EXPLORING INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO WOMEN'S WELL-BEING IN VIET NAM:
NEGOTIATING GENDER

by

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ABSTRACT

Using an interdisciplinary approach, this dissertation focuses on the cultural aspects of women’s well-being in Viet Nam in the context of achieving more effective and equitable human development. The concept of culture refers to the traditions, which have been formed and transformed over thousands of years, and which are mainly characterized by the intertwining of conflicting doctrines of indigenous culture. This study seeks to: (a) describe some of the major historical and cultural factors affecting gender relations; (b) examine the effectiveness of national and international efforts in negotiating and adapting to the gender and development approach; and (c) evaluate the implications of current socio-economic and cultural changes for the future well-being of women and female children.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods in a variety of approaches, including a review of Vietnamese primary sources, policy documents and a case study of a suburban commune, the thesis reaches five main conclusions. First, Viet Nam encounters certain difficulties in achieving women’s emancipation, which stems from its historical, cultural and political context that requires a concerted effort to negotiate and adapt to the prevalent theories relating to the gender and development approach. Second, although there remain considerable negative impacts of traditional norms and practices on women, there are also tremendously positive aspects of equality and social cohesion in these traditions. Therefore, a balanced and thorough analysis is necessary in order to identify suitable and effective intervention measures.

Third, with the recent đổi mới (renovation) policies, the promotion of gender equity has met with a certain degree of success, but apparently is still significantly constrained by the persistence of social and cultural norms that create continual obstacles to gender equality. Fourth, the dynamics of changes in gender relations at local levels reveal that women are often left in more vulnerable positions in terms of receiving lower benefits achieved at higher cost and sacrifice. Fifth, policy prescriptions regarding women’s well-being will require a consideration of material and non-material aspects of their relative situation, an appreciation of both modern and traditional values, and a realistic and sensitive approach in making proposals for their reform and modification.
Table of Contents

Abstracts........................................................................................................ ii

Table of Contents.......................................................................................... iii

List of Photographs....................................................................................... vii

List of Figures................................................................................................ vi

List of Boxes.................................................................................................. vii

List of Tables.................................................................................................. viii

List of Acronyms............................................................................................ x

Glossary and Units of Measurement............................................................. x

Acknowledgements......................................................................................... xi

Prologue. Experience, Perspective and Approach......................................... 1
  From Personal to Professional Experience.................................................. 1
  Staying in Viet Nam: Legally a “Foreigner”,
      and Culturally as a “Vietnamese Woman”................................................. 6
  Fieldwork in Viet Nam................................................................................. 8
  Ph.D. Fieldwork in Tân Tao commune........................................................ 11
  Collecting Secondary Data and Information.............................................. 13
  Collecting Primary Data and Information.................................................. 13
  Using and Analyzing Data and Information.............................................. 14

Chapter One. Research Problems, Objectives and Methodology.................. 16
  Research Problems....................................................................................... 16
  Research Objectives..................................................................................... 18
  Research Design and Methodology............................................................ 19
  Conceptual Framework................................................................................ 24

Chapter Two. Gender and Development:
  An Overview of its Application in Viet Nam.............................................. 27
  Historical Development of Gender and Development Theory and Practice... 27
Overall Situation of the Application of *Gender and Development* in Viet Nam .... 32
*Gender and Development* Considered As Not Yet Being Applied in Viet Nam..... 34

Chapter Three. Historical and Cultural Factors in Gender Relations in Viet Nam and Their Perceived Relevance to GAD Approach and Theories .............. 38
Gender Relations over Historical Periods in Viet Nam ..................... 38
Cultural Aspects of Gender Relations in Viet Nam.......................... 48
The Need to Negotiate and to Adapt to the Gender and Development Approach ...63

Chapter Four. Cultural Factors in Gender Relations in Viet Nam .................. 70
Image of Women in Vietnamese History and Literature ..................... 71
Cultural Analysis of Human Development Related Gender Issues in Viet Nam .... 74
*Education and Employment* .................................................. 77
*Social and Family Relations* ................................................. 82
*Legal Protection* ............................................................... 91

Chapter Five. Đổi Mới and Women in Viet Nam .................................. 95
Overview of the Process of Đổi Mới in Viet Nam ........................... 95
General Impact of Đổi Mới on Women’s Well-Being .......................... 100
Women’s Education, Employment and Livelihoods under Đổi Mới ............ 102
Women’s Social and Family Relations under Đổi Mới ........................ 111
Women’s Legal Protection Issues under Đổi Mới ............................. 129

