**Gender Equity in Education:**

**Some Highlights of the Current Situation in Vietnam**

*Dr. Lam Quang Dong*

*Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU)*

[*lamquangdong@vnu.edu.vn*](mailto:lamquangdong@vnu.edu.vn)

**ABSTRACT**

First, the paper presents exemplary efforts of the Government of Vietnam in relation to gender issues through legislation, namely the Law on Marriage and Family, the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and the Law on Education, and Vietnam commitments to international gender-related instruments such as CEDAW. Some statistics of our Faculty of English, VNU, is given as illustration of our own efforts for enhancement of gender equity. The paper then briefly describes key achievements of gender equity in education before elaborating several issues to be addressed, including

1. discrepancies and gender inequality in education among different regions and ethnic groups;
2. women’s limited access to vocational training;
3. gender stereotypes in textbooks and curricula in relation to women’s access to education and development opportunities;
4. gender disparities in fields of study and employment.

The paper finally concludes with some recommendations to be taken.

Since the foundation of the country as an independent nation in 1945, realizing the importance, potentials and capacities of the “better-half” of the world, trying to reduce the conventional patriarchal, male-dominant and male-preferred ideologies under the influence of Confucianism, in response to the world’s feminist movements and performance of its commitment to international treaties, the Government of Vietnam has made numerous efforts to institutionalize *gender equality* with different regulatory and policy measures. Certain achievements have been made in various areas, but actual *gender equity* in all walks of life continues to take decades to materialize, and similar lengths of time are expected to elapse before inequality in people’s mindset and behavior can demonstrate tangible changes.

This short talk has no ambition to cover the panorama of current gender equity in education in Vietnam; I merely am able to provide some highlights as illustration of the general remarks above. Accordingly, first, the paper will present exemplary efforts of the Government of Vietnam (GoV) through gender-related legislation and similar enactments on education. Then the paper briefly describes key achievements of gender equity in education before elaborating several issues to be addressed, and finally concludes with some recommendations to be taken.

I must admit that my paper is based largely on some key research and assessment reports accessible at this time, and thus cannot claim credits as original authors of this talk. Rather, I am here to report to you the results and findings from those researchers, most notably the kind provision of valuable data and essential inputs by Dr. Le Thi Quy, Director of the Center for Gender and Development, VNU, the *Reports by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on the implementation of CEDAW in Vietnam* (2006, 2012) and the World Bank’s *Vietnam Country Gender Assessment* released December 13th, 2011.

1. **Gender-related Legislation in Vietnam**
   1. **Law on Marriage and Family**

On Dec 23rd 1959 the Government submitted to the National Assembly the Bill on Marriage and Family (Public News Bulletin No 1, 1960). The Law on Marriage and Family 1959 (Act 13 on marriage – family) consists of 6 chapter and 35 articles. It stipulates principle issues in marriage, obligations and rights of spouses, the relations between parents and children, divorce, ensuring monogamy, free-of-will marriage, equality between men and women, protection of women and children’s interest, etc. (Art. 1); elimination of feudal remnants such as forced marriage and higher respect to men (Art. 2). Spouses are free to career choices, to political, cultural and social activities (Art. 14), and enjoy equal rights to property (Art. 15). The law also restricts divorce when the wife is in pregnancy or the baby is less than a year old (Art. 27). On Jan 3rd 1987 the Chair of the State Council promulgated the Law on Marriage and Family in Decision No 1 dated Dec 29th 1986. This law contains 10 chapters and 57 articles, with supplementation on identification of parents for children, adoption, guardianship/sponsorship, matrimonial and family relations between Vietnamese citizens and foreigners.

The Law on Marriage and Family 1986 is a continuation and further development of the Law on Marriage and Family 1959, which contributes to women liberation, development of truly democratic, harmonious, happy and sustainable family, promotion of the national construction and protection of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The Law 1986 really marks a comprehensive development.

