

Achieving Social Equality for Women in Vietnam Today: Some Lesson Learned

Nga Nguyen Thi

PhD, Institute of Philosophy, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics

Oanh Hoang Thi Kim

PhD, Institute of Philosophy, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics

Abstract

Achieving social equality for women is one of the most crucial Millennium Development Goals in many countries all over the world. In contemporary Vietnam, social justice is taken into consideration in various angles, in which women's social justice is an issue mattered to the Party and the State. In fact, Vietnam has made remarkable achievements in the implementation of social justice for women in many fields such as economics, politics and education. This study, however, also addresses many challenges faced by Vietnam in implementing social justice for women, which include (1) The difference in the proportion of men and women participating in economic activities, management leadership at all levels participation is still quite high; (2) Women's more disadvantage than men and their lack of receiving necessary conditions to contribute to their worth; (3) Women's social injustice through the smaller percentage of girls in primary and secondary school in comparison to boys, especially in poor and ethnic minority areas, etc. By analyzing the underlying influencing factors of the situation in Viet Nam, the article suggests core solutions to improve social justice for women and girls in contemporary Vietnam, which include training women with essential skills, sharing women's workload by infrastructure and services, strengthening the implementation and the supervision of Law on Gender Equality and the National Strategy for Gender Equality, focusing on more effective propaganda and education on gender equality, As a result, women will fully realize their potential and, therefore, contribute more to social life.

Keywords: social equality for women, women's social justice, Social justice for Vietnamese women

1. Introduction

On November 26th 2017, "Resolution 62/10" was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in the 62th session addressing the annual 20th of May, starting from 2009, to be "World Day of Social Justice". This shows special and universal concern of the society upon this subject. In Vietnam recently, social justice is taken into consideration from various angles, in which social justice for women is an issue mattered to the Party and the State. The Party and the State is taking positive steps in promoting social justice, contributing to realize the goal of "rich people, strong nation; democratic, equitable and civilized society".

2. Some Fundamental Achievements in Performing Social Justice for Women in Vietnam

In terms of economics: Women participate in all stages, procedures and sectors in producing both material and spiritual possessions for family and society. The female labor force participation rate is moderately high. According to a report by General Statistics Office, the national labor force aged above 15 consists of 54.61 million workers (updated to February 1st 2016), in which male makes 51.7% and female 48.3% (Tran, 2015). Vietnamese women have participated in nearly all professions and areas including man-predominant fields such as research, engineering application and advanced technology (female participation rate in science is approximately 40% and female scientist reaches 6%) (People's Army Newspaper, 2017). Moreover, women account for a great portion in the work force of many careers, for example, 60.9% in education, 57.52% in medical and healthcare, 50.32% in industry, 65.5% in commercial service, 51.75% in finance and credit (Vietnam Women's Union, 2011)... There is no big distinction between male and female workers in the average hour pay rate. Vietnam is one of the leading countries in women's participation in economic activities with the rate of over 60% of the labor workforce are females managing household economy; 70% working in the textile and garment industry; 80%

taking part in food and fishery industry and 50% in finance and banking, information and communication, commerce and tourism, etc. There are an increasing number of women holding executive positions in big corporations. Vietnam currently ranks 7th in the percentage of female CEO with 31.4%, higher than China (with 30.9%) and the USA (with 30.7%) (Thuy, 2017). The Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2016 has shown that Vietnam ranks 33th among the top 144 countries with the greatest success in closing the gap between women and men in economics (Truc, 2017).

In politics: Nowadays, more and more female representatives are joining the executive board in the Party system, the State Administrative Agencies and the people's elected bodies. The Vice President has always been a female in Vietnam since 1999. The rate of having women as Ministers, Deputy Ministers or Director Generals is also rising rapidly. At various local levels, women's attendance rate in the People's Council or People's Committee increases in local governments and some even have female presidents. The percentage of female participation in National Assembly has always been considerably high. From an overall view, in recent years, Vietnam is one of few countries of the Asia-Pacific region in which women accounts for over 25% of the parliamentarians. The number of women with major responsibilities in National Assembly increases promptly in recent tenures. For instance, in the Fourteenth National Assembly, among 496 people elected, there are 133 women, who make 26.80%, increasing by about 2% from the last tenure (24.4%). Especially in 2016, the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam welcomed the first chairwoman: Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan (Bui, 2016).

