

# RECONCILING FEMINIST, SOCIALIST, AND OTHER AGENDAS: APPROACHES TO GENDER ANALYSIS IN VIETNAM

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## **Abstract**

In this paper we map the predominant interpretations and characteristics of Vietnamese research on gender issues. Through a review of recent articles from the Vietnamese-language journal *Women's Studies*, we profile the main topics, intellectual influences, methods, and conceptual approaches of women's studies and gender research. The academic orientations that we identify in Vietnam are linked to the country's legacy of relative isolation. However, major economic reforms and an open door policy since the late 1980s are leading to increased international exposure among Vietnamese researchers, and contributing to a diversification of research themes on women and gender issues. The paper identifies some of the challenges for enhancing the profile of Vietnamese scholarship on gender.

## **Introduction**

Paying heed to "gender considerations" has become obligatory in almost all development assistance programs over the past two decades. Yet understandings of gender and agendas for "gender sensitive development" vary considerably within both academic and practitioner circles. In this paper we attempt to map the interpretations and agendas of gender research in Vietnam, and the characteristics of Vietnamese researchers' perspectives on women and gender issues. The context for the changing academic orientations in Vietnam include major shifts in the roles of state and market

through *doi moi* (the policy of economic renovation in place since 1986), increasing globalization and academic “capacity building” efforts of various agencies. All of these factors have contributed to reshaping and rethinking gender issues and gender research in Vietnam.

We offer an analysis of trends in Vietnamese research on gender issues by reviewing recent articles (from 1996 to 2005) from the Vietnamese-language journal *Khoa Hoc ve Phu Nu* [Women’s Studies], produced by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Through this journal, we profile the main topics, intellectual influences, methods, and conceptual approaches of selected articles. We have chosen to focus on development-related gender research, and therefore exclude other gender-related research stemming more from humanities and history. We end by indicating some directions for future research and action. As a background to our discussion, we first describe the context of gender identities in Vietnam, and some earlier trends in research on gender and Vietnamese women.

## **Gender Identities in Vietnam**

Women in Vietnam have a number of traditional seats of socio-cultural, economic, and political power. Some power stems from the bilateral kinship system and associated gender complementarity. Compared to patrilineal patterns, bilateral inheritance patterns in Southeast Asia and parts of India are associated with greater autonomy, freedom of movement and public interaction of women, plus increased social independence and relative equality in marital relations. Southeast Asian women are known for their active roles in income-generating activities, particularly in small trading of agricultural produce, food items, and other goods, in both urban and rural areas. They are said to have good business acumen, frequently owning and managing micro-enterprises. Their dominant presence in the economy is also related to their significant role in decision-making and control over the budget within the household. Dube associates Southeast Asian women’s active engagement in income-earning activities with “their freedom of association, their ability to migrate (often leaving children behind), the support of their kin, their hold over resources, and their rights over space” (1997:47).

Even in pre-colonial times in Vietnam, extended families were less common than nuclear families. This marks a significant difference from China. This characteristic has been noted to have had positive implications for women’s position in Vietnam, given their greater degree of independence from parents-in-law (Werner 1983). Compared to China, Vietnamese women’s status in the family and society is considerably higher, and women have a high level of involvement in marketing goods and managing household finances. The value placed on “family harmony” in Vietnam is well captured in the proverb, “husband and wife in harmony can scoop the East Sea dry”. The activities of women imply significant control over resources and access to spaces—forms of control and access not afforded to women in many other countries. Women have also traditionally enjoyed a number of mechanisms of support and protection within the village. Many village temples had funds from communal land to

support widows. Women further participated in village-level rotating credit arrangements.

There have been a striking number of women heroines in Vietnamese history who still enjoy considerable renown, some after more than two millennia. Following the revolution, streets across the country were re-named to bear names such as Hai Ba Trung and Ba Trieu. The Two Trung Sisters (Hai Ba Trung) led the first insurrection against Chinese invaders in 40 AD by directing an army of 80,000 with 38 female generals. Later, a 21-year-old peasant woman led another rebellion against Chinese invaders in 245 AD. Literary tales further celebrate the strength of Vietnamese women and their sacrifices, the most famous of these being Nguyen Du's *The Story of Kieu*.

National liberation brought significant changes in legislation affecting women's rights and opportunities (Pham Bich Hang 2002; Dang Thi Van Chi 1998; Eisen 1984). The Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north legislated women's equal rights with men in public and private domains. The 1959 Marriage and Family Law (revised in 1956) legislated freedom of marriage and divorce (with custody over children), and the rights of husband and wife to equal property and inheritance. Even if there were gaps between the laws and the practice of everyday life, Vietnam did make important gains in female access to education and health care.

