

Gender and Development in Vietnam in the 21st Century

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“ Despite recent gains, women remain an undervalued and underdeveloped human resource. For when women are empowered, families are strengthened, socially-constructive values are taught, sexually-transmitted disease is slowed and the global economy expands.”

Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright

Introduction

This paper will treat issues that have arisen as Vietnamese women, both urban and rural, try to move socially, economically, and politically from a subordinated condition to a decision-making status in the 21st century. Equal, equitable, fair and inclusive gender relations can create valuable social net worth, and can aid development.

If gender and development are related, a number of questions arise. How can fairer treatment of women result in both increased equity and economic efficiency? Will Vietnamese women gain access to the education and health benefits that will allow them to reach leadership positions? Is development -- long-term economic growth, increases in per capita income -- directly influenced by fertility rates? How do Vietnamese women relate to, and compare with, other women in the world? How can they extricate themselves from poverty, develop their capacities, and attain prosperity?

Since 1975, two multilateral institutions, the UNDP and the World Bank, have articulated the issues and expanded the messages of gender and development for the international women's movements. The Women's Decade (1975-85) started with the Women's Decade Conference in Nairobi in 1985 and produced the Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing in 1990, and the gathering at the UN in New York in 2000. These conferences elaborated the policies and strategies that today are animating the search for equality for women.

In Vietnam, women account for over half the population. In April 1999, the Vietnamese census revealed a total of 76,328 million people, of which 38,810 million were women and 37,520 million were men -- 96.7 men per 100 women. Urban dwellers were around 18 million, only 23 percent of the population, as opposed to 58 million inhabitants who resided in rural areas. Agriculture remains fundamental to the Vietnamese economy, employing 73 percent of the country's labor force. The male proportion of the workforce was 53%, while women were 47%. Over sixty percent of the population was under 25 years of age.

I. Vietnamese Women and the Household

“ The value of women’s labor in the home has not been accounted for because it is not part of a market, a mistake worth roughly \$8 trillion.”

Robert Picciotto, Director General
Operations Evaluation, World Bank.

Traditionally, Vietnamese women are known as the “minister of the interior,” or called *noi tuong*, the “general of internal affairs.” Their role is to raise and educate their children, to manage the family finances, to make ends meet, to cook and clean, and to make most decisions in the household. More generally, society holds them responsible for producing a strong family while maintaining peace and harmony. Despite these deep-rooted and tremendously important expectations, Vietnamese women are in fact regarded as subordinate to men. They are assigned a disproportionately large share of the workload, both inside and outside the home. This is especially true of rural women.

Nowadays, with Vietnam’s per capita income among the lowest in the world (\$300 per annum) and with low wages and high unemployment and inflation, almost all Vietnamese women have to earn a living outside the home. They work as vendors on the streets, in offices, or in factories to supplement the incomes of families, whose members include parents, grandparents, and many children. In the countryside, they work in the rice fields, in the market place, and inside the home.

Domestic Violence in Vietnam

Attitudes perpetuating inequality and violence exist in families at all income levels in Vietnam. Violent behavior at home is regarded as a normal prerogative of men who are heads of family, and a way of educating their wives and children. Harmful social habits such as jealousy, gambling, and drug and alcohol abuse as well as economic hardship and sexual incompatibility contribute to verbal and physical abuse. Even women’s smaller physical stature can be linked to gender violence. Women’s weaker bargaining power has huge consequences for the welfare of women and children.

The Role of the United Nations

The UN General Assembly in 1993, in its Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women, defined gender-based violence as “any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life” (United Nations 1995:73; UNIFEM 1998). With these declarations and in other ways, the United Nations women’s

conferences have contributed to real progress towards sexual equality in the past two decades.

In Vietnam, a recent national report is serving as a catalyst for the discussion of these sensitive issues within the family, particularly husband-on-wife violence. The Second National Report on the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was published by Women's Publishing House in Hanoi. The report, based on qualitative and quantitative field research conducted in Vietnam during April and May 1999, includes a review of media reports. The research was designed to examine inconsistencies among the current law, its interpretation, and its implementation at the district and commune levels.

The report also documents community attitudes between men and women, among various age groups, and between urban and rural populations. It analyzes, too, the response of institutions such as the police, the courts, the local authorities, and the media over comparable periods in 1989 and 1999. While men can also be victims of marital abuse -- verbal, emotional and physical -- the report's focus is on Vietnamese women, as they are more often at risk than men.

The report shows that both men and women in Vietnam take the traditional patriarchal value system for granted. People equate gender equality with peaceful conformity to socially-prescribed gender roles. Gender stereotypes allow domestic violence to continue occurring as a "normal" and accepted part of spousal relations. Given the deep-rooted nature of these perceptions, it is not surprising that institutional actions perpetuate the status quo.