In education: Vietnam has generally eradicated gender gap. Women and young girls are encouraged to enhance their cultural and educational background equally to men. According to many statistics, Vietnam has succeeded in raising the rate of female students at various levels of education. Specifically, at the moment, the percentage of girls studying in elementary schools is 91.5%, 82.6% in secondary and 63.1% in high schools; while it is respectively 92.3%, 80.1% and 53.7% with boys. Female university gradulators is 36.24%, Masters: 33.96% and PhDs: 25.69% (Dang, 2015).

In family: women's role is being promoted remarkably. Women are respected and involve more in making essential decisions and incomes. In urban-area families, men and women are holding equal positions by sharing mutual tasks in household chores or children upbringing. Nowadays, it is normal for husbands to go shopping for food, to cook or to wash the dishes. Social awareness of male and female's functions is raised. Vietnam is acknowledged as a country which has successfully protected women against domestic violence by carrying out gender mainstreaming programs, policies and laws in order to support women's power and financial independence; fighting for women's rights and freedom; establishing Caring Centers for abused victims such as Mental Therapy Center or Women's Health Care Center, which are operating effectively.

Vietnam's Communist Party and State's effort in maintaining gender equality has been internationally recognized. In United Nations' 2016 report on gender inequality index, Vietnam ranks 65th over 144 countries. We also achieved the Millennium Development Goals of gender equality and women position promotion before due in the year 2015 (Minh, 2015).

3. The Challenges

Despite being highly recognized as one among many countries in East Asia with the most extensive change in eliminating gender gap, achieving gender equality is still facing numerous obstacles due to various reasons.

In economics, the number of women participating in economic activities is still lower than men. Work quality of women is not yet stable and sustainable. That almost all female workers are employed in poor qualification or insecure areas is stated in the research of the Institute of Labor Science and Social Affairs (Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs). Women working in textile and garment, service, etc. make 70% of the workforce. The proportion of female workers in informal sectors is quite high, with 62.4% working in unpaid and self-employed families, 41.1% doing simple jobs (Hang, 2017). The monthly average salary of female workers (about 4.58 million VND) is lower than that of male workers (5.19 million VND). The rate of unemployed women after the age of 35 is quite high which should be taken into consideration. A recent study by the Institute of Laborers and Trade Union of Vietnam found that up to 80% of women over 35 years of age in industrialized areas were laid off or quit the jobs, of which 59.6% receive low payment which is not enough to live on; 39.1% were dismissed due to work pressure and job retrenchment, 22,65% suffer forced leave. The study also found that the higher the age, the greater the likelihood of job loss (Anh, 2017).

In politics, even though Vietnam ranks high in congresswoman rate, there is still a big gap between the percentage of male and female leadership and management at various levels, especially in executive positions (men are 3 times as much as

women). Disapproval coming from family or the society prevents women from taking part in social and political activities, especially in mountainous areas, ethnic minorities communities, electing female representatives to people-elected agencies is a significant impediment.

In education, gender gap is still significant, especially in remoted areas, areas with difficulties. The rate of female students in mountainous areas is low (the rate of illiteracy among women aged from 15 to 40 is higher than that of men, especially in Northern midland and mountainous).

There is a great gender disparity at higher levels of education. According to data from the Central Vietnam Women's Union, in 2013, the proportion of women with university degrees nationwide is accounted for 36.24%; Masters: 33.95%, PhD: 25.69%. The percentage of women who get the title of Associate Professor and Professor over the years is much lower than that of men. From 2011 to 2015, only 23.06% female professors, associate professors are recognized (Nguyen, 2016). Currently, the proportion of male professors and associate professors is male accounted for 83.5% and females accounting for only 16.5%.

