

Country Briefing Paper

WOMEN IN VIET NAM

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This report is one of a series on the status and role of women in developing member countries of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The primary purpose of the series is to provide information on conditions facing women in these countries in order to assist ADB staff in formulating country strategies and programs, and in project design and implementation.

Women in Viet Nam was prepared by a consultant, Stephanie Fahey, Director, Research Institute for Asia and the Pacific, University of Sydney, in close collaboration with Shireen Lateef, Principal Social Development Specialist, and Alessandro Pio, Principal Programs Officer, ADB. Nguyen Nhat Tuyen (ADB) provided valuable assistance in the field and with data collection. Special thanks are due to Mia Hyun of the National Committee for the Advancement of Women, and to the many Vietnamese government officials who provided information and helpful advice. Ces Sanieel and Bong Reclamado provided production assistance. Editing assistance was provided by Jay Maclean.

The report updates the information contained in an earlier publication, *Women in Development: Viet Nam*, published by ADB in 1995.

It is hoped that the series will also be useful to government and nongovernment organizations and individuals working in the field of gender and development.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	-	Asian Development Bank
CEDAW	-	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CFAW	-	Committee for the Advancement of Women
CIDA	-	Canadian International Development Agency
FAO	-	Food and Agriculture Organization
GAD	-	gender and development
GDP	-	gross domestic product
GCOP	-	Government Committee on Organization and Personnel
GSO	-	General Statistics Office
MARD	-	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MOLISA	-	Ministry of Labor, Invalids, and Social Affairs
NCFAW	-	National Committee for the Advancement of Women
NGO	-	nongovernment organization
POA1	-	National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women 2005
POA2	-	National Gender Strategy and Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women 2001–2005
RNE	-	Royal Netherlands Embassy
SIDA	-	Swedish International Development Agency
TWG	-	technical working group (MARD)
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	-	United Nations Fund for Population Activities
VBARD	-	Viet Nam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development
VCP	-	Vietnamese Communist Party
VTE	-	Vocational and Technical Education
VLSS93	-	Viet Nam Living Standards Survey, 1992/93
VLSS98	-	Viet Nam Living Standards Survey, 1997/98
VWU	-	Viet Nam Women’s Union
WB	-	World Bank
WID	-	women in development

NOTE

In this report, “\$” refers to US dollars.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Viet Nam has made good progress in improving the well-being of women and reducing gender disparities. The Government has made impressive advances in narrowing the gender gaps in terms of improved income and access to productive resources, education, and health care. However, gender gaps continue to exist. Overall, health and education indicators for women are worse than for men, wage differentials persist, and women are underrepresented in the formal labor market. Differences are also apparent in state employment, access to credit and land, time worked, political representation, and decision making.

Pockets of gender disparity are apparent, particularly within poorer communities where competition over scarce resources exposes and reinforces gender inequalities. Gender disparity also appears in national-level statistics within particular areas and these disparities are magnified within poor households. For example, inequity exists for girls in general in upper secondary, vocational and technical, and university education. Disparity also exists in hours worked (including in the home) and income received. The most disadvantaged women are those in poor rural areas, remote and mountainous areas, and members of ethnic minority communities.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STATUS OF WOMEN

At present, 90% of adult males and 79% of adult females are literate. Of children aged more than 5 years old, 12% of girls and 7.5% of boys have never attended school, and these proportions have remained remarkably constant over the past 20 years. Gender gaps are prominent among the poor and ethnic minorities and in rural areas of the Northern Uplands, the Mekong Delta, the Central Coast and Central Highlands, due to school fees and the opportunity cost of child labor. While the gender gap is closing for higher education, it persists in vocational and technical education (VTE), and signs of sex segregation in upper secondary and university education are becoming more obvious, with females clustering in pedagogy, social sciences, and linguistics, while males dominate technical and scientific courses. This segregation potentially disadvantages women from fully participating in new industries, such as information technology, biotechnology, and application of new materials.