Subsequently, the National Assembly of the SRV promulgated the Law on Marriage and Family No 22/ 2000/ QH10 dated September 6th 2000. This Law comprises 13 chapters and 110 articles, including expansion and supplementation on marriage, spousal relations, relations among parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, siblings and other family members; on life support; guardianship/ sponsorship among family members; and redress to violation. Compared to previous ones, the Law 2000 not only asserts the views of the Party and Government towards women and family, but highlights responsibilities of the State, individuals and families in the enforcement of the law as well. This has been considered the most progressive and comprehensive legislation on marriage and family in Vietnam to date.

* 1. **Law on Gender Equality**

On Nov 29th 2006 the National Assembly passed the Law on Gender Equality which came into effect on January 1st, 2007. The Law consists of 6 chapters and 44 articles, specifying the Goals of Gender Equality (GE); the State policies; State management agencies; Measures to ensure GE; inspection, monitoring and redress of violation against GE; state agencies and authorities as implementers; political, social, professional and mass organizations (PSPMOs); families; individuals; foreign organizations and individuals operating in Vietnam territories.

The aim of the Law on GE is *elimination of gender-based discrimination* and promotion of GE in all walks of social and family life, a localized concept from CEDAW. The Law affirms:

* Men and women have the same rights and responsibilities. Men shall not receive higher respect than women.
* Women are entitled to the same interests and access to education and health care as men.
* Pregnant women and women with babies and/or infants shall receive special care.
* Women are enabled to engagement in social activities like men.
* Men also do housework; housework is not regarded as solely women’s responsibility.
* No exploitation, oppression, maltreatment or beating shall be inflicted upon women.
* Men and women join hands and collaborate in building up happy families and prosperous society.
* Men and women are entitled to equal participation and equal shares of products made (Law on Gender Equality, 2007).

Especially, the Law identifies “Measures for Promotion of Gender Equality” (Art. 19, Chapter 3), which are influenced by Article 4 in CEDAW “Special temporary measures” to address current gender inequality and truly materialize GE. The rationale for these measures is based on both biological and social aspects: women are physically different from men, they have to be pregnant, bear and raise children; they have suffered from discrimination for thousands of years due to customs and traditions; they have little opportunity for education; they have to work hard and enjoy smaller shares of products than men. Therefore, the State offers priority policies to women in terms of health care in pregnancy, birth-giving and child rearing; in education, promotion and participation in social activities. The Law requires families and men to care for women when they are pregnant and give birth. They must be better fed and allowed to work less, etc. These are policies for exercising equity towards women.

The measures for GE promotion are to be implemented within certain time periods and terminated when GE goals have been delivered. The State also aims at gender mainstreaming in the development of legal and normative documents in order to improve the effective implementation of the Law on Gender Equality.

* 1. **The Law on Domestic Violence Prevention**

In November 2007, the National Assembly passed the Law on Domestic Violence (DV) Prevention which took effect on July 1st 2008. It comprises 6 chapters and 46 articles, namely Chapter 1: General Provisions; Chapter 2: Prevention of Domestic Violence; Chapter 3: Protection of and Support to DV Victims; Chapter 4: Responsibilities of Individuals, Families, Agencies and Organizations in DV Prevention; Chapter 5: Redress to Violations of DV Law, Complaints and Grievances; Chapter 6: Provisions on Implementation.

For the first time Vietnam has a separate law on education, prevention and penalty of a crime safeguarded by patriarchy for thousands of years, which has regarded it as “insignificant”, “trivial family matter”, “men’s right to education of their wife and children”. The Law is aligned with Article 3, Clause 1, 5a, 6 and general recommendation 19 of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Article 3 identifies principles for DV prevention; Article 4 deals with obligations of persons with violent acts; and Article 5 stipulates the rights and obligations of victims of violence. Most notably, the Law reflects equality without discrimination on the basis of sex of the perpetrator or the victim while specifying penalty and education to the perpetrator and assistance to the victim, which substantially differs from Vietnam feudal laws.

As clearly seen, the same acts of DV resulted in different punishments by the laws biased to more protection of the husband while in fact more husbands beat and kill wives than otherwise.

