

Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Report No: 150

Query title	GEDSI Factsheet – Vietnam
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Date	September – November 2025
Query	Produce a GEDSI Factsheet in Vietnam, focusing on the country level, agriculture sector and waste management sectors.
Enquirer	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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Introduction

The Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) have requested the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk to develop a Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) Factsheet in Vietnam, with a specific focus on waste management and agriculture sectors. This will inform the workplan for the Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) Environmental Pollution Programme, alongside DEFRA's internal decisions for the next few years. The factsheet seeks to answer the following research questions:

- > Who are the most marginalised, vulnerable, or socially excluded people and groups in Vietnam's urban and rural areas and what are the key drivers of inequalities —including within the waste management and agricultural sectors. How do intersecting identities and forms of discrimination intensify their exclusion and disadvantage?
- > How are these excluded groups affected by the adverse health and environmental impacts of air, waste, and chemical pollution in Vietnam's urban and rural communities, and what are the implications of this exclusion on their well-being and livelihoods?
- > What are the risks, including safeguarding and SEAH risks, to working with these groups or addressing drivers of inequalities? How are these risks best mitigated?
- > Who are the key stakeholders to engage on GEDSI with?

Marginalisation and social exclusion – country level

Gender equality

Legislation and women's political participation

- > **Vietnam has a strong legislative framework to protect and promote gender equality. It**

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ratified the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) in 1982; its 2006 [Gender Equality Law](#) prohibits all forms of gender discrimination (ILO, 2025); and, in 2021 Vietnam launched its 2021-2030 National Strategy on Gender Equality (UN Women, 2021) (which follows on from its previous [2011-2020 Strategy](#)).

- **The proportion of women in the National Assembly Parliament increased from 27% in 2016-2020 to 30% for the 2021-2026 term** (above the global average of 26%), and women candidates accounted for 45% of the total number of candidates in the 2021 elections ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.22).
- **Gaps remain with regard to women's engagement with political and decision-making processes.** A review of the 2011-2020 Gender Strategy found that two-thirds of its targets had been met, with particular gaps in implementation around women's political leadership and underspend of Strategy budget commitments ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.21).
- **There is significant variance in the political positions women occupy, which is reflective of broader social norms around gender roles** – for example, women make up 51% of the Committee on Ethnic Affairs and 49% of the Culture, Education, and Youth Committee, but make up only 15% of the Finance and Budget Committee, and only 6% of the Security and Defence Committee ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.22).
- **In the 2016-2020 term, women were less likely to vote than men** – this was especially pronounced at village elections, where 26% of women voted compared to 42% of men. Both women and men are also more likely to vote for male candidates, particularly at village level; while having a family is considered an asset for male candidates, female candidates with families are less likely to appeal to voters ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.22-3).

Economic opportunities and rights

- **The labour force participation rate for women in Vietnam is 69%**, lower than men in Vietnam (79%) but higher than regional (58%) and global (49%) averages for women. The number of women in vulnerable employment has decreased significantly over the past decade, from 69% of women in 2013 to 56% in 2023 ([World Bank, 2025](#)).
- **Efforts have also been made to protect and promote women's access to safe and dignified work:** in 2019 Vietnam revised the [Labour Code](#) to strengthen protections against gender discrimination and sexual harassment at work, including requirements around equal pay, and reduce the gender gap in mandatory retirement ages ([ILO, 2020](#)).
- **Significant gains in women's economic position mask more nuanced exclusion dynamics for many women in Vietnam.** In 2021, male workers on average earned 29% more than female workers, in part due to education disparities and women's over-representation in insecure roles (Pham, H. and Nguyen, T. 2025). As of 2023, only 22% of middle or senior management positions in Vietnam were held by women; the number of women on boards of publicly listed companies was 15%, and the percentage of roles for chair of a board held by women was 8% (ILO, 2025).
- **Women business owners are significantly underrepresented compared to men**, with women's small and medium enterprise (SME) ownership accounting for 27% of SME's overall, and only 19% in rural areas ([UN Women, 2021](#)).
- **In 2024, Vietnam revised the [Land Law](#) to stipulate that both a husband's and wife's name be included on a Land Use Rights certificate.** However, this is not well enforced, and

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women's access to land remains limited – particularly in rural mountainous areas (FAO, 2019).

- > **Women face formal, social and cultural barriers to participating as economic equals with men.** Gendered norms around domestic and caring responsibilities, alongside women's over-representation in insecure roles, undermines women's economic position and resilience ([UN Women, 2021](#)). Women in Vietnam spend twice as much time on unpaid care work than men on average (ILO, 2025, p.12). Only 12% of Vietnamese children under three are enrolled in kindergarten, placing the burden of childcare on women ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.16). Traditional social norms on gender roles are often more pronounced in rural areas, where women can face heightened barriers to accessing employment (along with education and other services) and have higher burdens of unpaid care work (ILO, 2025, p.28).