In the nationalist patriotic and socialist ideology, especially during the war, gender differences were often downplayed. Socialism's answer to "the woman question" was to erase differences and integrate women into the labour force. Socialist images of women labouring in industry and agriculture were portrayed on billboards and monetary notes. Discourses of the Vietnam Women's Union reflected this Communist Party policy stance. The socialist system in general, and agricultural collectivization in particular, were supposed to have exploded the myth of women's inferiority to men (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978:218).

Vietnamese women have very high rates of participation in the rural and urban labour force. The agricultural sector in Vietnam has long been dominated by and dependent on female labour. Women's roles in administrative positions increased dramatically during war-time, but fell back afterwards. An important factor in the decline in poverty through the *doi moi* (economic "renovation") period has been the resuscitation of women's commercial, informal sector activities, particularly to compensate for the loss of formal employment (Fahey 1998).

The Vietnam Women's Union has fulfilled an important role since its foundation in the 1930s as a vehicle for moving forward women's rights. Since *doi moi*, it is the mass organization that has undergone perhaps the most significant reorientation. Whereas its primary functions used to be family planning and political propaganda (generating awareness and mobilizing support for national campaigns), since the reforms, the Women's Union has strengthened its role in promoting economic activities at the household level. Its metamorphosis reflects a shift from a mainly political orientation to one that is more practical, technical, and service-oriented. The Women's Union offers credit for poor women, and when credit through this channel is unavailable, helps women with the paperwork to apply for credit through the Bank of

Agriculture or Bank for the Poor. Although more active now, the Women's Union remains uneven in its coverage and is non-existent in some places. It is often weaker among ethnic minority women and also in southern Vietnam. The Women's Union has taken on an important role in promoting legal literacy, making women aware of their rights and opportunities. It has offered an important channel for collaborating with NGOs in implementing development projects, taking advantage of the Women's Union's extensive network that spans the national to the hamlet level.

## **Gender Research in Vietnam**

While there has been a surge of writing on women and gender issues of late, it is certainly not a new topic. Discussions over the status and rights of women in modern Vietnam have received attention since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Theorization and Marxist influences over the woman question arose within a specific socio-historical context. The Confucian tradition, which reinforced social hierarchy and patriarchal values, came to be challenged by the emergent women's movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the French education system. Women's rights were a topic of interest for the elite, including early analyses of women and colonial exploitation. The first women's magazines were published at this time. Hundreds of books and newspaper articles began to appear on "women's problems" and women's roles in society (Marr 1976; 1995). This attention reflected a growing consciousness among women of themselves as a distinct group with distinct interests and demands. Discussions ranged from female education to politics and national liberation. As time went on, the women's movement became to a large degree incorporated within the anti-colonial struggle for national independence. Women's rights were associated with national and class questions (Dang Thi Van Chi 1998).

More important than radical or liberal versions of feminism in Vietnam have been the Marxist-oriented discussions of "the woman question", based on the classical works of Engels. These perspectives have shaped state feminism and analyses of women in Vietnam, especially tinged with revolutionary idealism (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978). Vietnam has for many decades had a pro-active state committed, on paper if not in practice, to the promotion of women's emancipation (i.e., state feminism), particularly through the Vietnam Women's Union. State feminism is based on the notion that the state can and should improve women's social, economic, and political status. It is associated with state institutions explicitly established to advance women's interests (e.g., through activities and policies). The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences has an Institute for Family and Gender Studies, and there is a separate Hanoi-based Research Centre for Female Labour.

Because of the Vietnam state's strong commitment to state feminism, any mention of gender issues often meets with a common response that Vietnam has already achieved gender equality. This sentiment may be expressed by men or even representatives of the Vietnam Women's Union. Gender-based violence is also often not recognized. There is sometimes little acknowledgement of the gaps between traditions or laws and practices (de jure vs. de facto) (Scott et al. 2006). The problem

with many favourable analyses of gender equality in Vietnam is not differentiating women's *position* from their *condition*. The position of women, in terms of political representation, decision-making, or participation in the work force, may be higher in Vietnam than in Japan or Korea, for example, whereas women's condition, in terms of work intensity and health status, may be much lower.

In Vietnam, although considerations of women's well-being have been part of government policies and related initiatives (e.g., of the Vietnam Women's Union) for many decades, *research* on gender issues has been slower to develop (Le Thi Quy 1999). Research has gradually increased as Vietnamese scholars and students study abroad or engage in international collaboration and conferences. NGOs and donor agencies have also provided important experience in gender-sensitive development planning for an emerging cohort of "gender specialists" in Vietnam, although relatively little of this experience has been documented in widely circulated journals or research reports. The institutionalization of gender studies in university curricula is low, but growing. Although gender studies have sometimes been seen as a separate discipline, it is often considered a sub-discipline of sociology (Hoang Ba Thinh 2001). In Ho Chi Minh City, the Women's Studies program at the Open University began in 1991. Other institutions offering women's studies courses or programs include the Hanoi University of Pedagogy, the in Hanoi National University, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in the National University in Ho Chi Minh City, and the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy.