Unlike *Hong Duc Law* which only specified penalties, the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention emphasizes information and communication work to advocate DV prevention and education as the key measures. Apart from punishment, measures for reconciliation are highlighted in case of less serious acts. The Law also specifies the responsibilities of individuals, families, agencies and organizations in DV prevention. Apparently, the enactment is a great leap forward in Vietnam in the implementation of CEDAW.

* 1. **Gender Equity in Education**

As an effort to mainstream gender equality in education, the Law on Education 2005, which was amended in 2009 and 2010, contains several provisions related to gender equity. For example, Article 10 stipulates, “all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion, belief, sex, family origin, social status, economic circumstances, are entitled to equal rights to learning opportunities. The State exercises social equity in education, enables everyone to have access to education…” Article 11 also rules that families are responsible to enable their members to complete compulsory universal schooling, while various other articles in the law pay particular attention and priority to the poor, ethnic minorities, disadvantaged groups, people living with disabilities and other special groups in education and training. Currently, the draft for a new Law on Education is being prepared and discussed, which is expected to incorporate new developments and advances in stronger gender-related efforts.

Apart from these legislative instruments, educational institutions also have their regulations which further specify activities, policies and mechanism for realizing gender equity, and many have established Committees for the Advancement of Women in correspondence to national and sub-national models under the same name.

At our own Vietnam National University, **HA**noi (VNU), one of the four in the BESETOHA group (**BE**jing University, **SE**oul National University, the Universityof **TO**kyo, and VNU), similar establishments and undertakings have taken place. We have our own Committee for the Advancement of Women, and among VNU faculty, many women are professors and doctoral degree holders, and various important management and academic positions are assumed by women. Women with small infants enjoy lighter workloads, and all are encouraged to earn Master and Doctoral degrees at home and abroad. Unfortunately the data accessible to us at this time are not sex-segregated, so we fail to provide you with the exact figures in VNU as a whole.

The Faculty of English, VNU University of Languages and International Studies (ULIS), comprises of 158 female and only 8 male teachers. I am now Dean of the Faculty, assisted by all women Vice Deans and Heads and Deputy Heads of the various Departments. The reason I was elected as Dean of the Faculty was that at the time, I was the only one with a doctoral degree in the Faculty, not because I am male. Four teachers in our Faculty hold doctoral degrees, I and another man, and 2 women – this is the only “equality” in terms of educational title while in all other respects, the men in our Faculty account for a tiny share.

Thanks to these regulatory framework and efforts by the Government, authorities, agencies, organizations and people alike, several key achievements have been made. Following are some examples.

1. **Some Exemplary Achievements**

The *Reports by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) on the implementation of CEDAW in Vietnam* (2006, 2012) and the World Bank’s *Vietnam Country Gender Assessment* released December 13, 2011 remark that Viet Nam has undergone a major socio-economic transformation over the past quarter century, rising from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle income country. Today it continues to develop rapidly, becoming more integrated with the global ... [See More +](javascript:toggleExpand('abstract');) economy and undergoing significant regulatory and structural changes. Viet Nam has also made remarkable progress on gender equality, but important gender differences still remain. On the positive side Viet Nam has had considerable progress in addressing gender disparities in education, employment and health. The gender gap in earnings is lower in Viet Nam than in many other East Asian countries. Indeed by a number of measures, women's outcomes have improved significantly.

Vietnam’s *National Action Plan on Education for All* launched in 2003 aims at ensuring all children, especially girls in difficult areas and of ethnic minorities, have access to and completion of quality universal elementary school by 2015, elimination of gender discrepancies in elementary and middle schools by 2005, and reaching gender equity in education by 2015.

Gender discrepancies in enrollment have substantially reduced, as Table 1 shows. The percentage of girl students in science and engineering programs at tertiary educational institutions has increased, reflecting positive change in the attitudes towards gender-stereotyped occupations. Basically, gender imbalance in elementary school has been almost entirely eliminated in Vietnam as one of the goals in the *Dakar Framework for Action 2000 on Education for All* (Goal 5). The Government of Vietnam has issued policies to enhance access to education by girls and ethnic children, such as tuition fee reduction, stipend grants, textbook provision, priority in employment upon graduation, etc.