Chapter Six. Contemporary Institutional Organizations
as They Affect Women in Viet Nam ........................................... 133
Institutional Organizations ..................................................... 133
The Situation of Gender Research and Training in Viet Nam .................. 136
Implications of Institutional Efforts to Improve Women’s Well-Being .......... 144

Chapter Seven. A Micro Study of Tân Tạo Commune in Ho Chi Minh City .... 149
Basic Introduction .............................................................. 149
Commune Background Information ............................................ 155
Education and Livelihood Security ............................................. 167
Social and Family Relations ................................................... 204
Legal Protection ................................................................. 223
Chapter Eight. Policy Implications and Conclusion: The Case of Viet Nam ..... 231

The Need to Negotiate with GAD Approach ................................................. 232
Dualism in Vietnamese Culture................................................................. 238
Successes and Shortcomings ..................................................................... 242
Changing gender relations in the new socio-economic context.................. 247
Policy Implications .................................................................................... 250
Conclusion .................................................................................................. 259

Bibliography ............................................................................................... 262

Appendix 1. Chronology of Events Relating to Gender Equality and Women ... 273

Appendix 2. Residence Status Categories .................................................... 276
Other Factors Determining Income Level .................................................. 277
Sample of Open-Ended Questions and Questionnaire......................... 281
List of Photos

Photo 1. Field Trip in Thái Nguyên province, 2000 ................................................. 9
Photo 2. Women’s Focus Group in Long An Province, 2000 ................................. 15
Photo 3. Training on Gender, Credit, and Environmental Issues for Local Women, Cần Thơ Province, 1997 ............................................ 140
Photo 4. Tấn Tảo: Women Combining Income-Earning Work with Child Rearing and Household Responsibilities ............................................. 153
Photo 5. Tấn Tảo: Incense Making, a Common Home-Based Work for Women and Young Girls ................................................................. 179
Photo 6. Tấn Tảo: Men’s Involved in Construction Work ......................................... 181
Photo 7. Tấn Tảo: Men’s Focus Group Discussion .................................................. 189
Photo 8. Tấn Tảo: Young Couples Relying on Grandparents for Child Care Services ................................................................. 211

List of Figures

Figure 1. Female Representation in National Assembly (1976-2000) ......................... 101
Figure 2. Tấn Tảo: A Respondent’s Drawing on the Cause-and-Effect of Poverty, Lack of Education, and Social Evils ............................................... 171
Figure 3. Tấn Tảo: Income by Sex According to Educational Level ......................... 193
Figure 4. Tấn Tảo: Income of Male- and Female-Headed Households ....................... 197
Figure 5. Tấn Tảo: Economic Contribution Levels of Members of Full-Couple Households ................................................................. 199
Figure 6. Tấn Tảo: Contribution Levels of Members in Full-Couple Households Classified by Income Groups ..................................................... 201
Figure 7. Tấn Tảo: Decision-Making Levels for Different Activities in Households ... 215
Figure 8. Tấn Tảo: Household Income According to Main Household Occupation Group ................................................................. 280
List of Boxes

Box 1. Some Real Stories on Sharing Information in Social Research .................. 11
Box 2. Understanding Feminism in Viet Nam ................................................. 66
Box 3. Lady Trieu’s Famous Statement ......................................................... 71
Box 4. Women and Men During Wartime Portrayed in Contemporary Arts .......... 72
Box 5. Traditional Folklore: ‘Association of Men Who Are Afraid
of Their Wife’ (Hội sợ vợ) ................................................................. 74
Box 6. Invisible Violence against Women ....................................................... 94
Box 7. Factors Influencing Parents’ Decision on Their Daughter’s
Enrolment in Upper-Secondary School .................................................... 106
Box 8. Finding a Husband as a Reason to Move to Cities ............................. 109
Box 9. Controversial over Whether Confucian Practices Should Still be Applied ... 116
for Women Based on the Sexes of Their Children .................................... 122
Box 11. The Unfortunate Connection between Women’s Trafficking and
Their Not Being Able to Find a Local Husband ....................................... 125
Box 12. Sexual Harassment against Young Girls ........................................... 132
Box 13. Objectives of the Women’s Unions for the 1997-2002 Period ............. 134
Box 14. The Main Activities of NCFAW ...................................................... 135
Box 15. Positive Results from Local Gender Training ................................... 139
Box 16. The Need for Higher Participation of Male Trainees in Gender Training... 141
Box 17. Assessment of a Gender Project Implemented by NCFAW .................. 142
Box 18. “Women’s Empowerment”: Finding a Suitable Vietnamese Translation ... 145
Box 19. “Selling, or “Transferring” Land ................................................... 159
Box 20. Women’s Focus Group Discussion on the Improvements
in Living Standards ..................................................................................... 168
Box 21. Social and Cultural Factors Behind Young Men’s Unemployment ....... 188
Box 22. Focus Group Discussions on Household Decision-Making ................ 213
Box 23. Some Examples Given by Children in Tân Tạo Commune
on Images of Females and Males Illustrated in Textbooks ...................... 217
Box 24. A Desperate Mother with a Drug-Addicted Young Son ..................... 220
Box 25. Men’s ‘Entitlement’ to Drink .......................................................... 222
Box 27. Children’s Perception on Social Harassment against Girls ................ 229
Box 28. Men’s Involvement in Social Evils as Being Culturally ‘Spoiled’ ........ 246
List of Tables