In Hanoi, the Centre for Family and Women's Studies (upgraded in 2004 to the Institute for Family and Gender Studies), was founded in 1990 as part of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (Do Thi Binh 1999). This Institute produces a journal in Vietnamese called *Khoa Hoc ve Phu Nu. Sciences about Women* is the literal translation of this title, reflecting the emphasis on scientific socialism that is characteristic of the Soviet academic legacy in Vietnam, but here we use the more common translation, *Women's Studies*. Published six times per year, the *Women's Studies* journal includes articles on the following major topics: gender equality, women and family, women and labour, women and culture and social issues, women, population and health, and theory and methods. In a speech celebrating 15 years of the commencement of *Women's Studies*, editor Tran Thi Van Anh (2005a) explained that the journal has made contributions to the explanation and promotion of laws and policies of the Vietnam Communist Party and State, and has provided input into the policy-making process.

The journal represents a forum for researchers, managers, university lecturers, and institutes that are concerned with women, gender, and family. Although most contributors are staff of the Institute for Family and Gender Studies or other institutes of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, on occasion the journal features contributions from Vietnamese authors working in international NGOs, such as Nguyen Thi Hoa (2005), a staff member of Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE). Contributions have also appeared from staff of Vietnamese NGOs, such as Hoang Ba Thinh (2003), of the Center for Research on Gender, Family and

Environment in Development, and Le Thi Mong Phuong and Dang Ngoc Quang (2003)—the latter from the Rural Development Services Centre.

Overall, the quality of the journal articles in *Women's Studies* is limited by the lack of funding for research and library resources, and the heavy focus on practical issues, rather than detailed reflection and in-depth analysis. These factors add up to a situation in which Vietnamese social researchers spend little time preparing original and high-quality research outputs. Of particular concern is the lack of research on southern Vietnam (the south and central region and the central highlands), and contributions from southern researchers (Tran Thi Van Anh 2005a). Nevertheless, *Women's Studies* remains the main Vietnamese-language Journal covering gender issues, and for this reason we selected it as the focus of our discussion of gender scholarship in Vietnam.

## **Themes in Gender Research**

The 1990s saw a proliferation of reports on women and gender issues in Vietnam. An annotated bibliography of published and some unpublished works by Vietnamese and foreigners on gender issues between 1993 and 1999 identified 213 English-language sources (Pham Thi Hue 1999). Among these, most sources reflect applied research addressing practical and policy-related problems. One characteristic of many of the studies is that women are foregrounded as topic of research, rather than the study adopting an intersectional approach or gender analysis as an analytical framework or lens, to be applied to an analysis of natural resource management, migration, or trade policy. This is changing slowly as a consequence of gender mainstreaming initiatives. Yet, for the most part, the study of gender in Vietnamese society, like in many places, is still largely a study of women. Men have rarely been a topic of research. One exception to this is a special division on research and teaching about gender at the Ho Chi Minh National Political Academy's Department of Sociology. Established in 1997, this division is divided into two groups, one to study women and girls and another men and boys, thereby opening up possibilities for important issues concerning men and masculinities to be explored. In another innovative move, in 2005 the Institute for Family and Gender Studies appointed its first male director, a former researcher at the Institute of Sociology.

Below we identify three very roughly defined areas of emphasis of Vietnamese gender studies research in recent years, drawing from the *Women's Studies* journal and other sources. These areas reflect the economic sphere, the family and cultural sphere, and the socio-political sphere.

1. Studies about *women and work* include research on gender roles, labour and health conditions, income, women's workload (labour intensity, division of labour and time use studies) and the contribution of female workers in the transition from central planning to market economy. Women and work has perhaps been the most central focus of gender research. This is an important theme given the high participation of women in the labour force, in formal and informal sectors. Different studies have provided mixed assessments of women and the market

economy, macro-economic policy, and women's subordination in the labour market, including child labour (Tran Thi Van Anh and Vu Tuan Dung 1998; Nguyen Duc Chien and Nguyen Thi Hong Thuy 2005; Nguyen Thi Quynh Hoa 2005). Notions of equality, for example, began to be challenged as women's positions were threatened by unemployment, and cuts in social security and other services associated with the *doi moi* economic reforms.

