transporting timber and loading goods), stages requiring advanced technical skills (such as sawing, cutting blanks, mortising, and fine processing), as well as jobs involving potential health risks (such as painting). Meanwhile, female workers are typically assigned lighter tasks that require diligence and endurance but do not demand specialized technical skills, such as sanding and polishing with sandpaper, as well as packaging finished products. In the case of fine art woodworking — a field that demands advanced craftsmanship — both men and women may participate in carving. However, female workers are generally limited to simpler stages, such as initial shaping or carving basic details, while male workers handle more complex details and complete the final product finishing.

Photo 3: A male worker operating a mechanical saw at Chang Son craft village (Hanoi)



Source: Forest Trends

Gender distinctions are also readily apparent in the operation of machinery. Traditional mechanical equipment in carpentry workshops — such as table saws, circular saws, milling machines, drills, and chiseling machines — is primarily operated by male workers due to the physical strength required and the technical proficiency involved. In contrast, female workers typically operate only CNC machines — modern computer-controlled equipment with pre-programmed workflows. Even within this stage, gender roles remain segregated: male workers are responsible for designing technical drawings, programming the machines, and addressing operational errors, while female workers perform basic tasks such as loading materials, removing finished products, and starting or stopping the machine as instructed.

3. Factors contributing to gender-based division of labor in woodcraft villages

The gender-based division of labor in Vietnam’s woodworking craft villages is a widespread phenomenon shaped by a range of historical, cultural, social, and economic factors. The key underlying causes include:



Social perceptions of gender roles

Traditional society often maintains clear expectations about the roles of men and women. Men are typically regarded as primary breadwinners, responsible for physically demanding tasks that require strength and technical expertise, often associated with core production stages or hazardous work. Women, by contrast, are linked to tasks that require dexterity, meticulousness, and patience.



Characteristics of production stages

Processes such as carrying timber, operating machinery, sawing, cutting blanks, mortising, and fine finishing typically require physical strength, endurance, and complex technical skills. These tasks are generally assigned to men. In contrast, stages such as sanding, smoothing, and packaging require manual dexterity, meticulousness, patience, and concentration, and are therefore most often performed by women.

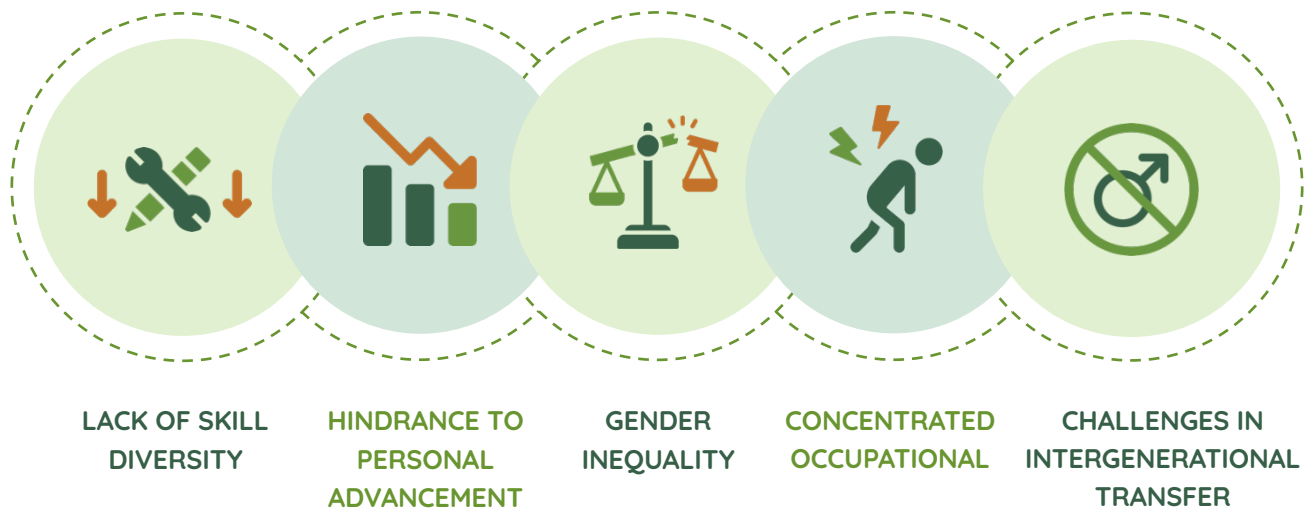


Patrilineal transmission and occupational inheritance

In woodcraft villages, the trade is traditionally passed down from one generation to the next. In families with both sons and daughters, workshop owners typically begin training their sons from a young age. As adults, sons are expected to inherit the family business and assets. Having received early training, they gain substantial experience in timber selection, cutting, and woodworking techniques. Once married, the son—now the husband—continues to take charge of tasks requiring advanced technical skills and responsibility for output quality.