Great advances have been made in access to health facilities, which benefits women directly because they need health services more than do men. However, pockets of disadvantage exist in remote areas and for the poor who cannot afford the fees introduced during economic reform (*doi moi*). Women's greater demand for health services because of their reproductive role and their susceptibility to reproductive tract infections means that the lack of health care services has a greater impact on women. Fee for service, ineffective implementation of the fee exemption program, and inequitable budget allocation mechanisms have resulted in unequal access to quality health care. The fees and charges for these services are often out of the reach of the poorest families; they may forego accessing services and self-treat themselves and their children.

Common health problems for ethnic minority women and their families include malaria, malnutrition,¹ and respiratory and gynecological infections. These result in high levels of maternal mortality, obstetric complications, and maternal and child malnutrition. In resource-constrained households, women's share of food is lower than that of men. Although more than

50% of families now use modern contraception methods, one of the major health risks to women is the dominance of intrusive forms of contraception (intra-uterine devices) and family planning (abortion). It is estimated that 40% of pregnancies are terminated,² the highest rate in the world (2.5 per woman).³

New issues for women's health are emerging with increasing awareness of promiscuity and domestic violence. In an environment where the use of condoms is not common and intravenous drug use is a significant problem, the risks of contracting HIV/AIDS have also grown. The fight against HIV/AIDS is intrinsically linked with women's empowerment. In 2000, 14% of HIV cases in the country were women, and the prevalence of HIV in female sex workers was 4%.⁴ Domestic violence is clearly a health issue for women. In recent years, official reports of domestic violence have increased and are more likely to be heard in court.

There is no formal barrier to women's participation in the electoral process. Although representation of women elected to positions at the local level has increased, it is still low relative to their presence in the National Assembly. Women are poorly represented in strategic decision-making bodies such as party committees. There are no women in the Politburo and the proportion of women in the Central Committee has declined. Overall, the political decision-making role of women has deteriorated.

PARTICIPATION IN THE ECONOMY AND LEGAL RIGHTS

Women's labor force participation rates have been high since the war. However, since *doi moi* and improved economic conditions, their participation in the formal economy has declined. Economically active women are concentrated in agriculture where they contribute more hours of labor than do men to cultivation, livestock breeding, agriculture processing, and marketing of agriculture produce. Yet, they have only limited access to extension services. Since 1993, male farm employment has declined and the number of female farmers has increased.⁵ It is clear that as nonfarm enterprises are becoming more economically attractive, women are being left behind in the less dynamic agriculture sector.

Wage employment opportunities in rural areas are limited for women. Women are also less successful in establishing small and medium enterprises in the formal sector because of lack of resources including labor time, management skills, knowledge of the market, access to credit, and land. Less than one tenth of economically active women are now employed by the State. During the initial years of *doi moi*, it is estimated that female labor accounted for 70% of the loss from the state sector, and by 1999 only 42% of state employees were women. Women work about the same time in income-earning activities but earn 14% less than men per month.⁶ These differentials decreased during the 1990s, although differences persist in the latter years of the working life cycle.

According to the 1996 Constitution and relevant laws, women and men are granted equal rights with respect to economic opportunities, marriage and family matters, political participation, public administration, and ownership of property including land. The 2000 Law on Marriage and Family stipulates that land-use certificates for household common land must list the names of both spouses, indicating shared possession. However, the 1993 Land Law, which predates it, does not mention co-ownership, and in 80% of cases, land-use certificates in rural areas are registered

in the name of the male household head. This can make it more difficult for women to access credit and pursue business opportunities. Although women have equal property rights, they are often disadvantaged due to social factors, which cut across and often contradict the legislation, whose enforcement is often left to the discretion of local officials.

GOVERNMENT POLICY AND PROGRAM ON WOMEN

The Government has adopted a Gender Strategy and National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women 2001–2005 (POA2), which is the most important gender-specific planning document. The Plan outlines 6 objectives and activities in the areas of employment and economic status for women, education and training, health, leadership and decision making, women's rights, and strengthening the national machinery. Each ministry has a Committee for the Advancement of Women, responsible for drafting ministry-based gender strategies and action plans to promote and facilitate gender mainstreaming. The Viet Nam Women Union (VWU), a mass organization with more than 11 million members, operates at the commune, district, provincial, and national level. In addition to its mandate of raising awareness and advocacy at the grassroots level, the VWU has become more involved in implementing programs and projects.