Studies on women and work address female employment in a variety of employment sectors: state, private and informal (Nguyen Viet Vuong 1998); services, small enterprises, and industry (Tran Thi Van Anh 2005b; Nguyen Thi Hoa 1998); Nguyen Thi Nhiem 1998; Giles, and Nguyen Phuong Thao 2005), and fisheries, forestry, and agriculture (CGFED 1996; Le Ngoc Lan et al. 2004). Labour union problems and employment in foreign enterprises (Hoang Thi Linh 1997; Dang Bich Thuy 2004) are also touched upon. Studies that focus on labour migration (Dang Nguyen Anh 2005; Le Phuong Thanh 2003), micro-credit and entrepreneurship (Do Thi Binh 1998; Le Thi 1998a; Bui Thi Thanh Ha 2003), gender and poverty (Le Thi 2005c), and female farmers in household economic activities (Vu Tuan Anh and Tran Thi Van Anh 1997) have paved the way to gendered understandings of new economic relations as Vietnam enters a market economy (Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung 1996 and 2000). Other studies document gender roles or natural resource management practices among ethnic minorities (e.g., Bui Thi Thanh Ha 2005; Le Thi Dien 2005; Do Thi Binh and Hoang Thi Sen 2005; Le Kim Lan 2005; Le Thi Mong Phuong and Dang Ngoc Quang 2003), who comprise approximately 14 percent of the population in Vietnam.

2. Studies about *the family, sexuality, and society* constitute a second main research theme. This body of research aims not only to describe actual conditions but also to formulate new models of the family which seek to address the material needs (e.g., nutrition and shelter) and spiritual needs (e.g., human dignity) of all members, and to guarantee the reproductive rights and reproductive health of both men and women, and the rights of children as future citizens of society (Le Thi 1994). A recent edited volume, *Life Stories*, recounts the lives of 77 "heroic mothers" (National Political Publishing House 2004a). Women, marriage, and the family (Le Thi 2005a, 2005b, 2003; Pham Thi Hue et al. 2005; Mai Huy Bich 1991; Vu Tuan Huy 1996; Belanger and Khuat Thu Hong 1996; Tran Thi Hong 2005; Phung Thi Kim Anh 2005; Nguyen Tuan Anh and Quach Mai Phuong 2003), household headship (Nguyen Thi Khoa 1996; Nguyen Thanh Tam 1996) have been common topics of research. Aging and the life cycle (Vietnam Women's Union 2005), sexuality (Khuat Thu Hong 1998), HIV/AIDS (Khuat Thu Hong et al. 2004), and abortion (Hoang Kim Dung 2003; Bui Kim Chi 2005) have been reported on less frequently.

Discussion of "social evils" (*te nan xa hoi*), such as drugs and prostitution, have finally come to be subjects of empirical research, not only moral discourses

lamenting the loss of social values (CSDS 2002). Some studies address forms of exploitation and violence against women and children in society and in the family, including the trafficking of women and sexual abuse, as linked to the human rights of women (Le Thi Quy 2000; Doan Viet 2005; Nguyen Thi Phuong Thao et al. 2005). Others report on reproductive and maternal health care (Dao Huy Khue and Trieu Thanh Vuong 2005; Hoang Ba Thinh 2003; Tran Van Ha 2003), problems of gender stereotyping (Tran Thi Van Anh 2000) and female criminality (Hoang Thi Nga 2005). On the cultural geography of gender, work by Do Thai Dong (1991) and Tran Ngoc Them (1997) has drawn attention to the lower influence of Confucianism in southern compared to northern Vietnam.

3. Studies on the *socio-political dimensions of gender* examine the educational level of women and ways to improve gender equity. Women's rights, empowerment, and equality have been recurring themes in Vietnamese research (Le Thi and Do Thi Binh 1997; Truong Thi Thuy Hang 2005a, 2005b; Tinker and Summerfield 1999). Recent work has drawn attention to inequities in access to information and resources such as education (Ha Thi Minh Khuong 2005), agricultural extension services, credit, land (Tran Thi Que 2001; Ha Thi Phuong Tien 1997; National Political Publishing House 2004b), and housing (Thai Thi Ngoc Du 1999b; Hoang Thi Lich 1999; Nguyen Thi Hoa 2005). Equally important topics include women in leadership and decision-making (Tran Thi Van Anh 2002) and institutional mechanisms for the advancement and empowerment of women in the family and society. The latter includes gender awareness training (Tran Thi Que et al. 1999; Vuong Thi Hanh 2005), the integration of gender issues in development projects (Ha Thi Phuong Tien 2000), changing rural institutions (Tran Thi Van Anh and Nguyen Manh Huan 1995), and broader gender equality policy analysis (Tran Thi Van Anh 1993, 1994, 1997, 2005c; Le Thi 1996; Nguyen Viet Vuong 1998; Pham Ngoc Anh 2005; Ngo Thi Ngoc Anh 2003; Le Ngoc Lan et al. 2004) and urban management issues (Vu Thi Vinh 2004).