Table 1. Main Demographic Characteristics of Tân Tảo Survey.................................22
Table 2. Viet Nam Has Been Behind in the Application of GAD...............................36
Table 3. Viet Nam’s Human Development Index (1985-2000).................................102
Table 4. Working Population Over 15 years Old by Sex and Rural/Urban, 1996.........103
Table 5. Literacy Rate for Population Aged 15 and Older (%), 1999.......................105
Table 6. School Attendance According to Ethnicity, 1995..................................105
Table 7. School Attendance of Primary and Secondary Education
    in Urban and Rural Areas According to Sex (%), 1999.......................106
Table 8. School Attendance of Lower-Secondary and Upper-Secondary
    Education According to Sex (%), 1999.......................................106
Table 9. Female Education Attainment in Viet Nam, 1997-98...............................107
Table 10. Who is the Breadwinner? Percentage of Those Who Disagreed.............112
Table 11. Family Responsibilities in a Northern and a Southern Lowland Commune...114
Table 12. Household Decision-Making in a Northern and
    a Southern Lowland Commune___________________________________________114
Table 13. Typical Gender Stereotypes in Schoolbooks of Vietnamese Language ......119
Table 14 Gender Socialization among Children in Viet Nam...............................120
Table 15. Male/Female Ratio by Age Group, 15-49........................................123
Table 16. Frequency of Domestic Abuse by Self-Ranked Income Levels................131
Table 17. Percentage of Types of Domestic Violence by Main Income Earner
    in Family ..................................................................................131
Table 18. Tân Tảo: Population, Number of Households and Population Density......161
Table 19. Tân Tảo: Population Structure According to Type of
    Household Registration______________________________________________161
Table 20. Tân Tảo: Age and Sex Groups.......................................................162
Table 21. Tân Tảo: Population According to Birthplace and Sex........................163
Table 22. Tân TẢO: Time of Migration According to Sex................................164
Table 23. Tân TẢO: Changes in Land Area over the Years..............................165
Table 24. Tân TẢO: Household Groups According to Occupation (%)...............165
Table 25. Tân TẢO: Number of Households According to Occupation............166
Table 26. Tân TẢO: Main Occupations According to Sex (%)..........................177
Table 27. Tân TẢO: Areas of Work According to Sex.....................................181
Table 28. Tấn Tảo: Place of Work According to Sex ................................................ 182
Table 29. Tấn Tảo: Employment Sectors According to Sex (%) .......................... 183
Table 30. Tấn Tảo: Number of Times of Changing Occupations by Sex ........ 184
Table 31. Tấn Tảo: Adults’ Opinions on the Importance of Girls’ Education .... 190
Table 32. Tấn Tảo: Perception on the Importance of Ensuring Children’s Education
versus Other Issues, According to Sex .............................................................. 191
Table 33. Tấn Tảo: Girls’ Education and Domestic Responsibilities .................. 192
Table 34. Tấn Tảo: Time Spent for and Income from Main Occupation
According to Sex .................................................................................................. 196
Table 35. Tấn Tảo: Perception on Women’s and Men’s Economic Role .............. 207
Table 36. Tấn Tảo: Household Responsibilities .................................................. 208
Table 37. Tấn Tảo: Decision-Making on Loan in Full-Couple Households
According to the Sex of Household Head ......................................................... 212
Table 38. Tấn Tảo: Perception on Domestic Violence .................................................. 228
Table 39. Tấn Tảo: Income According to Age ...................................................... 277
Table 40. Tấn Tảo: Income According to Employment Sector .......................... 278
Table 41. Tấn Tảo: Income According to Location of Work .............................. 279
Table 42. Tấn Tảo: Per Person Income According to Household Main Occupations... 279
List of Acronyms

