

The Government has made impressive progress toward narrowing the gender gap according to a number of national indicators. Benefits for women are seen in, for example, increased income and the establishment of women's health clinics. Access to productive resources and services such as education and general health care has also improved. In some areas, women's empowerment may have increased, but it has decreased in other areas, especially in political representation. There is little evidence to suggest that women, especially rural and ethnic minority women, have become empowered. The high levels of domestic violence and the lack of decision making by women regarding family planning suggest that within the family at least, women have not experienced significant empowerment.

These findings show that gender inequity is more significant in Viet Nam than national statistics indicate. The impressive levels of many indicators in health and education, for example, overshadow some of the incremental yet real dynamics of change in some of these indicators. The country is in transition from a command to socialist market economy and with this comes new relations to productive resources. Strategically important economic sectors include the new enterprise development in the private sector, the associated access to secondary schooling and VTE, and access to political decision making through more independent committee structures at all levels.

*Doi moi* has been in operation for just over 10 years; the long-term gender impact of reforms is not yet clear. Furthermore, problems exist with the quality of the data, especially in rural and remote areas, and this is critical when changes are incremental. Data are unreliable due to problems of collection (i.e., some areas are inaccessible and some populations are too small to be represented adequately). Some indicators reveal changes in benefits and access, but benefits and participation do not ensure empowerment or compliance with legislation.

The Government is committed to gender issues through a top-down approach of legislation and policy formation. However, caution is required as the State withdraws from the daily lives of people, because gender disparities may increase if unchecked. Also, it appears that gender issues are being subsumed under a poverty reduction focus. For example, the recent Socioeconomic Development Plan for 2010 makes no specific mention of gender. The concern is that gender mainstreaming without rigorous policies and checks in place may undermine or reverse progress to date.

It is clear that as nonfarm rural enterprise is becoming more economically attractive, women are being left behind in the less dynamic agriculture sector with less access to extension services. Women have been less inclined to diversify agriculture production in order to increase their income-earning capacity. Impediments such as access to credit and entrepreneurial skills exist. Women also are less successful in establishing small and medium enterprises in the formal sector and concentrate in informal sector activities of trade and handicraft production. Women are disadvantaged due to lack of resources including labor time, management skills, and knowledge about the market, networks, and credit. The fact that most rural women work twice as long as men (in agriculture and household duties) is a major constraint on their capacity to capitalize or undertake business opportunities. In addition, limited access to credit forces them into the

informal market. This may be because the loans required are smaller and/or the status of women as borrowers is less.

Agriculture has limited capacity to absorb more labor and a crisis is developing around both the shortage and increasing fragmentation of household land. A recent trend among younger women, at least among the Kinh, is to join their male counterparts in leaving the countryside in search of employment. Job opportunities for young women as housekeepers, in restaurants, and street trading have increased in urban areas. The growth of textile and clothing industries among state, private, and foreign-invested enterprises has also provided new employment opportunities for young women.

For women to participate fully in economic development, education is critical. There is a direct relationship between poverty and low levels of education. Differentials in access to education for boys and girls are higher among the poor and the differences are exacerbated at the higher education levels. Limited access to VTE and technical subjects in higher education may reduce the ability of women to participate more fully in technical fields.

Women have a greater individual demand for health services because of their reproductive role and the high incidence of infection from intrusive methods of population control. When the user-pays principle was introduced into Viet Nam, the poor were reluctant to use health services and withdrew into self-treatment with nonprescribed medicines. An associated impact was that women bore the burden of taking care of sick children and the elderly in the home.

The Government is beginning to deal with such sensitive issues as gender-based violence and women trafficking, and is increasing the choice of contraception in order to reduce the extremely high rate of abortion, the low level of use of condoms, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. These issues require sensitive handling. ADB can contribute to the alleviation of these problems at the policy and legislative level, and include their consideration in health projects and as standard safety measures for all projects, especially road construction.

Three strategic directions, which impinge on a number of ongoing and proposed projects, are identified as focal points for ADB's gender activities:

- Encourage women to participate in agriculture diversification and rural enterprise development.
- Improve gender equity and empowerment through equal access to secondary education and VTE.
- Develop gender-sensitive policy that both empowers women and improves their access and benefits.