Gender-based violence (GBV)

- > A [2019 National Survey on Violence Against Women](#) showed 63% of women had experienced one or more forms of physical, sexual, emotional or economic violence by their husband or partner in their lifetime, 32% within the past year (Duc, H. 2023, p. 23).
- > **Rates of intimate partner violence are typically higher in urban areas than in rural ones**, although women in rural areas – particularly those from poorer households – face greater barriers in accessing services (including critical GBV response services) due to the lack of outreach to remote regions and inadequate infrastructure in these locations (ILO, 2025, p.15).
- > **Women with disabilities are more likely to experience all forms of intimate partner violence:** 33% of women with disabilities report having experienced physical violence compared to 25% of women without disabilities ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.25).
- > **11% of women report having experienced non-partner physical violence since the age of 15;** this figure is significantly higher (24%) for young women aged 15 to 19 years old ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.24).
- > **Research shows that nearly a quarter of women who report experiencing violence at the hands of a husband or partner were injured as a result of that violence** ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.32); women who have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in the past year spent, on average, a quarter of their annual income as a direct result ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.37).
- > **Women who are not in employment, or have only or not completed primary school, are more likely to have experienced husband/partner violence**, as are women who express greater tolerance to wife beating itself. Husbands and partners are typically less likely to commit violence the higher their level of educational attainment ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.37).
- > **The Government of Vietnam has demonstrated considerable commitment to addressing the issue of GBV**, particularly since its [2010 National Study on Domestic Violence Against Women](#). This includes, for example: reinforcing the 2006 Gender Equality Law and the 2007 Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control; increasing provision of essential services for survivors; conducting national campaigns to raise public awareness; and conducting an expanded National Study in 2019 to assess progress since the 2010 study ([UNFPA 2020](#), p.9).
- > **In comparing the data collected in the 2010 and 2019 surveys**, modest reductions were seen across rates of physical and emotional violence and controlling behaviour; slight increases were recorded in sexual violence, although it was suspected that this was due at least in part to women's increased comfort in reporting experiences of sexual violence

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([UNFPA 2020](#), p.38).

People with disabilities

- > **The 2010 Law of Persons with Disabilities** is intended to enshrine the rights of people with disabilities as equal citizens under the law. However, deeply held social and cultural norms around disability mean people with disabilities continue to face marginalisation and exclusion in virtually all spheres.
- > **According to the 2019 Census**, disability rates are higher amongst women than men, and the highest prevalence of disability is concentrated among women living in rural areas ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.82). There is no evidence as to why this is the case. However, based on broadly accepted and defining assumption that disability is the result of the failure to remove environmental and attitudinal barriers for people with impairments, it could be argued that the higher rates of disability among women and in rural areas is a result of the disproportionate barriers they face, such as higher levels of poverty and lack of income, as well as significantly reduced access to services such as healthcare, rehabilitation services, education and socio-economic and political opportunities ([Pham, 2025](#)). Additionally, the percentage of people in rural areas is higher than in urban areas.
- > **A smaller proportion of women with mobility-related disabilities have access to supportive devices compared with men** ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.82). In addition, 3.1 per cent of men with disabilities access functional rehabilitation in the 12 months preceding the survey, while only 1.8 per cent of women do so.
- > **People with disabilities face persistent, deep-rooted stigma that often ties disability to Karma**, meaning disability can be viewed as a form of deserved punishment for either the individual's past misdeeds or those of their parents or ancestors (Nguyen, T. and Singhe, M. 2023).
- > **Insight into the priorities, preferences and lived experiences of people with disabilities is severely limited in Vietnam**, due to a lack of co-conducted research and consultation with people with disabilities, a lack of formal engagement with organisations for persons with disabilities (OPDs), and limited official data disaggregation by disability ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.24).

Education

- > **Children with disabilities in Vietnam are significantly less likely to be enrolled in school than children without disabilities.** Net enrolment for children with disabilities in primary school is 68% compared to 95% for children without disabilities; for secondary school, net enrolment rate is 53% compared to 95%; for upper secondary, 31% compared to 77% (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.26).
- > **Children with disabilities who are enrolled at school face accessibility challenges and a lack of accommodations** such as learning aids or sign language interpreters, despite Vietnam's [2010 Law on Persons with Disabilities](#) which aims to protect the right of children to access education (Nguyen, T. and Singhe, M. 2023). Deep-rooted gender inequality intersects with disability discrimination in Vietnam to pose greater barriers to accessing education for girls (Pham, L., 2025).
- > **The national literacy rate for people with disabilities** aged 15 and over was 79% in 2023 compared to 96.3% for people without disabilities (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.27).

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- > **These barriers to accessing and remaining in education have a direct impact on people with disabilities' future** employment opportunities and, as demonstrated in the 2019 National Survey on Violence, leaves women with disabilities at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence ([UNFPA, 2020](#), p.37).
- > **People with disabilities also experience exclusion in terms of their access to vocational training opportunities.** In 2023 only 9% of people with disabilities aged 15 or older were enrolled in vocational training compared to 25% of people without disabilities (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.28).