With reference to the course book system, there are still many vivid illustrations of gender inequality; for instance, teaching females that household chores and raising children should be their responsibility while going out and socializing is just for male or using pictures and posters with discrimination acts on which the father watches TV and the mother does all the housework.

In family, attaining equal treatments for women and men remains insufficient as domestic violence is not yet eliminated entirely in places like the countryside. The stereotypes of women who must stay home and take care of everyone, give birth to a boy and are not allowed to make important decisions still exists along with gender prejudice.

4. Fundamental Causes of the Shortcomings

First, the culture of patriarchalism and the promotion of the traditional role of men are invisible barriers that have profound implications for the realization of social justice for women.

Gender stereotypes and male preferences ideology in society with specific manifestations such as: preferring sons to daughters; taking care of the family, the children and the parents are considered as women's responsibilities; men are family's breadwinners who can shoulder and solve all big issues in the family... lead to the fact that women are in a more disadvantaged position and inequality than men. In many organizations, women are not promoted to managerial positions (even if they are qualified), because many still think that only men can take up important tasks, while women should only do light work to have time for their family. This idea is not only in the people, but also in leaders, especially in a group of women who are also prejudiced with women. So, in elections, the men who beat women off the electoral roll are not men, but women.

Second, there remains a gap between legal provisions on equality and justice for women and the enforcement of those rules in practice.

According to international standards, Vietnam has a fairly comprehensive legal system and policy framework for gender equality. However, there are still legal barriers to women. For example, the regulation saying "First-time public servant appointment must not exceed 55 years old for men and 50 years old for women" restricts the opportunity for women to be appointed to the position of leadership, management, whether they have the capability as men. Or the retirement age regulation of 60 for men and 55 for women is also a hindrance for women in their process of striving, working, and dedicating.

Commenting on this, a research stated three issues relating to such retirement age to be considered by organizations and employers. First, taking into consideration the effectiveness of investment, fostering a female cadre is not beneficial to a male cadre, as the working time of men is longer than 5 years. Second, in terms of numbers, the higher the managerial position, the fewer female candidates for that position than male candidates. Third, in terms of correlation, considering two male and female candidates on the same terms, female candidates are more restrictive than men in terms of experience, simply because they are 5 years younger. Thus, the age regulation places women on an unequal "race" with terms that discriminate against women, and the winners are always male, since at the final state, men have no competitors because their female competitors are eliminated 5 years before (Nguyen, 2013).

As another example, the Law on Marriage and Family of Vietnam bans violent acts among family members and premature marriage. However, the phenomenon of maltreatment, mental abuse of men to women in the majority of families has not been severely punished according to law. Premature marriage in rural, mountainous and ethnic minority areas is quite common. According to a current survey, up to 40 out of 53 ethnic minority groups have an average rate of premature marriage of more than 20%, in which 10 groups have a higher rate of premature marriage (20-30%), 11 groups at 30-40%, 13 groups at 40-50% and 6 groups at 50-60% (Mai, 2017). One of the reasons is that 37% of interviewees do not know about the Marriage and Family Law; 63% say they have heard but do not know what the law says.

In addition, although there are policies and regulations that provide incentives for women workers, those policies and regulations have not been implemented or difficult to implement in practice. For example, the tax incentives for businesses employing more female workers, or the regulation of enterprises employing more female workers must have kindergartens or support payments for women whose children are at kindergarten age are not implemented by business owners. Most businesses admit that they cannot arrange time for their female workers' contingency professional training (Government Decree No. 23/CP, 1996).