CIDA: Canadian International Development Agency
CSSH: College of Social Sciences and Humanities, in HCMC
GAD: Gender and development
HCMC: Ho Chi Minh City
HEPR: Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction
LPRV: Localized Poverty Reduction in Viet Nam Project
NCFAW: National Committee for the Advancement of Women
NCSSH: National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities
WAD: Women and development
WID: Women in development
WU: Women’s Union

Glossary and Units of Measurement

doì mòi: the process of economic renovation to switch from central planning to market economy, and opening up to international exchange in many aspects.

Culture: a set of knowledge, perceptions, mentality, values, ways of thinking, customs, practices, lifestyles, etc., that people have accumulated and to which they have become accustomed, generation by generation. The concepts of ‘traditions’ and ‘modernity’ are thus related.

dong: Vietnamese currency, approximately 1 US dollar is equivalent to 15,800 dong as of September 2003.

Gender equality: achieved by eliminating any forms of structural discrimination that puts women in relatively disadvantageous positions.

Human development: a process of expanding choices so that people can improve their overall well-being in a sustainable manner (United Nations 1998).

Indigenous: defined in the case of Viet Nam as its long-standing cultural foundation which has been transformed by Chinese influence and Western exposure.

Well-being: defined in this dissertation not only in terms of economic but more importantly the social, cultural and political aspects of women’s lives.
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PROLOGUE.

EXPERIENCE, PERSPECTIVE, AND APPROACH

"Even many American politicians and scientists have said that the Americans lost the war because they did not understand Vietnamese history and culture."

General Võ Nguyên Giáp
in the article “Vietnamese Culture: National Traditions and Traits”, 1998

At the early stages of the formulation of this dissertation, I had frequent discussions with my Committee on the question of whether my research would be considered indigenous, which in the context of Viet Nam refers to a perspective based on its cultural characteristics based mainly on its long-standing foundation, which has also been transformed by Confucian influence and by Western exposure. I often asked myself these questions in order to make clear the perspectives I would provide in the research analysis. With a combination of extensive Vietnamese background and Canadian post-secondary education, I find myself having the opportunity to explore issues from an ‘insider’ perspective using the tools I have learned from the ‘outside’. The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with certain information on the author’s personal and professional background, and relevant issues in the process of doing fieldwork in Viet Nam, and also to make sense of the way data were collected and analyzed in this research.

From personal to professional experience

I was five-years-old when Viet Nam was reunified in April 1975. Four months after the fall of Saigon, I went to school in grade one for the first time. My entire primary and secondary education was under the socialist system in Viet Nam. Growing up in the city once known as Saigon and then named Ho Chi Minh, one of the themes I often heard from mass media about ‘building socialism’ (xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội) was the ‘equality between males and females’ (bình đẳng nam nữ). To me, however, reality was far from the equality I heard about. I started to notice the social and cultural differences between women and men when I was about eight years old. It was when my mother, the head of Women’s Union in our quarter, told me a Chinese-Vietnamese saying ‘One son counts, ten daughters are worthless’ (Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô).
Learning about government women’s programs and activities from my mother, I often wondered how they could substantially improve women’s lives. Being raised in an intellectual family with both parents as teachers, we were however living in a neighbourhood known for its ‘social evils’ (tề nạn xã hội) such as prostitution, drug abuse, theft and gang violence. Everyday I witnessed not just widespread poverty, but also how women with their tremendous survival skills and patience strove to care for their families, especially in the years after reunification when many men went to re-education camps (học tập cải tạo). My parents’ ‘laisser-faire’ parenting policy, despite some of its limitations, had been a great opportunity for me to think freely and to pursue what I believed in. I was also fortunate to have knowledge of and first-hand experience of the three main local cultures of Viet Nam, by growing up in a family rooted in the Centre, and by interacting with Northern people living in the South.