ADB'S GENDER STRATEGY

The areas of more relevant gender gap in Viet Nam include (i) limited access to extension, credit, and land in the agriculture sector, where the female labor force is more prevalent, and difficulties in pursuing nonfarm employment prospects; (ii) lower enrollment in secondary and vocational/technical education, which in turn limits the potential for female employment and their voice in fertility choices; and (iii) creeping under-representation in state employment and in government decision-making positions. ADB's country strategy and program, which focuses on economic growth through rural and private sector development, equalization in human capital endowments through universal lower secondary education, and improved governance with special emphasis on public administration reform, is well suited to addressing these gaps by mainstreaming these concerns in ADB operations, as in the following recommendations:

- (i) In its operations in support of agriculture and rural development, ADB will strive to create a level playing field for men and women in the diversification of agriculture production and the development of rural enterprises, through a focus on equal access to agriculture inputs, extension services, skills training, and productive resources such as land and credit.
- (ii) In its operations in the social sector, ADB will ensure that gender equity and empowerment are promoted through equal access to secondary education and VTE. The choice of subjects will not be sex segregated. Achievement in secondary education is expected to lead to improved labor force participation, better control of contraception and fertility, and greater ability to overcome poverty. By promoting accessible health care and its equitable financing, ADB will also be benefiting women directly, given their greater dependence on health services during their reproductive years.
- (iii) In the area of governance, ADB will contribute to gender mainstreaming in all government policies and programs, through gender-capacity building support to relevant

government agencies and ensuring that all ADB assistance is gender inclusive. The focus will be on ensuring that civil service and public administration reform does not adversely affect women and that the reforms undertaken support the Government's gender mainstreaming goals.

IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY THROUGH ADB OPERATIONS

The three areas of focus above—agriculture and rural development, socially inclusive development, and governance—are targeted to create benefits for women, greater equity for women in access to resources and services, and the empowerment of women both within the public and private domain. The aims of the strategy can be achieved by incorporating gender concerns into ongoing and proposed projects, which lend themselves to these strategic priorities.

The proposed approach will be implemented mostly by mainstreaming gender considerations into ADB projects, with particular attention to those in agriculture and rural development, small and medium enterprises, secondary education, health services and financing, and public administration reform. The routine conduct of gender analysis will be actively promoted in the design stage to ensure that women's needs are met and more effectively integrated. Collection of sex-disaggregated data at the design and benefit monitoring and evaluation stages will be required. Special components will be designed and resources allocated, where women are identified as a clear target group.

Following are more specific recommendations.

Agriculture and Rural Development

Given women's significant role in the agriculture sector, ADB assistance will be designed to be responsive to women's roles, priorities and needs, and to ensure equal access to resources such as seeds, fertilizers, information, new technology, and extension services. Women's distinct role and responsibilities in the sustainable use of natural resources, as key resource users and managers, will be supported. For example, community awareness programs will be developed with women as a specific target group; women will be actively encouraged to participate in land-use planning, social forestry, and other income-earning opportunities; and provision will be made for women's access to and control over natural resources. Poverty reduction initiatives will include a focus on reducing female poverty. Possible approaches include development of strategies to increase and enhance women's employment prospects in the informal sector, promoting rural nonfarm employment and income-generating opportunities, and providing greater access to credit. Community-based livelihood projects to address food security, crop and livestock diversification, and microfinance will be developed with poor women as a target group.

Socially Inclusive Development

The focus will be on improving access to and retention rates in secondary schooling and VTE for girls, especially poor and ethnic minority girls and women. To achieve these aims, ADB projects will explore mechanisms such as fellowships, application of affirmative actions principles, stipends, and targets. Girls' entry into nontraditional fields such as science,

technology, and vocational and technical courses will be supported, through priority for female access to VTE and design of appropriate curricula to provide girls with realistic marketable skills.

Governance

Improvements in governance and participation in decision making to become gender inclusive will be supported. The POA2 goals of gender mainstreaming in sectoral ministries through the review of skills mix and requirements and policy and planning procedures will also be supported directly or indirectly.