Although physical violence is estimated to have occurred in only 5 to 20% of households, actual data indicate that domestic violence is a very real and widespread phenomenon, affecting women from all social and geographical groupings. As noted, certain levels of domestic violence are accepted as normal in Vietnamese culture, and community institutions entrusted with maintaining social order may be slow in recognizing and handling the problem. Although gender equality is guaranteed by the law, many women are deprived of the fundamental right to respect and to physical protection. Women continue to endure violence in silence, in part because of a lack of knowledge about their rights, and in part due to a lack of public condemnation of all forms of violence.

Since they accept gender-based violence as the norm, many men and women consider it a private matter. There is no impetus to take collective action to combat the problem. Many divorces are due to domestic violence: 70 percent of the 22,000 divorces recorded in 1991 were in this category. But many women likely remain in abusive marriages rather than confront the stigma of divorce.

What Is Being Done?

Under these cultural and private circumstances, does the government have the legitimate right, or the duty, to intervene? In Vietnam, the answer has not come across very clearly.

It is true that the Vietnamese state has established a Women's Union, which has the broad agenda of promoting women's rights, including political, economic, and legal equality; and of ensuring protection from spousal abuse. The Women's Union claims more than 10 million members (UNDP 1996:15). In reality, however, there is much more to be done than a state-sponsored entity can handle.

At the same time, Vietnam today is subject to considerable outside influence, at least as compared with the recent past. NGOs and international agencies operate programs there, implicitly and explicitly spreading the gospel of gender equality. Both citizens and officials travel more than before. And the Vietnamese community in the United States and in other diaspora countries, who are having their own growing pains in this area, are in widespread communication with their relatives in Vietnam. This presumably causes at least a modicum of new thinking to rub off on Vietnam's citizenry.

How To Move Ahead

Given all this, what might realistically be done in Vietnam to promote women's rights? A number of broad prescriptions come to mind. Existing women's unions and reconciliation groups could develop training programs and awareness drives, using target-group discussions and other appropriate techniques. Justice officials, local People's Committees, police, medical professionals, and social organizations could take more rigorous measures in dealing with violent incidents. The National Committee for the Advancement of Women, another establishment of the Vietnamese government, could set up a task force to monitor gender-based violence at all levels in Vietnam, and urge more official action to detect and stop abuses.

Another kind of violence: Sex Trafficking

One type of violence can spawn others. The government, press, and international NGOs have reported an increase in recent years in trafficking of Vietnamese women, both domestically and to other countries. Organized groups lure poor, young, often rural women with promises of jobs or marriage, and force them to work as prostitutes. Some women are kidnapped and sold as wives to foreign men. The sex trade is a matter of international concern, and trafficking networks are known to be linked to international organized crime. Victimized women and girls are at an increased risk of further violence such as physical

abuse, unwanted pregnancy, forced labor, and sexually transmitted diseases, including infection with HIV/AIDS.

How does this happen in a country so jealous of its own sovereignty and where Vietnamese women play such an important role in the business, social and educational professions? In fact, Vietnamese women are subject to pressures that increase the likelihood of victimization by sex traffickers. Many are poor, lacking employment and income-earning opportunities. A large number are caught up in rural-urban migration. Many are under pressure to help support their family. Vietnamese women are also affected by international phenomena that facilitate the sex trade: migration for work purposes, widespread drug use, and increased foreign travel by well-heeled businessmen and tourists. All contribute to a sharp increase in commercial sex.

The sex industry, of course, is not new; it has existed in Vietnam for decades if not centuries. Traditionally, sex traffickers used deception, coercion, debt bondage, the threat of force, and the abuse of authority. Women and girls were kidnapped and sold as commodities in a sexual marketplace for the pleasure and profit of affluent men in their own or in other countries. More recently, however, mail order sex, the internet bride trade, and sex tourism have added new dimensions to sex exploitation.

For the victims, the route to prostitution remain the same as before. In a *voluntary* situation, the woman approaches a sex establishment herself. When the arrangement is *involuntary*, deception and coercion of the woman are employed by an agent or brothel. Finally, there are agreements that amount to *bonding*, wherein a parent or guardian receives money in exchange for a daughter.

Although the last seems especially heartless and unjust, there are cultural, familial, economic and historical reasons behind the decision to send a child to work in the sex industry. Children are expected to support and obey parents' wishes and show the parents gratitude and respect no matter what the situation. Prostitution is often perceived as fulfilling a traditional role of daughters, who are caretakers of the family and community. Kieu, the heroine in *Kim Van Kieu*, the best-selling Vietnamese novel of all time, typified that role.