Economic rights and opportunities

- > **People with disabilities continue to face discrimination and rejection from jobs linked to misconceptions about their capacity.** The labour force participation of people with disabilities is 24%, compared to 77% for people without disabilities (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.31); women with disabilities face even more limited access to employment and are more likely to rely on low-wage and informal jobs.
- > **People with disabilities who are in employment often face multiple physical and attitudinal barriers to their full participation in the workplace,** and they report feeling reluctant to ask for flexible working arrangements or reasonable accommodations (Nguyen, H., Alexander, J. and Bellon, M. 2025).
- > **Households with a member who has a disability are significantly more likely to be over lower economic status and are more likely to experience chronic or transitory poverty than households where there are no members with disabilities** (Kiley et al., 2023).

Access to services and digital access

- > **People with disabilities face multiple physical, attitudinal and cultural barriers to accessing health services and WASH facilities.** As of 2023, only a quarter of health facilities had walkways, ramps, and accessible sanitary facilities (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.43). Similarly, many sanitation facilities and water points lack accessible features, making it difficult for people with physical disabilities to access these services (Pham, L., 2025, p.2).
- > **Many healthcare workers are not trained in disability-inclusive care,** while discriminatory attitudes can impact on the quality of care provided to patients with disabilities (Lan, N., 2021). Pregnant women with disabilities report experiencing discrimination from health workers who are surprised or disbelieving that they are having children (Nguyen, L., 2022).
- > **People with disabilities are consistently excluded from equal digital access:** Only 34% of people with disabilities had access to the internet in 2023, compared with 84% of citizens without disabilities (National Statistics Office, 2023, p.34). This likely has a significant impact on people with disabilities' ability to access education, services, and economic opportunities.

Exposure to violence

- > **The 2019 Survey on Violence Against Women found that rates of all forms of intimate partner violence were higher among women with a disability** compared to women with no disability. 33% of women with disabilities had experienced physical intimate partner violence, compared to 25% of women without disabilities. The experience of childhood sexual abuse was also reported as higher by women with disabilities (6%) compared with women without disabilities (4%) ([UNFPA, 2020](#), p.28).

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- > **Women with disabilities are often unwilling to report or share that they have experienced violence.** A 2018 study found 4 in 10 women and girls with disabilities in Hanoi and Danang cities had experienced sexual abuse at least once; of these, 59% had never shared this experience with anyone, while only one person had reported their experience to the authorities (Nguyen, T. and Singhe, M. 2023).

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Asexual and Other Identities (LGBTQIA+)

- > **Vietnam has made significant legislative strides with regards to LGBTQIA+ rights.** In 2014, the National Assembly amended the 2000 [Marriage and Family Law](#), removing the ban on (but stopping short of fully recognising) same-sex marriage (Horton, P. and Rydstrom, H., 2019). In 2015, the civil code was amended to state that it is no longer illegal for transgender people to change their first name and legal gender. In 2022, Vietnam's Health Ministry confirmed same sex attraction and being transgender are not mental health conditions, following a civil society-run petition that attracted over 76,000 signatures and a letter from the WHO's Vietnam office (Human Rights Watch, 2022).
- > **Societal norms around LGBTQIA+ people are shifting in a positive direction.** Research from 2019 suggests younger people hold more open views around same-sex preferences, while parents are increasingly tolerant regarding the sexuality of their children (Horton, P. and Rydstrom, H., 2019). Vietnam has the second highest level of support for gay marriage in Asia (65% either in favour or strongly in favour, second only behind Japan at 66%) ([Pew Research Centre, 2023](#)).
- > **Despite this progress, LGBTQIA+ people are still at risk of exclusion and restrictions on their rights.** Heterosexual couples are still seen as the foundation of societal stability (Phạm, Q., 2022). The government's cancellation of Ho Chi Minh City's main Pride Parade raised concerns over the potential rollback of LGBTQIA+ rights in Vietnam (although this may have reflected broader concerns around civil unrest rather than a targeted curtailment of LGBTQIA+ expression) ([DW, 2025](#)). Recent increases in the prevalence of HIV have led to greater levels of stigma against men in same-sex relationships, raising concerns that men will feel compelled to enter heterosexual marriages due to societal pressure (Horton, P. and Rydstrom, H., 2019).