Although Vietnam has a policy system to create favorable conditions and opportunities for women, in practice, the policy monitoring and implementation for female workers is still limited. Many enterprises still violate the law on working time and rest time for female workers but not being handled. According to a survey conducted by the Labor Protection Committee and the Women's Union of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor, up to 76% of female workers work overtime, of which 300-400 hours of overtime work per year in textile, garment, seafood enterprises is quite popular. In quite a number of businesses, female workers have to work from 500 to 600 extra hours per year (Hoang, 2011).

Due to low income, female laborers have to work extra hours to increase their income. However, based on this, many employers require female workers to sign overtime agreements, many of whom are required to work overtime from 31 to 60 hours per month. Due to work pressure, many female workers do not even have time to go to rest-rooms, drink water or have enough food... Many women workers do not have a rest time in during their period. Many women workers who are coming to the birth month still have to work in loading and unloading bricks or stoves, where there is smoke, dust, exhaust gas....

Third, work pressure coming from family and society is a barrier, so women have to "accept being left behind" compared to men.

In fact, in order to fulfill at the same time both family and work responsibilities, many women have double responsibilities and time to work in comparison to men (average working time of women is 13 hours per day while men's time is only about 9 hours). Thus, women have less time to study, relax, enjoy and participate in social activities than men.

The burden of family work prevents women from having time to improve their professional capability so that they can be further promoted in their career. Especially, in the period of industrialization - modernization and current vigorous and deep international integration, like men, women need to have good professional knowledge, foreign language and computer skills as well as sensitivity, flexibility, creativity in work... To do that, women need more time. Meanwhile, the work of the family is still considered a heavy responsibility of women. That easily explains why many well-educated women give their way to and back up their husbands in taking care of their family, just to keep their "happiness". Many women accept lag or strive to be modest only at the level of accomplishment for family reasons. It is also the same reason why at similar level of education, men develop better, have higher positions and have more opportunities for professional training than women. This is one of the main reasons leading to the fall of women in education, training, science and technology, and in leadership and management in Vietnam. In order to fulfill their role, women have to shorten their time for leisure, culture activities and skill improvement. This is a disadvantage and unfair in opportunities for women.

Addressing these underlying causes, our research wants to show that if governments of various levels and sectors join hands and have positive, realistic and effective policies in place ensuring equality for women; if the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality and the National Strategy for Gender Equality is better controlled and monitored; if the promotion of gender equality is more effective enabling women be free from prejudices and social barriers; if women are given equal opportunities to men and women are given equal access to various types of training and fostering; if women are supported in doing housework by improving the infrastructure and services and sharing with men, they can definitely develop all

capabilities, qualities, promote their potentials, participate in contributing to the development of society like men. This is social justice for women.