I became very conscious of the differences in social expectations between women and men when I started upper-secondary school (Grade 10). That was the time for most of us to prepare for university entrance exams and to make future plans. Most of my female friends simply accepted the social and cultural arrangements that girls should settle for marrying young and having children, while boys were able and encouraged to pursue higher education and have a career. I, however, constantly questioned this in terms of economic efficiency, social fairness, and personal development. It became even clearer to me about the gender stereotypes that existed in the society when my physics teacher gave a session on career orientation. He said that girls should take a short training program in an ‘easy’ area then get married and have a family, and that they should avoid ‘difficult’ and ‘not suitable’ schools such as engineering. Despite his advice, I managed to pursue chemical engineering anyway for one and a half years before coming to Canada in 1990.

It seemed that the society in which I grew up believed in what was being said in Nguyễn Du’s Truyện Kiều (The Tale of Kieu), ‘how miserable is women’s fate’ (dâu đơn thay phận dàn bà). Girls were valued according to the four virtues: ‘hard work, beauty, modest speaking, and fidelity’ (công, dung, ngôn, hành), which in my opinion, besides some positive impacts, greatly limits their life experience and choices, and even lowers their self-esteem. They were raised to have only one purpose in life, that is, to get married and have children. It appeared that, despite all what they learned in school and from the mass
media about the socialist ideology of gender equality and the ‘glory’ (vinh quang) of participating in the work force to contribute to the society, they were still being constrained by cultural traditions that strongly pressured them to conform to expectations within the domestic sphere.

It seemed that each and every girl was trying to socially and culturally survive, and that she would never think about questioning why women were placed in subordinate positions. My heart felt for the generations of female children and young women of 1975. Many, when they grew up, could not find a spouse due to a shortage of men and thus silently suffered from being socially ostracized for not being able to fulfil ‘God’s mission’ (thiên chúc) of having children. Many others had to settle for unsuitable or abusive husbands, polygamy or being abandoned, and in general, most had to work long hours to earn income and to take care of their family. Many of my friends and people I know in Viet Nam became somewhat disinterested, or even ignorant, about social issues. It seemed that they were raised not to question. Under the doi moi (renovation) policy, some women became more interested only in earning a living and having a family.

Arriving in Canada in 1990, I was fascinated with the achievement in social equity here, especially gender equity, and its economic, social and legal protection for women. I was also disappointed to discover that I was uninformed in many areas. For the first time, I learned about the many sides of Vietnamese history, and about the development of many fields in social sciences and humanities. I pursued studies in economics in Bachelor and Master’s programs, believing that they would provide me with knowledge about poverty reduction in developing countries. At the same time, being deeply interested in social development, I have read books in other social sciences.

It was not easy for any Vietnamese woman with the same background as mine to enter social research. Intellectually, the lack of research and development of social sciences and humanities in Viet Nam also means that I lacked a broad knowledge of social theories. Emotionally, it seems to be almost impossible for a Vietnamese woman to decide to discuss social and gender issues, because she was raised to conform to cultural norms of the society. It would take tremendous courage to be able to analyze or be critical of prevailing convention. In addition, the pressure of earning a living upon arrival
in Canada as an adult does not create an incentive to pursue social research. All of my same-age friends who came to Canada at the same time chose to study a specific area which was more likely to find them jobs, such as computer science, engineering, or accounting.

Starting with a deep concern with the issue of poverty in Viet Nam, and inspired by my maternal grandmother who started her life as a poor, underprivileged girl but who strove to become a successful business woman and helped many poor people, I pursued a program of Bachelor of Commerce, Honours Economics at Concordia University (Montreal) and graduated in 1995. I continued my studies in a Master’s program in Economics at the University of British Columbia (UBC), graduating in 1996.

With support from Professor Geoffrey Hainsworth at UBC, I had a research associate position at the Centre for Southeast Asia Research, and made affiliation with Vietnamese social researchers in my first trip back to Viet Nam in 1996. In May-June 1997, I participated as organizer and translator in a study tour in seven provinces of Vietnam, which was led by Professor Hainsworth and involved a group of UBC graduate students. For the following six months, I worked closely with him as a consultant for the United Nations Development Programme in Viet Nam to write the Viet Nam’s first Human Development Report, with my contribution focusing on women’s and children’s issues.

In 1998, I received an internship from the Centre for Human Settlements at UBC to work for six months (April-September) in a Canada-Viet Nam project on ‘Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam’ (LPRV) funded by the Canadian International Development Agency. My work involved collecting information and materials on poverty reduction activities from bilateral and multilateral international organizations in Viet Nam.