Ethnic Minorities

- > **Ethnic minorities in Vietnam are significantly more likely to live in poverty.** In 2019 there were 14.1 million people from 53 ethnic minority groups, accounting for 15% of the population ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.17). Of these, 36% of ethnic minority households remain in or near poverty, compared to 10% of the overall population. In 2020 the World Bank reported that ethnic minority groups comprised 79% of the country's poor, despite making up only 15% of the population (ILO, 2025). The ethnic minority groups include the Tay, Thai and Hmong peoples, composing approximately 80% of the population. They have very little access to education, infrastructure, transportation, health care and other services ([Meding and Thai, 2017](#)). In Northwestern Vietnam, ethnic minority groups typically consist of subsistence farmers whose livelihoods are impacted by flooding (*ibid*).
- > **Multidimensional poverty rates in the Northern Mountains and Central Highlands regions, where most ethnic minorities reside, exceed more than twice the national average.** The percentage of individuals lacking educational certification within ethnic minority populations is twofold compared to that of the Kinh and Hoa (Chinese-Vietnamese) groups. Furthermore, disparities in income and expenditure between ethnic minorities and the Kinh

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and Hoa communities have increased in recent years ([IWGIA, 2024](#)).

- **Research by FAO highlights how children from poorer ethnic minority communities are less likely to have their nutritional needs met**, and they often receive minimal health care before the age of three, making them more susceptible to malnutrition and generally poorer health outcomes (FAO, 2019).

Older people

- **Vietnam is an ageing society**: the ageing index increased from 36% of the population in 2009 to 49% in 2019, and Vietnam is expected to become an 'aged' population by 2035 ([UN Women, 2021, p.75](#)).
- **7% of older people lived in poor households as of 2021**, with the percentage being higher for women and those living in rural areas (ILO, 2025, p.29).
- **Older women are reportedly more likely to live alone, to be informally employed, and to suffer from chronic illness than older men**. They are also more likely to be widowed and face financial insecurity, given women typically leave the workforce earlier and live longer than their male counterparts.
- **The issue of violence against older women requires further study** ([UN Women, 2021, p.7](#)), as does the intersection between age and disability.

Children and young people

- **Vietnam has achieved near-parity between boys and girls up to lower secondary school as of 2024 (94% of girls, 96% of boys)**, with completion rates above average for other lower income countries but slightly lower than other countries in the region ([World Bank, 2025](#)). As noted, children with disabilities are significantly less likely to be in school than their peers without disabilities.
- **15% of girls and 2% of boys in Vietnam marry before the age of 18**. Child marriage is most prevalent in more isolated rural and mountainous areas, and amongst ethnic minority groups, with rates as high as 23% in the Northern Midlands and Mountainous areas and 18% in the Central Highlands ([Girls Not Brides, 2025](#))
- **Approximately 6% of children in Vietnam may have experiences related to child trafficking**, with boys and girls equally likely to have been trafficked ([UNICEF, 2019](#)).
- **There is evidence that young people – and young women in particular – can face significant challenges as they attempt to enter the labour market**, due to a lack of 'in-demand' skills, discrimination, a lack of access to labour market information, and for some women, the reluctance of employers to hire women of child-bearing age (ILO, 2025, p.31). This dynamic is almost certainly more pronounced for young people, and especially young women, with disabilities. The challenges young people face in finding skilled work, paired with low educational attainment in some contexts, can lead to young people leaving school to find insecure or low-quality work (Tran, T., 2018).

Urban versus rural

- **The percentage of people living in rural areas is higher than people living in urban areas**. The World Bank (2025) estimates that 60% of people live in rural areas and 40% live in urban areas.

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- > **In 2021 reports found that wages were rising and labour shortages were emerging in large cities, while there are more workers located in rural villages and remote areas.** However, rates of vulnerable employment are much higher in rural provinces (ILO, 2025).
- > **Access to agricultural land is commonly a critical pathway to economic stability for those living in rural areas.** However, ethnic minorities, women, people with disabilities (the majority of whom live in rural settings), and migrant workers can face significant barriers in accessing agricultural land, and in finding alternative non-agriculture-based income (ILO, 2025).
- > **An estimated 65% of households in Vietnam do not have a clean water source on the premises.** Women are primarily responsible for collecting water, meaning that in remote rural settings without adequate WASH facilities, a significant portion of women's time is spent collecting water ([UN Women, 2021](#), p.267).
- > **In many rural communities, cultural norms contribute to high levels of poverty and exclusion among women from ethnic minority groups.** Although they represent under 15 percent of the population, ethnic minorities now make up nearly half of all people living in poverty. Women from remote ethnic groups often face significant disadvantages due to unequal rights, limited opportunities, and restricted access to education. Frequently burdened with heavy household responsibilities, these women also face an elevated risk of gender-based violence ([DFAT, 2017](#)).

Economic disparities

- > **Economic disparities create further marginalisation of many different groups in Vietnam.** The country's 210 wealthiest individuals earn enough in a single year to lift 3.2 million people out of poverty and eliminate extreme poverty nationwide. Economic disparities are compounded by unequal access to representation and opportunities, leaving the poorest marginalised while the wealthy benefit most. Millions of people, including ethnic minorities, small-scale farmers, migrants, informal workers, and many women, remain vulnerable to poverty, lack essential services and political influence, and continue to encounter systemic discrimination ([Oxfam, 2017](#)).