**Table 1. Percentage of Girl Students 2002-2003**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Enrollment Rate | Completion Rate |
| Elementary School | 47.49% | 47.57% |
| Middle School | 47.26% | 48.17% |
| High School | 47.36% | 47.17% |

(*Source: Reports by NGOs on Implementation of CEDAW in Vietnam, 2006, 2012)*

The system of special boarding schools for ethnic minority children have been established, with MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) reporting that 30% of students in these schools are girls of ethnic minority groups. Numerous non-formal education and training programs have been offered to mountainous areas as well.

The importance of education has been repeatedly highlighted in government plans and policy statements and the country has made remarkable progress on this front. The 2008 VHLSS shows continuation of the increase in educational attainment among younger cohorts of men and women (18-21) which were noted in 2004 and 2006 surveys. Women have caught up or surpassed men in terms of attaining junior college and university degrees. Younger cohorts of children entering school are also more likely to stay on to complete their secondary schooling. As a result, among the current school age children, Viet Nam has closed and even reversed gender gaps in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling.

Women have made major gains in educational enrolment, but are still highly segregated into particular fields. The only gender education gap that still exists is among certain ethnic minority groups. However there is a significant degree of segregation of men and women in their fields of study, which is connected to the significant segregation in terms of occupation and industry of employment as well. Another concern is that educational materials still promote gender stereotypes. Such concerns and challenges are described in the afore-mentioned reports below.

1. **Current Challenges**
   1. *Discrepancies and gender inequality in education among different regions and ethnic groups*: more women than men are illiterate, since efforts to eliminate illiteracy may not have paid sufficient attention to women. 87% of children between 6 and 14 years of age who do not go to school reside in rural areas and belong to ethnic minorities, especially among mountainous communities. Gender gaps widen as levels of schooling rise from elementary to graduate programs. Evidence shows that as many as one-third of ethnic minority girls do not complete elementary school, and 70% of school dropouts in these regions are girls as well. Several factors contribute to this situation: poverty, early or underage marriage, son preference, poor transport links, language barriers, poor teaching and facilities. Most importantly, educational expenses are significant, which causes difficulties to families, especially those with 2 – 3 school-aged children, resulting in more girls staying home than boys.

Gender disparities by age, ethnicity and location as well as to the content of education also remain. In terms of location, the Northwest region, which has highest levels of poverty, is also the only region reporting marked gender inequalities in education. Among 15-17 year olds, only 53% of girls remained enrolled in school compared to 68% of boys, reproducing a pattern of gender disadvantage noted in Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey (VHLSS) 2004 and 2006. As far as ethnicity is concerned, the Khmer/Cham and the Northern Mountain ethnic groups all report a female disadvantage in enrolment rates. This is a new development as far as Khmer/Cham groups are concerned and may reflect higher rates of wage employment among this group in 2008. Among the Hmong of kindergarten age, girls are less likely to attend school (72%) than boys (81%). Among the H’Roi minority the gender gap is 25 percentage points. There are also gender gaps in dropout rates among ethnic minorities, for example less than one fifth of H’Roi boys left school while more than 40% of girls did.

As further illustration of the situation above, a research by Truong Huyen Chi et al (2011: 36-37) describes:

Interviews point to a widespread negative view of education across all three ethnic groups, yet the Hmong appear the most critical of its benefit. Hmong parents who participated in a group discussion in Lao Chai agreed that learning is only for the purpose of knowing how to read in Vietnamese and being able to do basic math. Daughters, they agreed, should not continue schooling after the primary level. Most of girls in Lao Chai quit during or after primary school, a couple of years after which many of them get married at the age of 12-14. Another aspect that may hinder girls attending school is the poor school conditions, especially sanitary facilities. Poor quality teaching and the demand that they work both in and outside of the home, especially in handicraft retailing in Sa Pa, contribute to the major forces that keep Hmong students out of school. In their own words:

My father said that girls are born to work and to marry, while boys can study to become government civil servants… I married when I turned 15, so I quit school then. When I was at school, Kinh teachers used to get mad easily and beat us and forced us to memorize in Kinh language. (Thi, 16 years old)

I was ten years old at the start of first grade. When I was 12, I quit school to sell textile crafts; I still wanted to continue, but my father said I must stay home to look after my sick older brother and three younger siblings. (Binh, 14 years old)

I am now in third grade. At first, I sold handicrafts with my mother on the Cat Cat-Sin Chai route. I then joined friends to sell in Sa Pa. I like talking to [foreign] tourists since it is lots of fun. I’m often absent from school at the end of the week and sell through the weekend since there are lots of tourists then. I return to school on Monday. During the week, I help collect firewood and look after my siblings. I give half of money I make to my father and keep the other half. (Tuyet, 13 years old)

Not all Hmong parents, nonetheless, encourage their children to discontinue schooling. When they cannot afford it, they may have to choose which child will continue their education. Hoan, a 37 year-old Hmong man, decided to keep his only son and the first of the three daughters in school. For those families with better means, children go to school longer. For instance, Ngoc, a 54 year-old woman, and her husband made good money from a combination of various tourism-related jobs and thus managed to send their first son through ninth grade and their third daughter through seventh grade.

In the picture is another example: a 15-year-old housewife with a 1-year-old daughter, living high up on the rugged mountain with her husband’s family of 8 members in Ha Giang, the northernmost province in Vietnam, explained while tending her vegetable garden on the mountain slopes that she finished Grade 5 and had to stop since she did not have rice and fuel wood to bring to her semi-boarding school far from home (Mai Thanh Hai, 27th February 2012).



Gender disparities are evident in access to extra tuition which parents increasingly believe will improve grades and which has now become a mainstream educational activity, particularly among upper secondary school students. Among three of the four ethnic minority groups studied there is a clear case of male advantage in access to extra classes which are often taken in addition to regular schooling in order to improve children’s chances for attending higher quality secondary and post-secondary education.

* 1. *Women’s limited access to vocational training*: only 6% of women of 13 years of age or above can receive training compared to 9% among men of the same age. Women between 22-25 years old have lower access to vocational training than men (24% rural women vs. 30% rural men; 38% urban women vs. 51% urban men). The 2.9 million vocational trainees in 2001-2002 include only 30% women, and women account for three quarters of participants in non-technical training programs.

* 1. *Gender stereotypes which are still found in textbooks and curricula also limit women’s access to education and development opportunities:* UNESCO analysis of school text books indicated the presence of numerous gender biases, both of an obvious and subtle nature in the narrative text, illustrations and learning activities of primary school textbooks currently in use in Viet Nam – along with a number of examples of good practices in promoting gender equality. Most of the identified biases can be categorized as stereotypes and cases of invisibility or imbalance between genders. For instance, boys are presented in mathematics textbooks, particularly in illustrations, as ‘strong, masculine, leaders, able to use modern technology, able to work hard, interested in challenging and competitive sports, while girls are presented as singing and dancing, folding origami, able to use household equipment and do housework. In grade 1 to 5 textbooks, men and boys are usually ‘heroes/courageous, strong/able to do complicated and physically challenging jobs, knowledgeable/smart, naughty, creative, leaders’ while girls/women are presented as ‘weavers, nice and lovely, caring for someone (as teachers, nurses) clean and ordered, weak/emotional’.