4. Shortcomings in gender-based division of labor in woodcraft villages

While the gender-based division of labor in craft villages provided certain benefits during their formation and development, it also presents a number of risks and limitations - particularly in the context of modern society.



- **Lack of skill diversity:** Rigid gender-based work assignments restrict opportunities for both men and women to acquire diverse skills. For example, men may have fewer chances to cultivate traits such as meticulousness and patience, while women may have limited access to machinery and technical tools. This reduces workers' flexibility and adaptability.
- **Hindrance to personal advancement:** Workers may be confined to traditional roles and discouraged from exploring or developing their full potential beyond established gender norms. This is especially true for women, who are often assigned to supporting roles that generate less economic value.
- **Gender inequality:** This division of labor reinforces gender stereotypes and contributes to the undervaluation of one gender's capabilities – especially those of women. This can lead to disparities in wages, limited career advancement, and underrepresentation in leadership roles within the craft village. Women often earn less and are rarely promoted to positions such as team leader or workshop supervisor.
- **Concentrated occupational risks:** Gendered task assignments can expose workers to specific health risks. For example, young male workers who spend extended periods on painting tasks may face reproductive health issues, while female workers engaged in sanding or polishing may suffer from respiratory diseases.
- **Challenges in intergenerational transfer:** Persistent gender stereotypes can hinder the transfer of skills to the next generation - particularly in families without sons, or where sons are unwilling to continue the trade. This poses risks to the sustainability and future development of the craft village.

In summary, while the gender-based division of labor may have brought certain efficiencies in the past, it now poses a major barrier to the sustainable development of traditional craft villages. It also generates numerous risks for both workers and the broader community. Promoting more flexible labor

arrangements and advancing gender equality are essential for woodcraft villages to thrive and adapt to contemporary demands.

Photo 4: A household is carving and finishing an altar table leg in La Xuyên craft village



Source: Forest Trends

5. Solutions for adjusting the gender-based division of labor

To improve the gender-based division of labor in woodcraft villages — toward greater fairness, efficiency, and sustainable development — it is essential to implement a combination of measures at the policy, community, and individual levels. Key solutions include:



RAISING AWARENESS AND
CHALLENGING GENDER
STEREOTYPES



CHANGING MINDSETS AT
THE HOUSEHOLD LEVEL



ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS
TO SKILL DEVELOPMENT



IMPROVING WORKING
CONDITIONS



PROMOTING WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP ROLES



POLICIES FOR ENCOURAGEMENT
AND SUPPORT

- **Raising awareness and challenging gender stereotypes:** Strengthen communication efforts in woodcraft villages to enhance community understanding of the capabilities and roles of both men and women in all types of work, dismantling outdated gender norms. For example, local campaigns can showcase inspirational role models (such as men succeeding in traditionally “women’s jobs” and women excelling in traditionally “men’s jobs”) within the wood industry.
- **Changing mindsets at the household level:** Encourage families to divide household and production tasks, as well as support career choices, based on individual ability and interest rather than gender. This fosters an open environment where children feel free to choose their own development paths.
- **Ensuring equal access to skill development:** Expand training programs without gender bias, promoting participation of both men and women in fields traditionally dominated by one gender. Provide all workers, regardless of gender, with opportunities to learn new techniques, operate machinery, and adopt new technologies to enhance productivity and reduce physical strain. Offer training in management, marketing, branding, and financial administration to equip men and women as capable business operators, not just producers.
- **Improving working conditions:** Invest in upgrading production environments, particularly in heavy or hazardous stages, to make them safer and more accessible for all genders. Examples include providing lifting equipment, adequate ventilation, standard protective gear, and regular training on occupational safety and fire prevention.
- **Promoting women’s leadership:** Encourage and create pathways for women to assume management and leadership roles within workshops — such as team leaders or factory supervisors — as well as leadership positions in village craft associations.
- **Policies for encouragement and support:** Develop preferential policies and provide financial or technical assistance to individuals or organizations that challenge gender barriers in labor division, as well as to craft villages that adopt clear gender equality policies.

Implementing these measures will not only help eliminate gender bias and promote fairness, but also significantly enhance competitiveness, innovation, and the sustainable development of traditional woodworking villages in today’s era of economic integration.

References

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