Several recent articles reflect on the state of gender studies and research and teaching on gender in Vietnam (Le Thi Quy 1999; Le Ngoc Hung 1999, 2005; Do Thi Binh 1999; Le Thi 1998b; Mai Huy Bich 1999a; Phan Thanh Khoi 1998; Dang Thanh Le 1998; Le Ngoc Hung 1999; Thai Thi Ngoc Du 1999a; Le Ngoc Lan 1999). In the next section we interpret the main approaches of, and influences on, the works cited above.

## **Characteristic Research Approaches**

As the previous section illustrates, gender issues have become the focus of considerable research by Vietnamese scholars. Influenced by socialist idealism, Vietnamese and English-language research in the 1970s and 80s often lacked an empirical base and gave a sloganistic and wholly positive assessment of gender equality in Vietnam (Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet 1978; Eisen-Bergman 1974). Discourses of heroic women exploit myths of the past in order to politically mobilize women for national liberation

and the construction of socialism. Like in other socialist countries, the Vietnamese state's impetus for promoting women was not merely for women's own liberation and well-being but, pragmatically, to support state policies and stimulate productivity and economic development. Gender-related research inspired in Marxism has focused in particular on women's work (the productive sphere). Studies influenced by radical feminism—with a greater focus on the body, sexuality, the reproductive sphere, gender-based violence, and cultural traditions that symbolize and subordinate women—have been less prominent in Vietnam, but are growing slowly.

Recent studies of women and gender issues make greater acknowledgement of the gaps between policy and practice, but continue to play down class, regional and ethnic divisions among women (Fahey 1998). For example, an article on women and economic development may celebrate the opportunities and progress women have enjoyed in the past decade, but neglect to acknowledge the fact that urban working women are in better a position because of the domestic services provided to them by other women. Much writing on gender seems to be written from “one voice” which represents women as undifferentiated: suffering inequality, heavy workloads, and difficulties and challenges in various forms. A cross-cutting analysis that captures the intersections of gender with class, employment, ethnicity, age, and perhaps religion is much less common. Explicit mention of social class within a differentiated gender analysis is particularly absent, despite acknowledgements of growing social differentiation. Interesting examples of “studying up” (cf. Nader 1982) could be done, for example, on women in positions of political or economic power and influence. The extent of this seems to be instrumentalist studies of women entrepreneurs and their business strategies (Bui Thi Thanh Ha 2003), which are valuable in and of themselves, but lack an ethnographic “thick description”. Research on gender and ethnicity is an important emerging area. However, while many studies document living conditions of ethnic minority women and men, there is less focus on issues of gender and ethnic *identity*. Moreover, little reference is made to influencing men's perspectives on gender issues and men's roles in the family (e.g., in Bui Thi Thanh Ha 2005).

Studies of household composition and the life cycle have drawn attention to the experiences of “the girl child”, single women (young and old), and female-headed households (Tran Han Giang 2001). Although important, studies of female-headed households too often are not disaggregated, and so include cases of women officially registered as household head even if they reside with their husband (a common phenomenon in Vietnam). This renders meaningless much statistical data (e.g., that concludes that female-headed households are better off than male-headed households). It also doesn't account for family support (e.g., migrating husbands), age, and life-cycle differences among female-headed households (Scott 2003).

Vietnam is experiencing a reconstruction of research, development activities, and curriculum materials addressing gender issues. Major academic capacity-building efforts have sought to improve the relatively weak qualifications and academic preparation of researchers specializing in gender issues, among other specializations.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.ant.ulaval.ca/gender\\_vietnam/](http://www.ant.ulaval.ca/gender_vietnam/)

As one example, the International Development Research Centre in Canada has funded a project on “Enhancing Capacities to Engender Research” involving 16 Vietnamese scholars. Most gender studies researchers have a background in history, economics, ethnology<sup>2</sup>, philosophy, or psychology. These researchers have usually not received thorough training in gender studies, and tend to lack materials and systematic research methods, factors which have sometimes led to the drawing of inaccurate or unfounded conclusions.

