

The success in improving the well-being of women and reducing gender disparities in Viet Nam has been impressive.⁷ According to national indicators on life expectancy, maternal mortality, basic education, and primary health care, the position of women compares favorably with that of neighboring countries and countries with a similar gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Table 1.1). Viet Nam ranked 108 out of 174 according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) gender-related development index, with a 5-point better ranking than for the Human Development Index.⁸ However, these national indicators say little about the pockets of gender inequality across the country—especially significant within poor households—and the challenges to female empowerment in the market economy and formal political system.

Table 1.1: Gender Statistics of Viet Nam and its Neighbors

Country	GDP/ Capita (\$)	Life Expectancy at Birth M–F ^a 1998	Maternal Mortality Rate per 100,000 Births 1990–1998	Female Adult Literacy (%)	Population Using Adequate Sanitation (%)	Population with Access to Essential Drugs (%)	Births Attended by Skilled Health Staff (%)
Cambodia	1,361	52–55			18	30	31
China, People's Republic of	3,617	68–72	85	75.5	38	85	
Hong Kong, China	22,090	76–82		89.7			225
India	2,248		410	44.5	31	35	
Indonesia	2,857	62–64	450	81.3	66	80	47
Lao PDR	1,471	52–55	650	31.7	46	66	
Malaysia	8,209	70–75	39	82.8	98	70	
Myanmar	1,027	58–62	230	80.1	46	60	
Nepal	1,237	58–58	540	22.8	27	20	32
Philippines		67–71	270	94.4	83	56	56
Singapore	20,767	75–79	6	88.0	100	100	100
Thailand	6,132	70–75	44	93.5	96	95	95
Viet Nam	1,860	66–71	160	91.0	73	85	77

^aM–F = male–female

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2000.

The apparent lack of gender disparity at the national level compared to the profound gaps between rural and urban populations, rich and poor, and Kinh and ethnic minorities is often used as a justification for dismissing gender-and-development (GAD) issues in Viet Nam. However, such judgments should be made cautiously.⁹

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) 1995 country briefing paper on women in Viet Nam¹⁰ pointed to the erosion of women's status as the market economy evolves. More recent GAD literature in Viet Nam affirms that analysis and points to increasing differentials between

men's and women's participation at the national level in strategically important areas, such as access to upper secondary education, technical and vocational education, state employment, access to credit and land, time worked, political representation, agriculture production, and family planning.¹¹ Of growing concern in Viet Nam is the revelation of entrenched gender-based violence both within and outside the home, and health risks associated with excessively high rates of abortion. More importantly, the limited data available indicate that the gender gap is greatest and growing within poor and disadvantaged households.¹²

Much progress has been made through the policies of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and the Government since the 1950s. Gender equality was institutionalized in the 1946 Constitution and has been enhanced in each constitutional reform and through legislation and regulations. Challenging the legacies of Confucian and French rule, Viet Nam reduced gender disparities in education, health, rights to property, access to income and resources, and participation in formal decision-making bodies. Under the VCP, women became major contributors to economic growth through high levels of participation in agriculture, handicraft production, trading, and labor force participation, supported by a degree of socialized childcare and household responsibilities.

Economic transition, which began in the 1980s, brought the unraveling of the cooperative agriculture system, which had the positive results of increased productivity and lower levels of poverty, especially in rural areas. However, with *doi moi* (policy of economic renovation), came economic competition and the user-pays principle. As a consequence, women's equitable position has been challenged. Reproductive responsibilities, such as childcare and household duties, were no longer met by the community but by the household; consequently, the length of women's working day increased. Women in the state sector are required to retire 5 years earlier than men, which disadvantages them in achieving seniority. Women lost their jobs at a faster rate than men with rationalization of the state sector and they were not compensated by increased access to productive resources relative to that of men in the growing nonfarm and private sector. For example, as cooperative land was divided among the community, men were issued land-use certificates. Credit was more easily obtained by men and men's greater mobility allowed them to search for employment opportunities further from home.

The user-pays principle for such services as health and education also disadvantaged women because of their reproductive role, resulting in higher demand than men for health services; and because the opportunity costs for education of females are higher than for males. The gender gap appears when these costs increase at the upper secondary level. Furthermore, with greater decision-making power allocated to the political machinery (including the National Assembly and the provincial, district, and commune levels), women's representation began to decline.

Although national statistics indicate an improvement in general well-being of men and women, improvement for women has lagged behind that of men in certain areas and social groups. Pockets of gender disparity are apparent particularly within the poorer communities where there is competition for scarce resources.

Statistical indicators of gender disparity either at the national or household level say little about changes in gender beliefs and practices and empowerment of women. In fact, social

attitudes of inequality remain and are reflected both within the public space of the paid workforce and, especially, within the private space of the family. In the workforce, men expect to be senior to women. Similarly, wives and daughters must defer to senior men especially in public.

The gender impact of *doi moi* is indeed complex and the situation is still in a state of flux. Data from different sources including the 1989 and 1999 censuses, the Viet Nam Living Standards Survey in 1993 (VLSS93) and 1998 (VLSS98), other surveys, and case studies are often contradictory. Nevertheless, it is clear that economic reform will continue in Viet Nam and agriculture will become a less significant economic activity. Nonfarm employment within both rural and urban areas will provide new opportunities for both women and men. As the economic transition continues, it is critical that women and men have equal chances to participate and that short-term as well as the more persistent gender disparities are redressed. This will come through equal access to all forms of education, especially business skills and information technology, and equal access to productive resources, such as credit and political decision making.

The overall situation is changing rapidly and statistically significant data are limited. Therefore, not surprisingly, analysis is still controversial (Desai 2000). What is less controversial is the disadvantage suffered by the poor, many of whom are ethnic minorities. Women within these households are the most disadvantaged in Viet Nam. The situation for many poor ethnic minority women has changed little as a consequence of *doi moi* and their position relative to men has deteriorated.

Undeniably, Viet Nam is still the leader in the subregion with respect to institutionalizing gender equity. For Viet Nam to maintain this position, at least three challenges arise for the Government:

- (i) maintenance of gender equity priorities as the State progressively withdraws from intervention in the daily lives of people with the implementation of economic reforms (e.g., labor allocation and childcare)—policies on gender equity imposed from above may be difficult to sustain as a culture of patriarchy reemerges;
- (ii) transparency in monitoring gender gaps in access to services, especially in the flagship sectors of health and education of the previous command economy; and
- (iii) development of new and innovative policies and programs to deal with the problems outlined at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, including domestic violence, choice of contraception, and women trafficking—a daunting task for any government.

In summary, although national indicators present a positive picture, areas of gender disparity exist, most clearly within the ethnic poor but also at the national level in vocational and technical education (VTE), upper secondary education, university, senior positions in bureaucracy, political representation, income levels, and hours worked. The sole focus on disparity and levels of participation of women—the methodology characteristic of the traditional women-in-development (WID) approach—reveals little about the effectiveness of women's participation and empowerment either in the public or private domain. It is argued here that more can be achieved in Viet Nam with respect to the effectiveness of women's participation and empowerment.