References

- [1] Anh, Q. (2017, March 29). Bấp bênh lao động nữ [Female unstable labouring]. [Online] Available: <http://www.congdoan.vn/tin-tuc/doi-song-cong-nhan-503/bap-benh-lao-dong-nu-182904.tld>
- [2] Bui, H.T. (2016, March 31). Tân Chủ tịch Quốc hội với lời tuyên thệ thiêng liêng dưới cờ Tổ Quốc [The New President of the National Assembly with the sacred oath under the national flag]. [Online] Available: <http://dantri.com.vn/blog/tan-chu-tich-quoc-hoi-voi-loi-tuyen-the-thieng-lieng-duoi-co-to-quoc-20160331174759748.htm>
- [3] Dang, A.T. (2015, October 20). Bình đẳng giới trong chính trị ở Việt Nam: Thực trạng và giải pháp [Gender Equality in Vietnam politics: Real situation and Solutions]. [Online] Available: <http://www.tapchiconsang.org.vn/Home/Thong-tin-ly-luan/2015/35730/Binh-dang-gioi-trong-chinh-tri-o-Viet-Nam-Thuc-trang-va.aspx>
- [4] Government Decree No. 23/CP (1996, April 18); Government Decree No. 85/2015/NĐ-CP (2015, October 1)
- [5] Hang, T. (2017, March 4). Trên 41% lao động nữ làm những công việc đơn giản [Over 41% of the female workforce is in charge of simple task]. [Online] Available: <https://thanhnien.vn/kinh-doanh/tren-41-lao-dong-nu-lam-nhung-cong-viec-don-gian-804599.html>
- [6] Hoang, T. (2011, June 6). Lao động nữ vật lộn với cuộc sống [Female workers struggle with life]. [Online] Available: <https://baotintuc.vn/xa-hoi/lao-dong-nu-vat-lon-voi-cuoc-song-20110606092902177.htm>
- [7] Mai, T. (2017, June 29). 40/53 dân tộc thiểu số có tỷ lệ tảo hôn trên 20% [40/53 ethnical minorities have child marriage rate of over 20%]. [Online] Available: <http://giadinh.net.vn/dan-so/40-53-dan-toc-thieu-so-co-ty-le-tao-hon-tren-20-20170629171727948.htm>
- [8] Minh, T. (2015, September 22). Kết quả 15 năm thực hiện Mục tiêu Phát triển Thiên niên kỷ của Việt Nam [The outcome of 15 year implementation of the Millennium Development Goals of Vietnam]. [Online] Available: <http://www.mpi.gov.vn/Pages/tinbai.aspx?idTin=29159&idcm=188>
- [9] Nguyen, T. B (2016, April 25). Nữ trí thức và bình đẳng giới ở Việt Nam [Female intellectuals and gender equality in Vietnam]. [Online] Available: <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/thuc-tien/item/1430-nu-tri-thuc-va-binh-dang-gioi-o-viet-nam.html>
- [10] Nguyen, T. G. H. (2013). Phát triển nguồn nhân lực nữ chất lượng cao ở Việt Nam [Developing the high quality female human resources] (Doctoral thesis). Retrieved from Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy Database.
- [11] Toạ đàm về bình đẳng giới nhân ngày Quốc tế phụ nữ năm 2017 [Talk show on Gender Fairness]. (2017, March 3). [Online] Available: <http://www.molisa.gov.vn/vi/Pages/chitiettin.aspx?IDNews=26202>
- [12] Thực hiện bình đẳng giới vì sự phát triển xã hội và nâng cao vị thế của phụ nữ [Gender Equality implementation for social development and raise women's position]. (2017, March 7). [Online] Available <http://www.hoiphn.org.vn/print.asp?newsid=15975>
- [13] Thuy, L. (2017, April 8). Việt Nam vượt Mỹ - Trung Quốc về tỷ lệ nữ doanh nhân [Vietnam overpassed the USA and China in the percentage of businesswomen]. [Online] Available <https://thanhnien.vn/kinh-doanh/viet-nam-vuot-my-trung-quoc-ve-ty-le-nu-doanh-nhan-823595.html>
- [14] Tran, L. (2015, December 28). Lao động và việc làm ở Việt Nam 2015: Nỗ lực, nhưng chưa đạt kỳ vọng [Labor and employment in Vietnam 2015: Great efforts, but not yet met the requirements]. [Online] Available: <http://kinhhtevadubao.vn/chi-tiet/2-4925-lao-dong-viec-lam-o-viet-nam-2015--no-luc-nhung-chua-dat-ky-vong.html>
- [15] Truc, T. (2017, March 3). Trao quyền kinh tế cho phụ nữ nhiều hơn [Economic empowerment for women]. [Online] Available: <http://kinhtedothi.vn/trao-quyen-kinh-te-cho-phu-nu-nhieu-hon-281873.html>
- [16] Xây dựng người Phụ nữ Việt Nam phát triển toàn diện, đáp ứng yêu cầu của thời kỳ mới [Encourage Vietnamese women to develop comprehensively and meet the requirements of the new period]. (2017, March 7). [Online] Available: <http://www.qdnd.vn/chinh-tri/tin-tuc-su-kien/xay-dung-nguoi-phu-nu-viet-nam-phat-trien-toan-dien-dap-ung-yeu-cau-cua-thoi-ky-moi-501309>