Trafficking in women and children occurs for different purposes in different regions. Trafficking from the northern part of Vietnam to China is often for purposes of marriage. Generally, trafficking from the southern part of Vietnam to Cambodia and subsequently to Thailand is for purely sexual reasons. And trafficking to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau tends to be for marriage. With this demand intact and growing, organizations supplying virgin prostitutes to foreigners have been increasing in Vietnam.

The government of Vietnam is working with international NGOs to thwart trafficking in women, and is cooperating with other governments to strengthen

enforcement. Strategies include training of law enforcement officers, rescue and rehabilitation of victims, advocacy to raise public awareness, provision of alternative employment and income-earning opportunities for women and girls, and campaigns targeting parents and girls'schools.

II. Vietnamese Women and the State

The State Department's *Vietnam Country Report* notes that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) Central Committee is the supreme decision-making body of the nation, with the Politburo as the locus of policy-making. National Assembly members, most of whom are VCP members, have played an increasing role in Vietnam as a conduit for local and provincial concerns and as a critics of corruption and inefficiency.

Vietnamese law provides for equal participation in politics by women and minority groups, but, in practice, all are underrepresented. Most of Vietnam's top leaders are male. There is one woman in the Politburo, and 25 in the 450-member National Assembly. Women hold a few important positions, including Vice-President and several ministerships and vice-ministerships. Representation of women in positions in central bodies is relatively good (26%), but women are clearly under-represented at local government levels. In provincial, district and communal People's Councils, women constitute 21%, 19% and 14% of total members, respectively.

The Constitution prohibits discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, or social status. However, enforcement of these prohibitions has been uneven. The law addresses the problem of domestic violence, but the authorities do not enforce it effectively. The government also has a Committee for the Advancement of Women, mentioned above, which coordinates inter-ministerial programs affecting women. All these measures are necessary and may result in addressing equality and equity issues with more consultation, participation, voice, and empowerment for women. They seem to suggest that public policies can help to close gender gaps between men and women. As noted previously, however, Vietnam has a long way to go in this regard.

Population and Fertility

Vietnam's population increased more than six-fold during the last century – from around 12 million in 1990 to almost 80 million today. The fertility rate is now 2.3 children per woman compared to six in the 1960s.

Population chart (1) (not available)

In June 1993, legislation was ratified with the goal of lowering the population growth rate to 1.7 percent and raising the percentage of couples using contraceptive methods to 55 percent by the year 2000. Abortion is legal and available on request. Between 1990 and 1993, the total number of abortions

reached 1.2 million (UN 1998:73). For 1992, the abortion rate was estimated at 2.5 abortions per woman, the highest rate in Asia. According to the U.N. Population Fund, forty percent of all pregnancies were terminated, with about 1.4 million abortions performed in 1998.

The Vietnamese government has a family planning policy that urges couples to have no more than two children. The Vietnam Family Planning Association (VINAFFPA) provides programs and service delivery through community-based distributors (CBD) for communes. By 1997, information, education and motivation activities, and provision of contraceptive methods such as condoms and pills had extended to 311 communities with 914 distributors. The total number of couples managed by the CBD agents stood at 98,000, and 79,500 couples decided to use some form of contraceptive. Currently, women ages 15 to 49 using all methods of contraception were 79.2 percent.

The demand for contraceptives far outstrips the supply. The country's only condom factory operates around the clock – and it was expected still to come up 14 million condoms short in 1999. The IUD, almost the only contraceptive method available, was used by over half of the women, most of whom experienced side effects from use. Some women were used as part of a trial test and sterilized with a pill called quinacrine. Quinacrine, which looks harmless, actually dissolves into a strong acid in the body, and sterilizes by burning the uterus, causing scars.

Although the government calls for exhortation and not coercion in family planning, it can deny promotions and salary increases to government employees with more than two children. Local regulations permit fines based on the cost of extra social services incurred by larger families or reductions in state subsidies for those services. It is hard to escape the conclusion that, in Vietnam, the state has intruded into the area of family planning in a way that would not be tolerated in the U.S. or in most other countries.

Vietnamese government policy has nonetheless, produced results. The 1994 Vietnam Demographic Survey revealed substantial change over recent years in reproductive behavior and attitudes. Fertility has continued to decline to a level not far above a fertility rate of three children per mother. Compared with the late 1980s, contraceptive knowledge has broadened and contraceptive prevalence has increased, reaching a level of 65 percent of currently married women of reproductive age. Family-size preferences have shifted noticeably downward, suggesting that fertility will continue to fall in the coming years.