While reviewing *English 12* – an English textbook for 12th Graders in Vietnam for comments and suggestions for improvement, I encountered similar examples of gender stereotypes, e.g., “*My mother is a very caring woman. She takes the responsibility for running the household. She is always the first one to get up in the morning to make sure that we leave home for school having eaten breakfast and dressed in suitable clothes. In the afternoon, after hospital, she rushes to the market, then hurries home so that dinner is ready on the table by the time Dad gets home. Dad is always willing to give a hand with cleaning the house. Unlike most men, he enjoys cooking.”* (Unit 1)

‘Cosmetic’ biases are also present in the textbooks, meaning that while there may be gender parity in textbook contents, more subtle biases still persist despite some superficial or apparent changes made as the result of previous revision processes. At the same time, examples of good practice were also cited from textbooks showing girls and boys working together and sharing tasks in a balanced way as well as work and life situations where boys and girls are depicted as equally trustworthy in achieving and fulfilling their potential.

3.4 *Gender disparities also persist in fields of study and employment*

Gender disparities also persist in fields of study. At tertiary levels, men are more likely to specialize in engineering, manufacturing, construction and services while women specialize in social sciences, education, humanities and the arts. 29% of men compared to 11% of women enrolled in tertiary degrees focused on engineering, manufacturing and construction while 41% of women compared to 26% of men specialized in social sciences, business and law. The 2006 data showed an even greater clustering of men in engineering. Only in general programs and health do we see similar degrees of clustering. Moreover, while gender parity has been achieved at undergraduate levels, only 30.5 percent of Masters’ degrees and 17.1 percent of PhDs were awarded to women in 2007.

Finally, the educational disadvantage of those in working age groups has implications for employment. According to the ILO (2010), 2.7% of the male labor force and 4.5% of the female labor force were illiterate in 2007. Larger gaps are to be found in access to technical education within the labor force. While overall levels increased between 2006 and 2007, 70.9% of the female work force still had no technical education in 2007 compared to 60% of the male. These gender gaps in basic literacy and lack of technical and vocational qualifications mean that working women face a major disadvantage relative to working men in today’s labor market.

1. **Recommendations**

The afore-mentioned reports propose the following recommendations:

4.1 Revise education curricula and materials to better promote gender equality.

Continued efforts are necessary to transform the content of educational materials and text books in order to break down gender stereotypes, encourage girls to enter various fields of study, address various aspects of sexuality and gender identity which contributes to gender-based violence, other forms of violation of women’s human rights, and sex selected abortions

4.2 Increase training and incentives for women to enter a broader range of occupations.

More efforts should be made to use vocational training to increase productivity of both men and women in the face of changing labor market demands. Pro-active measures should be taken to get encourage women to enter a more diverse set of occupations and industries. Public-private collaboration in the provision of training to young men and women, which brought training institutes into partnership with private sector firms, has proved particularly successful in other counties in getting young women into the labor market.

4.3 Enhance the implementation of poverty reduction programs with people’s participation to facilitate educational development in areas of ethnic minorities.

4.3 More financial aids from the Government to people, especially women, engaged in efforts to eliminate illiteracy as well as follow-up activities once illiteracy has been eliminated.

4.4 Continue the implementation of policies to provide educational support to children of ethnic minorities with very small population. Ensure equity in sending ethnic girls to boarding schools. Train more ethnic minority people to become teachers as well.

4.5 Strengthen the improvement of textbooks and curricula to make them more suitable to ethnic groups. Re-schedule schooling time to avoid impacts of severe weather and floods to ensure safety for children, and minimize school dropouts.

**5. Concluding remarks**

As shown through the paper, despite certain achievements, gender equity will be long to be reached in all spheres of life, particularly in people’s mind and acts. The situation may be better for women in some urban, more developed areas while girls and women in rural, remote and mountainous regions still experience much wider gaps and difficulties which limit their access to education opportunities, like those in the illustrations. Several targets have been set for Vietnam with 2015 as the intended year, and now it is already 2012, i.e. only three more years for these to be achieved, which is a huge challenge. Anyhow, we are optimistic that life is getting better for girls and women in our country, and improved gender equity in education will be more visible in the coming time. For our part, we are fully aware of the need to enhance equality and equity in education, and have been doing what we can to materialize these ideas in our own institutions, and trying to encourage others to do likewise.

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