Due to their academic genealogy and limited background, the work of Vietnamese gender research tends to emphasize more description than critical social analysis, and more quantitative details than well-structured multi-method analysis of trends.<sup>3</sup> As this body of research grows, Vietnamese gender researchers are gradually shifting from descriptive to more scholarly, analytical, and critical writing, from uni-disciplinary to multi-disciplinary, and from prescriptive (or normative) to empirically oriented research. The articles in *Women’s Studies* have mainly been based on government data or local surveys and interviews funded by various development agencies, although the funding sources are not made explicit. Competency in and use of ethnographic methods (such as participant observation, oral history and unstructured interviews, and focus group discussions) is less strong, but improving. Urban-based male and female researchers have often been reluctant to do fieldwork in rural and ethnic minority areas. However, there is a growing interest in and use of a variety of “participatory” research tools and methods, such as participatory poverty assessment and participatory rural appraisal (e.g., Bui Thi Thanh Ha 2005; Le Thi Dien 2005), especially driven by NGOs and some international donor initiatives (e.g., World Bank and DFID 1999).

There have been many macro-social and descriptive studies, based on nationally aggregated data, but sophisticated quantitative and qualitative analyses are less common. At the other end of the macro-level studies are a plethora of very descriptive village or community-level studies that tend to lack comparative perspective or emphasis on the broader significance beyond the individual case. For example, a discussion on the impacts of economic development on the family would devote most of the space to the changing roles of family members, but the broader issues linked to the development paradigm of a market economy under *doi moi* in Vietnam is only mentioned in passing.

Methodological discussions are also infrequent in *Women’s Studies* articles. In reviewing 45 papers in a book on family studies, Mai Huy Bich (1999b) observed that only ten papers mentioned research methods. Most mentioned the time and place at which the research (usually a survey) was conducted. Five papers made reference to theory, 30 papers included tables with percentages, but sometimes failed to mention

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnology has been more prevalent in studies of women than has anthropology, which was only recently introduced as a recognized discipline in Vietnam. To the extent that ethnologists have contributed to women’s studies, it has mainly been through culturalistic descriptions of folklore of ethnic minority women (e.g., religion, marriage customs, and textiles), and less analytical and applied studies.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the comments that follow apply not only to gender research but social science research more generally (cf. Ambler 1998).

how the figures were derived (methods, including the size, selection, and composition of the sample of respondents). Sometimes the solutions proposed are rather self-evident and could have been predicted without conducting a survey. Few papers show how their conclusions are derived; sometimes the proposed solutions or conclusions have little bearing on the focus of the study. Few authors conscientiously acknowledge the limitations of their approach and methods.

The use of moral discourses seems to be a common characteristic among contributors to *Women's Studies*. Reflecting on an edited volume of studies by Vietnamese and American authors (Barry 1996), Mai Huy Bich (1999b) criticizes the way that some authors describe divorce as an irresponsible action, without recognizing how divorce or separation can also alleviate suffering. Notions of right and wrong, fair and unfair, have been shaped by the values of socialism and traditional morality. Such moral discourses are also reflected in the notion of “social evils.” Mai Huy Bich suggests that the authors’ moral condemnations and preaching stems from their inability to differentiate between normative and empirical approaches in their research on families. Normative approaches have been shaped by traditional morality, religion, and politics. Moral standards include laws and institutionalized behaviour regarding the family—e.g., in terms of choosing a spouse, limiting sexual activity, and determining the rights and responsibilities of parents, and of husband and wife. Attention to these elements leads to normative writing about what we should and should not do, what is right and wrong. An empirical approach, on the other hand, studies real-life situations, examining what is going on in practice, setting aside standards of what one perceives to be right or true. Such studies use empirical data, gathered through surveys or other means. By confusing normative and empirical approaches, many Vietnamese authors constrain the objectivity of their analysis, Mai Huy Bich (1999b) notes. This author criticizes authors for making statements based on “subjective feelings and thoughts” rather than being backed by other references or empirical research.

Even though it is one of the objectives of the journal to provide a critique of policies and recommendation for changes, most articles are limited to explanations of what the policies are about rather than how they have been implemented or a frank assessment of their impacts. Tran Thi Van Anh (2005a) laments that very few researchers write about controversial issues, thereby limiting debate in what could be an important forum for exchanging viewpoints. There have been few critical studies of women’s incorporation into industrial production, unlike other countries in which this process has been at the centre of many debates over women’s exploitation versus autonomy and empowerment (e.g., regarding *maquiladoras* in Latin America and elsewhere in Southeast Asia).

Vietnamese research tends to lack an analytical framework and theoretical innovation or adaptation (Tran Thi Van Anh 2005a). Articles in *Women's Studies* demonstrate little connection between theories and case studies, or any critique of existing theories and proposal of alternative explanations. As Mai Huy Bich (1999b) laments, where theories are cited, they are often not linked to practice, and are not subjected to empirical testing. Le Ngoc Van’s (2005a) article, “Some perspective in

feminist theory in family studies”, reviews the theoretical and methodological challenges put forward by feminist studies of the family, but leaves out any discussion of the relevance or application of these ideas in Vietnam. Similarly, Mai Huy Bich’s (2002) article on feminist theories in academic research, and Ngo Toan Dung’s (2005) article on theoretical approaches to gender and work in the labour market, unfortunately offer little or no indication of how such theories might be appropriately applied to research in Vietnam. On the other hand, Truong Thi Thuy Hang (2005a, 2005b) examines the applications of the United Nations’ Human Development Index and Gender Development Index to Vietnam.