Impacts of pollution on these groups

- > **Pollution is a significant problem in Vietnam.** In 2024 Vietnam was ranked as having the 22nd worst air quality globally, and Hanoi as the 8th most polluted city in the world ([UNICEF, 2024](#)).
- > **According to the WHO, over 60,000 deaths from heart disease, lung cancer, pneumonia and other diseases were linked to air pollution in 2016** (World Health Organisation, 2018), while in Ho Chi Minh City, air pollution was linked with 3785 deaths and an economic cost of US\$2.4 billion in 2019 ([Ho et al., 2023](#)).
- > **Sources of pollution include transportation, construction agricultural production, industrial production, and improper waste management** (World Health Organisation, 2018); the extraction of metals from e-waste in Ho Chi Minh City is linked to increased rates of lung cancer and kidney damage (Brindhadevi, K. et al. 2023).
- > **The disproportionate and heightened impact of pollution on already excluded or marginalised groups** – including children, older people, pregnant women and new

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mothers, people with disabilities, and the very poor – is well established ([Chen, F. et al., 2024](#)). However, data is lacking on the impact of pollution in Vietnam on a number of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities and older people.

- > **Children under 5 make up an estimated 7% of the total deaths attributable to air pollution in Vietnam** ([UNICEF 2024](#)). This is because they face higher risks of acute respiratory infections. While more data is needed, it is reasonable to assume that children are more likely to be impacted by air pollution if they are born to very poor and/or economically insecure families; if they come from single- or female-headed households; or if they have disabilities or pre-existing health conditions,
- > **Management of e-waste is a known driver of pollution in Vietnam.** A 2022 WHO study highlighted the impact of e-waste on children and adults, including risk of exposure to over one thousand potentially harmful chemicals (particularly for individuals – including children – involved in retrieving precious metals), and increased lead exposure ([Brindhadevi, K. et al. 2023](#))
- > **Exposure to elevated risks of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5})** in Ho Chi Minh City has been linked to increases in preterm birth and decreased birth weight, with increased exposure to PM_{2.5} directly correlated to these adverse health outcomes ([Ho et al., 2023](#)). Preterm birth and decreased birth weight are directly linked to increased risk of premature death, disability, impaired cognitive performance, and noncommunicable diseases in adulthood.
- > **Vietnam produces 1.8 million tonnes of plastic waste annually. 90% of informal waste workers are women**, who collect more than 30% of recyclable plastic waste in Vietnam ([World Economic Forum, 2025](#)). Female waste pickers are more likely to suffer from miscarriages, infertility, and breast cancer ([Hung, C., 2024, p. 319](#)). Additionally, women waste pickers often face social stigma, a high risk from frequent fires, and growing threats from increasingly mechanised, male-dominated parts of the waste industry ([World Economic Forum, 2025](#)).
- > **A 2020 study found that women who lived 10 kilometres from a solid municipal waste incinerator had increased breast cancer risks**, while burning rubbish and overall poor waste management has been linked to the emergence of 'cancer villages' across Vietnam ([Snell, G., 2022](#)).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in the agriculture sector

Women

- > **Vietnam has strong laws and policies supporting women farmers**, including the Beijing Declaration, the COP 29 Resolution on Gender and Climate, and the Asia-Pacific Declaration on Gender Equality. However, gender is not systematically integrated into laws and policies relating to agriculture (FAO, 2019), and existing legislation suffers from a lack of resourcing and involvement of women in decision-making processes (UN, 2025).
- > **Women account for an estimated 63% of the agricultural labour force in Vietnam and are central providers of income and nutrition for over 10 million farmer households** ([UN Women, 2021](#)). They are often left to manage farms when men migrate for work, with around half of men in North Vietnam and 9% in South Vietnam migrating outside of their provinces

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(Duyen, 2020, p.116). Despite their prominent role within the sector, only 10% of rural women are employed in ‘skilled agriculture, forestry and fishery’, compared to 15% of rural men (ILO, 2025, p.25). As of June 2022, none of Vietnam’s 63 provinces had a female Department of Agriculture and Rural Development director ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#)).

- > **Women from ethnic minority groups (typically most reliant on agriculture for subsistence) are particularly impacted by these patterns of exclusion.** 81% of ethnic minorities are engaged in agriculture, compared with 63% of non-ethnic minority rural women and 58% of non-ethnic minority men (UN, 2025).
- > **Vietnam’s [National Adaptation Plan \(NAP\)](#) aims to strengthen the climate change adaptation of citizens while also ensuring gender equality.** The Government of Vietnam has recognised the limited extent to which NAP processes and stakeholders mainstream gender equality and social inclusion (reflected in the ways in which women typically face restricted access to climate-smart training, tools, and credit access) (Ngo, L., Tran, T., 2024). The Government launched its '[Guidelines on Mainstreaming Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in the NAP Process in Vietnam](#)' in July 2025, with the aim of supporting and promoting GESI mainstreaming in NAP implementation and monitoring.