III. Vietnamese Women and Economic Development

For most of the past decade, Vietnam has enjoyed economic growth - 8 percent per year on average between 1990 and 1997 - that equaled or exceeded the average rate for the East Asian Region. Even in the East Asian recession that

started in 1997, Vietnam has avoided the serious balance-of-payments, fiscal and banking crises that have been common in the region. But two years of low growth – around 4 percent in both 1998 and 1999 – have seen urban employment decrease, and lowered enterprise profitability and public revenues. Growth in the service sector has declined, and manufacturing and construction have recorded negative growth.

At the same time, there was a sharp pick-up in export earnings in 1999, when exports rose by more than 20% after a sluggish two percent rise in 1998. Most of this growth came from crude oil, seafood, garments and footwear, which together accounted for about 53 percent of total export turnover. Both the Asian and European markets contributed to export earnings. For the first time, nearly half of all exports came from private companies, both domestic and foreign.

Growth Rate of Key Exports Chart (not available)

Although strong exports prompted some investment in exporting companies, total investment fell sharply, by 29 percent in 1997 and 19 percent in 1999, due to a precipitous drop in foreign investment. The latter, which averaged \$2 billion a year in the early and mid-90's, dropped to \$800 million in 1998, and \$600 million in 1999. The largest decline came from East Asia and Japan as a result of the regional crisis. Vietnam's export-oriented foreign investment also declined because of slow domestic reforms, lack of transparency, inconsistencies in trade laws, and increased competitiveness from other Asian countries.

The difficult economic situation which Vietnam is now facing is widening the rural-urban divide. Income disparities are growing not only between rural and urban areas, but within rural areas themselves. In the area of energy consumption, where Vietnam's consumption per capita is one-seventh the level of neighboring Thailand and among the lowest in the developing world, the rural population accounts for 80% of consumers but uses just 14 percent of the electricity supplied. In other words, rural consumers use not even one-fifth as much electricity as urban consumers, and pay almost twice as much per unit. These rural-urban disparities are likely to increase social tensions and drag down economic growth.

Women in the Economy

With Vietnam's economic development having slowed, and with social tensions increasing, progress for women in the society is all the more important – at least if one believes that there is a correlation between economic development and gender advancement. This is the conclusion of a new study commissioned as a background paper for the Policy Research Report on Gender and Development by the World Bank. It finds that greater gender equality in secondary education is good for economic growth. In countries with higher initial education, an increase of 1 percentage point in the share of adult women with secondary education implies an increase in per capita income of 0.3 percentage points.

The study, “Gender Inequality, Income, and Growth: Are Good Times Good for Women?” by David Dollar and Roberta Gatti, also examines the factors affecting a wide range of measures of gender inequality.

Secondary School Attainment Chart (Dollar & Gatti) (not available)

It is not that Vietnamese women are absent from the workforce. In fact, women in Vietnam have exceptionally high rates of economic activity. In the agricultural field, women do most of the sowing and planting, crop tending and harvesting, and animal husbandry. Women also dominate the informal trade and services sectors of the economy, accounting there for over two-thirds of the labor force.

Nevertheless, female unemployment remains higher than male, in both urban and rural areas. In rural areas, there is also considerable underemployment. Women work fewer hours than men in the formal labor market, constrained by household requirements.

Recommendations

With so many sectors needing attention if development, including gender development, is to progress, a long list of recommendations could be developed. For progress in the area of women, however, this paper would argue that the highest priority is basic education for all, including girls. This emphasis is badly needed. Although total school enrollment is 95% of the school-age population, only 60% complete grade five – with boys completing 5.8 years of schooling, and girls 3.4 years (UNICEF 1997:2).

Chart of Educational Attainment by Gender (not available)

Despite the high literacy rate in Vietnam, women have not yet reached the same levels of literacy and education as men. The figures above shows that 32 percent of females compared to 20 percent of males had a low education level. Females are also slightly disadvantaged across different levels of education. Besides, girls are concentrated in certain fields of study, chiefly education and the humanities, and poorly represented in others, such as math and science, where they will need better preparation to participate in the market economy.

These results suggest that, if gender development is one’s priority in Vietnam, the schools may be the first area to which one should devote attention.

Conclusion

To attain gender development and reduce poverty in Vietnam, the government, the World Bank, and NGOs should commit themselves to developing a national plan of action for the advancement of women. Women should have full and equal participation in political, economic, cultural and social fields. To accomplish these goals, more investment is required in education for girls and

women. This is absolutely necessary if Vietnam is to enhance women's role in leadership and decision-making. Education also plays an important role in reducing fertility rates, improving health care, providing opportunities to participate in the political process, and promoting upward mobility in employment and in the economic field.

Investing in women's education is one of the keys to developmental success.

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