Gender-related research by Vietnamese scholars has been influenced little by the “cultural turn” in English-language scholarship, which experiments with writing that reflects multiple voices, or emphasizes power relations in the research and research process (e.g., the politics of location and difference; crossing class lines). Participatory action research, to the extent that it is used, tends to be more instrumentally implemented, with little reflexivity or attempts to grapple with dilemmas of power in terms of positionality, the research process, and power in representation (cf. Gaskell and Eichler 2001; Guijt and Kaul Shah 1998). This is not surprising given the limited exposure to postcolonialism, feminist research and feminist theorizing. References to international debates and discussion are rare in Vietnamese publications.

Until recently, few scholars published internationally, reflecting the isolation of Vietnamese intellectuals from foreign contacts and journals. There is an absence of peer-review and high quality standards for publication in Vietnamese social science scholarship. Publications have little review of literature and do not make use of data to produce grounded theory. The systems of citations and referencing are often not systematically applied. These things are gradually changing as increasing numbers of scholars earn degrees or fellowships as visiting scholars abroad, although the lack of structure or relevance of some such programs can diminish their effectiveness.

## **Donor-Driven Agendas and Gender Scholarship**

A large part of the research conducted on gender issues has focused on practical socio-economic and policy-relevant topics, particularly related to poverty reduction. And much of this gender “research” is in fact not generated in academic institutions, but through consultancies for international donor agencies and NGOs. Thus, there are different parties promoting gender and development research and generating gender analyses:

- International donor and development agencies (e.g., United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, Swedish International Development Agency)
- International NGOs (e.g., OXFAM)
- Foreign researchers
- Vietnamese government agencies (National Committee for the Advancement of Women) and mass organizations (Vietnam Women’s Union)
- Vietnamese researchers (at universities and research institutes)

- Vietnamese NGOs (e.g., the Institute for Social Development Studies; the Centre for Research on Gender, Family and Environment in Development; Towards Ethnic Women)

Moreover, there is considerable overlap between some of these categories, as Vietnamese researchers act as consultants for international NGOs or donor agencies, for example.

Much attention has been given to gender awareness workshops and gender training toolkits (e.g., UNDP 1996) for a range of target groups, from state officials to participants in community development projects. A few English-language books on gender studies and gender and development have been translated into Vietnamese (e.g., Bowles and Klein 1996; Moser 1996). Phan Thanh Khoi (1998) is critical of some of the efforts to enhance awareness on gender issues. He distinguished between the acknowledgement of gender inequalities and gender differences. He lamented that when workshops and training courses about gender issues focus overwhelmingly on inequalities between man and women, the atmosphere becomes very “heavy”. Participants frequently exclaim that women suffer inequality, hardships, and gender stereotyping. When empowerment is discussed, it is mentioned only in the context of women. When the gendered division of labour is discussed, the discussion centres only on the hardships of women.

Overall, little effort is made to “Vietnamize” gender concepts. We argue for greater efforts to “endogenize” approaches to gender analysis (cf. Sadli and Porter 1999). Vietnamese and foreign researchers and development agencies need to engage in a deeper reassessment of their respective assumptions and conceptual baggage. Such reflections should contribute to richer interaction, dialogue and mutual understanding, as well as effectiveness initiatives for social change. One problem is that Vietnamese researchers do not have the opportunity to pursue independently conceived and funded research. Despite government support for gender equality initiatives, funds for independent research have been limited. Instead, Vietnamese researchers often carry out short-term donor-driven consultancy research in which the research questions and approach have been largely pre-determined. Moreover, donor-driven gender and development agendas may not be sufficiently adapted for the local context of gender relations in Vietnam.

Oxfam-UK is one NGO that has drawn explicit attention to this problem:

Although gender-related approaches such as gender equality, gender mainstreaming, and rights based gender analysis have been used in Viet Nam for some years, there appears to be ambiguity among development agencies over what this means in practice within the Vietnamese context. For many, gender is equated to women, and interventions are based around women’s basic needs in areas of their traditional roles, and do not address equality per se nor do they address longer term strategic needs leading to change in gender relations. (Woodhouse 2003)

There is a clear need for a more detailed understanding of the reception of, and resistance to, gender discourses and approaches among both men and women. Le Ngoc

Lan (1999) argues that, by not taking sufficient account of the elements of Vietnamese customs and culture that can provide a basis for gender equality, many recent studies of gender lack depth. They tend to omit consideration of cultural foundations and regional differences in culture. Moreover, many projects purporting to address gender issues have limited effectiveness because they do not go beyond a “Women in Development” (WID) approach, focusing on women not gender relations (Kabeer 1994).