Older and younger people

- > **From 2006 to 2011 there was a 4% increase in the proportion of farmers older than 55;** by 2011, 12% of the farming population was over 55, with a concurrent decrease in the number of farmers under the age of 25 (Help Age International, 2014, p.15).
- > **Older women are often left to tend to farms when men migrate to urban areas** (Ngo, L., Tran, T, 2024). Over 90% of agricultural employment is informal, and older workers (along with very young workers) are at higher risk of informal employment (ILO, 2025, p.30).
- > **Young people are increasingly less likely to want to work in agriculture in Vietnam** – particularly if they do not own land or have experienced some form of crisis shock (Arora and Slavchevska, 202, p.17). This is due to a combination of factors, including the challenges of agricultural work for low margins and returns, the risk of climate-driven shocks, and negative public perceptions around farming. The migration of young people to other sectors and urban centres has placed increased pressure on older subsistence farmers (Duyen, T. et al. 2020, p.122).

Marginalisation and social exclusion in waste management sector

- > **Vietnam’s rapid urbanisation and industrialisation rates have created significant challenges with regards to waste management** and associated challenges relating to public health, environmental sustainability, and social and economic equity. It is estimated that Vietnam generates around 60,000 tons of household waste a day, including 1.8 tonnes of plastic waste (IKI, 2023).

Informal workers

- > **Informal waste pickers – 90% of whom are women** (Hung, C. M. 2024, p.318) – **play a central role in Vietnam’s waste management ecosystem.** Around 30% of Vietnam’s plastic waste is collected by informal workers ([Vietnam Law, 2024](#)). Their work remains under-appreciated and under-valued by the Vietnamese government, in part because it is often

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invisible in nature ([Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2024](#)).

- > **The role of informal waste pickers is notably absent from the [2020 Environmental Protection Law](#) and other key policies.** The Environmental Protection Law fails to acknowledge the central role played by informal workers in waste management and recycling. Similarly, under Vietnam's [Law on Social Insurance](#), informal waste pickers are ineligible for compulsory social insurance as the majority work without a labour contract. Workers who do purchase voluntary insurance are not entitled to health insurance, pensions, or unemployment insurance (Hung, C. M., 2024, p.326). Existing legislation does not designate waste picking as a protected job or occupation under employment law (Hung, C. M., 2024, p.325).
- > **The 2020 Environmental Protection Law presents an opportunity to recognise waste pickers as contributors to the circular economy.** The Law requires enterprises to establish systems for recollecting plastic packaging or relegate this to an organisation that manages waste on their behalf (Hung, C. M., 2024, p.319). Research indicates that the effectiveness of this legislation will require incorporation of the informal sector into these processes.
- > **An estimated 90% of roadside waste pickers are migrants from rural areas who are not affiliated with a formal labour organisation.** This means such workers lack a collective voice with which to advocate for improved protections, representation, and working rights. It can also limit workers' ability to stay up to date with legal changes. Research conducted with informal waste pickers found that workers' desire to join a more formalised workers' association were low, with workers expressing concern that such formalisation would limit their flexibility and create administrative difficulties (Hung, C. M. 2024, p.326).
- > **It is worth noting that many informal workers take pride in their work, particularly in terms of their contribution towards better environmental outcomes, and that many appreciate the flexibility waste picking allows them alongside other responsibilities** (Kuo, K., Gordiychuk, K., 2025).
- > **Waste picker wages can vary significantly and are often reliant on negotiations between different stakeholders within the processing chain.** Price fluctuations for waste collected - often varying by 50% or more – can leave pickers economically insecure (Stiftung, F. 2024). Informal waste pickers typically have limited access to market information or technology that could support them to track market rates or access information on which collection points may offer increased prices ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.36). They can also struggle to access to financial services like bank loans, due to the insecure nature of their work ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.38).
- > **Informal waste collectors face significant health risks.** An estimated 10,000 waste pickers – the majority poor female migrants from rural areas with limited formal education – work in Hanoi. These informal workers typically work with minimal personal protective equipment, often sorting waste by hand. They can face frequent exposure to potentially hazardous materials and toxic waste alongside fire risks and risks of traffic accidents along the busy routes they work (Ming, T., 2023). Research from 2024 found that the majority of waste collectors included in the study had musculoskeletal issues, along with mental health issues related to their work (Plastic Smart Cities, 2024).
- > **Research conducted in 2024 found that nearly half of waste collectors do not have health insurance**, while those that are insured have only minimal coverage (Plastic Smart Cities, 2024, p.486; Kuo, K., Gordiychuk, K., 2025). This leaves informal workers vulnerable to

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both health and economic shocks. Waste collectors also frequently face discrimination when accessing healthcare.

- **Informal waste collectors often face social stigma and isolation.** Waste collectors are commonly viewed as dirty or having been exposed to infectious diseases, with many experiencing discrimination in public spaces and businesses (Stiftung, F. 2024). Similar stigma exists for so-called 'junk shop workers' of micro-businesses involved in waste management and recycling, such as scrap dealers and recycling facilities (Tong, Y. et al., 2021, p.121), particularly in areas experiencing gentrification (Tong, Y. et al., 2021, p.121).

Women

- **The informal waste collection sector is dominated by older rural women, who collect and sort an estimated 60% of the country's recyclable plastic** (Kuo, K., Gordiychuk, K., 2025). Research suggests that older waste collectors have completed an average of 4 years of schooling, and that 18% are illiterate (Tong, Y. et al. 2021, p.122). For these women, waste collection is often an appealing option as it offers flexible hours (allowing them to take on work alongside domestic duties) and requires minimal capital to get started (Kuo, K., Gordiychuk, K., 2025). Following an evaluation of data on plastic waste management, there is a lack of gender disaggregated data and power analysis, crucial for policy development based on evidence and equity ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#))
- **Despite women making up around 64% of formal and informal waste pickers in Vietnam, men continue to dominate policy and decision-making spaces relating to waste management** (IKI, 2023). This is in large part due to the discriminatory norms that limit women to domestic roles ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.8). Although approximately 70% of scrap business owners in Vietnam are women (Ocean Conservancy, 2019), female business owners typically play supportive roles while male counterparts make key decisions and wield greater financial power (Hung, C., 2024).
- **Informal waste workers are at increased risk of sexual harassment and abuse as a result of their work, with younger women and night workers at particular risk** (Ming, T. 2023). Women frequently travel in pairs or groups to minimise these risks; women who have experienced violence often do not report their experiences to law enforcement, choosing instead to avoid their perpetrators where possible ([World Economic Forum, 2023](#), p.37).

People with disabilities

- **There is very limited information on the position or experiences of people with disabilities in the waste management sector in Vietnam.** However, around 71% of people with disabilities in Vietnam work in the informal sector. Given the number of informal waste management sector workers, it is highly likely that people with disabilities are well represented within this workforce. This is an area that merits further research, particularly given the compounded challenges waste pickers with disabilities are likely to face in relation to healthcare, decision-making opportunities, exposure to violence (especially for women), and discrimination and stigmatisation ([UNDP, 2023](#)).

Risks of addressing these inequalities

- **Interventions aimed at shifting unequal power relations come with an inherent risk of backlash from individuals, groups and systems who/that perceive their power to be**

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under threat. While Vietnam has made significant strides towards equality on a number of fronts, dynamics including high rates of GBV, suspicion and stigmatisation around disability, and the recent backlash against male same-sex couples, all speak to deep-seated social norms that may create resistance to change. In 2015, the lift of the previous ban on same-sex marriages sparked intense backlash ([TIME, 2016](#)), while Vietnam's strong legislative framework around disability rights has faced passive backlash in the form of slow implementation and significant funding shortages ([UNDP, 2023](#)). Failing to take a nuanced, intersectional approach to understanding and mitigating potential backlash, based on an intervention's intended aims and context, risks causing harm to and exacerbating the exclusion of already marginalised groups. Similarly, interventions that focus only on practical, institutional, or policy-based barriers to inclusion are likely to be ineffective at best, or risk causing harm at worst.

- **There is a lack of data on key aspects of social and economic exclusion in Vietnam.** Data on disability in relation to key sectors (including agriculture and waste management) is minimal, as is data and evidence focused on how disability intersects with other commonly marginalised identities (such as age and gender). There is also a lack of data on different forms of GBV, including the risks and experiences faced by informal waste pickers. These data gaps pose a challenge in terms of designing interventions that accurately reflect the needs and lived experiences of marginalised groups.
- **Informal workers have varied and sometimes opposing views on the changes they would like to see within their sectors.** While some informal waste pickers report wanting stronger social protections (including financial safeguards, healthcare, and insurance), others are concerned that formalisation will increase their administrative burden and remove some of the flexibility that supports their broader lifestyle. Interventions that take a one-size-fits-all approach to promoting inclusion may risk worsening or creating new forms of exclusion if these dynamics are not carefully considered from the outset.
- **Exclusion dynamics are complex, spanning multiple interdependent systems and sectors; engaging with only one element of exclusion may risk raising expectations that cannot be met.** For example, increasing employment opportunities for women or people with disabilities may not be effective without addressing the barriers children with disabilities face in accessing inclusive quality education, or that young women and people with disabilities face in joining vocational training schemes. Viewing possible intervention areas as part of a systems-wide analysis will help to ensure interventions are able to have a positive impact on inclusion outcomes.