Through this paper, we have focused on research about gender and women, rather than feminism. Dialogues with Western feminism have often been problematic, and often encounter “Vietnamese exceptionalism”: the notion that Vietnam is unique and cannot be usefully compared with, or make use of theories or ideas from, the outside. While the assertion of Vietnam’s incomparability to anywhere else is an exaggeration, there is indeed a risk of imposing a universalist feminism. Hence the resistance to feminist epistemologies seen to be associated with Western values. Gender researchers often avoid the label “feminist” and do not identify with “feminism from afar” (Judd 1995). Indeed, a focus on gender does not imply a feminist epistemology.

In what might be called “non-feminist gender studies”, the notion that the public-private distinction or the sexual division of labour is a source or cause of women’s subordination is rejected (Purkayastha et al. 2003). This is reflected in some interpretations of domestic violence (including by Vietnam Women’s Union representatives) that blame the woman for upsetting family harmony and provoking her husband, by contradicting or not speaking softly to him in an “appropriate” feminine manner. In this way, studies of domestic violence tend to be based on culturalist, not feminist, analysis.

Much of the English-language writing on feminism and women’s studies is derived from modernist philosophical traditions (Schech 1998; Bulbeck 1998). The dualism between local traditions (or cultural relativism), on the one hand, and universal modernity, on the other, is a conceptual trap that has come to be challenged by post-developmental, post-colonial, and post-structural feminist positions. There is a sharp dichotomy between Western scholarship’s view of women as individuals vs. conceptions elsewhere of women as *individuals and collectivities*. In other words, women are defined through multiple relationships. This view opens the door to non-feminist perspectives, or a melding of the two, without feminism necessarily prevailing.

## **Conclusion**

### ***The gender and development imperative in Vietnam: Emerging approaches, dilemmas, and future directions***

Until the *doi moi* period (which began in 1986), and to some extent since that time, there has been little or no independent and critical women’s studies research tradition in Vietnamese social science. Instead, the social sciences were subjected to the political priorities of the Communist Party for national liberation, and sociology and other social sciences were not developed. These political priorities, largely shaped by historical materialism, influenced which disciplines would be supported, how, and what would be

the focus of study. Especially in periods of war, everything had to serve the war effort. Research sought to demonstrate the validity of government policies, rather than to challenge or critique the policies. In this context, women's emancipation was a political project of mobilization, rather than a field of research. The "research" that was conducted was mainly propagandistic, to celebrate women heroes in Vietnam's history, and to promote patriotic spirit amongst the population. These studies also had a modernist and programmatic aim of eliminating Confucianist, feudal, or colonial relations which exploited women. But such research lacked a methodological and empirical grounding that detailed women's conditions or gender relations in practice.

Taking stock of gaps in understanding and approaches to gender research, and seeking to assess the conceptual and academic baggage of Vietnamese and foreign researchers, can help to foster an "endogenization" of approaches and mutual understandings of gender-sensitive approaches to learning, research and international development practice. Women of Vietnam have occupied important positions in the nation's development and economic life, through movements for national liberation, post-war reconstruction, and the current market transition. The ongoing study of gender and development offers interesting prospects for the coming years. To date, Vietnamese scholarship on gender issues has been quite descriptive and lacked theoretical content or innovation. Amidst shifting economic, institutional, and epistemological contexts, Vietnamese gender researchers are grappling with feminist and gender and development frameworks in their applied research. This could pave the way for unique gender-specific Vietnamese conceptualizations and theories to emerge. There is good scope for some important gender research to unfold, creatively exploring the interfaces of endogenous and exogenous gender and development thinking (e.g., culturally-specific gendered concepts of feminism, empowerment, happiness family harmony, and suffering). Other promising research avenues include the social, historical, and personal contexts that shaped the approaches to gender studies used in Vietnam over time, and individual motivations for becoming involved in gender studies and for adopting a given approach.

Researchers who graduated or received training from abroad in recent years are a source of great potential for improving research calibre. Yet, only when they are in an appropriate position and with appropriate encouragement will they be able to fulfil this potential. This is sadly not always the case. In other words, international academic training is not enough. Renovating research, teaching, and social change on gender issues also requires a deep understanding of Vietnam values and contexts and an appreciation of how to combine this with selective knowledge from abroad. This is not an easy task for either young or mature researchers, and it is rare to find both at once.

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