Interventions that do not take an intersectional approach to promoting inclusion are likely to be ineffective at best, and harmful at worst. Intersectionality – the complex ways in which multiple marginalised identities can compound to change or increase how exclusion manifests for different individuals and groups – is often overlooked, with interventions instead targeting one or more excluded identities in isolation (e.g. women, people with disabilities). However, for example, women informal waste pickers will face different challenges – and opportunities – depending on their age, ethnicity, whether they are live in (or have migrated from) an urban or rural setting, and whether or not they have a disability. An intersectional lens should be used in the design and delivery of interventions looking to promote inclusion, to maximise the intervention's impact and to ensure it both leaves no one behind and does no harm.

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Key stakeholders

Government actors	
Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development	Leads national policy and programming relating to agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and rural development.
Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment	Oversees and manages policy and programming relating to land and water management, climate change planning and commitments, and environmental protection.
Ministry of Industry and Trade	Responsible for setting trade policy, including for agricultural products, and for industrial waste and recycling.
Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs	Responsible for social welfare, labour standards, and inclusion of different marginalised groups.
Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs	Oversees policy development and programming relating to ethnic minority groups, including in rural and remote regions.
Provincial People's Committees	Responsible for overseeing the implementation of national policies at the provincial level, including relating to agriculture, local waste management systems, and environmental monitoring.
Donors and multilaterals	
Food and Agriculture Organisation	Centrally involved in the development of Vietnam's Country Programming Framework 2022-6 , which includes priorities on health, climate change and natural resource management, food safety and equitable livelihoods, and gender and persons with disabilities.
GIZ	GIZ's priority areas in Vietnam are: climate change and the environment; energy transition; and green economy and vocational training and education. This includes a focus on inclusive development (just transition).
International Fund for Agricultural Development	IFAD is focused on tackling poverty in rural Vietnam, with a focus on poorer farming households and pro-poor market systems development.
UNDP	UNDP's Country Programme Document (2022-2026) is focused on the following: shared prosperity through sustainable economic transformation (with an inclusive and gender-responsive focus); climate change, disaster resilience and environmental sustainability; and governance and access to justice.
International Non-Governmental Organisations	
Oxfam	Oxfam's work in Vietnam includes a core focus on secure livelihoods and resilient communities, alongside social accountability and empowered citizens, as well as gender equality and women's agency.

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<u>SNV Netherlands</u>	SNV engages with government agencies, private sector actors, and local authorities across the agri-food, energy, and water sectors, including in remote areas across Vietnam.
<u>Winrock International</u>	Winrock's work supports biodiversity conservation and climate resiliency alongside livelihoods improvement for rural communities in Vietnam.
<u>WWF-Vietnam</u>	WWF is one of the leading conservation organisations in Vietnam, with programmes focused forests, oceans, freshwater, climate and energy, and food.
<u>WasteAid</u>	WasteAid is focused on the waste and resources sector, including through supporting efforts to accelerate a circular economy in Vietnam.
<u>Global Plastic Action Partnership</u>	The Global Plastic Action Partnership is working with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to launch a collaborative platform for addressing plastic pollution in Vietnam.

National and local civil society organisations

<u>Vietnam Farmers' Union</u>
<u>Vietnam Cooperative Alliance</u>
<u>Vietnam Rural Development Science Association</u>
<u>Centre for Rural Development in Vietnam</u>
<u>Vietnam's Women's Union</u>
<u>Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union</u>
<u>Vietnam Federation on Disability</u>
<u>Vietnam Environment and Sustainable Development Institute</u>
<u>Centre for Environment and Community Research</u>
<u>GreenHub Vietnam</u>
<u>Zero Waste Vietnam</u>

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About Helpdesk reports: The Disability Inclusion Helpdesk is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), contracted through the Disability Inclusion Team (DIT) under the Disability Inclusive Development Inclusive Futures Programme. Helpdesk reports are based on between 3 and 4.5 days of desk-based research per query and are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues and expert thinking on issues around disability inclusion. Where referring to documented evidence, Helpdesk teams will seek to understand the methodologies used to generate evidence and will summarise this in Helpdesk outputs, noting any concerns with the robustness of the evidence being presented. For some Helpdesk services, in particular the practical know-how queries, the emphasis will be focused far less on academic validity of evidence and more on the validity of first-hand experience among disabled people and practitioners delivering and monitoring programmes on the ground. All sources will be clearly referenced.

Helpdesk services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations and individual experts on disability, including Social Development Direct, Sightsavers, ADD International, Light for the World, Humanity & Inclusion, BRAC, BBC Media Action, Sense and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). Expert advice may be sought from this Group, as well as from the wider academic and practitioner community, and those able to provide input within the short timeframe are acknowledged. Any views or opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the Disability Inclusion Helpdesk or any of the contributing organisations/experts.

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Suggested citation:

Naomi Clugston, Amy Harrison, Nilanjana Bhattacharjee, Anisha Saggu (2022) *GEDSI Factsheet Vietnam*, Disability Inclusion Helpdesk Research Report No. 150. London, UK: Disability Inclusion Helpdesk.