In September 1998, I officially enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Interdisciplinary Studies and Asian Research at UBC with Professor Terry McGee as my supervisor, and received a graduate research assistantship to continue my work for LPRV. In November-December 1998, I participated as facilitator and translator for a training workshop on various poverty-related issues in five Vietnamese universities. In May 1999, I received a Southeast Asia Business Research Scholarship, funded by the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, to conduct research on women’s entrepreneurship in Vietnam. During this
summer, I also spent six weeks at Vinh University to do fieldwork in three communes within the LPRV project. I also received a small research grant from the Northwest Regional Consortium of Southeast Asian Studies to work on my proposal before carrying out field research.

I started my Ph.D. field research in Viet Nam in December 1999, thanks to an Doctoral Research Award from the International Development Research Centre, for a period of six months, mainly on a semi-urban commune in HCMC. In 2000, I also had the opportunity to participate in a training workshop in Đa Lạt, a study tour in the Philippines, an urban poverty workshop in HCMC, an IDRC gender training workshop in Huế, and research visits to four communes to collect data on gender and poverty. In September 2000, I received a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship for two years for the period of writing my thesis. During this time, I also participated in another IDRC gender training workshop in Hà Noi in May 2001.

My intensive experience in working in Viet Nam with social researchers, government officials and local people has given me the experience and knowledge which I think I could use to contribute to research on Viet Nam. I can especially take advantage of my language skills to have access to Vietnamese language materials which have not yet been made available in English or other languages.

Spending my childhood as a female living in poverty has given me a clear picture of what poverty really means for female children and women. I have come to appreciate the lessons of my childhood experience, as it provides me with a perspective that truly reflects the reality faced by the disadvantaged and underprivileged economically, socially and culturally. It is easy to read books about the poor or the disadvantaged such as women, but I believe that one needs a certain level and type of experience in order to be consistently accurate in reflecting the heart of the issues.

I believe that in order to address the issue of poverty, the voices of the poor must be heard and understood. By the same token, in order to address the issue of gender inequality, the voices of girls and women must be heard and understood. However, in reality, the voices of the disadvantaged are often ignored or muted, as the poor are often intimidated in expressing opinions because of their low status and vulnerable positions.
When growing up in Viet Nam, I was often taught in school about Viet Nam’s victory over the United States as the Vietnamese people perceived it. Since I had the opportunities to understand more from the American side, I have had a fuller view of Viet Nam’s winning the battle. Even later when I came back to Viet Nam and went to visit different revolutionary areas such as the Củ Chi tunnels, I came to realize that the United States defeat was unavoidable. It is the many Vietnamese social and cultural characteristics which guide their hearts and minds, and which would take time for outsiders to understand. The rationale for me to look at the issues in my dissertation from a social and cultural perspective is precisely this.

**Staying in Viet Nam: Legally a ‘Foreigner’, and Culturally a ‘Vietnamese Woman’**

Since my first trip to Viet Nam in December 1996, I immediately needed to adapt to my new identity as a ‘foreigner’ (người nước ngoài, as opposed to ‘Vietnamese’ = người Việt) when it came to legal issues, such as making contacts with government organizations including universities and research institutions, registering for temporary residency each place I stayed over, and even buying a domestic airplane or train ticket. However, with a ‘participant observation’ research approach and a personal preference of blending in with local people, I tried so that not many people could recognize me as an overseas person from my physical appearance or my Vietnamese speaking. Normally, only those in organizations I worked with and hotel staff knew that I was Việt Kiều (overseas Vietnamese).

My stay in Viet Nam in different regions as an ordinary local person was also facilitated by having a changeable accent when speaking Vietnamese. I could speak with three main accents: North, Centre and South. In addition, my use of words changed accordingly to suit local language. For example, monoglutamat sodium (MSG) would be called mi chính in the North, vi tinh in the Centre, and bột ngọt in the South.

Blending in with local people gave me a great opportunity to learn much about their lives before and after doi moi, especially women’s. Most people were open to talk to me,

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1 Precisely, I should be identified as ‘Vietnamese with overseas residency’ (người Việt Nam định cư ở nước ngoài), or often called ‘overseas Vietnamese’ (người Việt hải ngoại or Việt Kiều).
especially when I was not with my Canadian friends or colleagues, even when they knew I was not from their local areas. I always wish I had more time to spend with them, since each day I would learn something new, and it made me feel as if my research would not be complete or accurate if I left the area.

Appearing as a 'pure Vietnamese', despite all of its advantages, could sometimes get me into trouble caused by a few local people. I enjoyed a natural and spontaneous relationship with local people, but at the same time, I had to take care of myself from being harassed by a few locals such as drunken men or aggressive people. One time, a local restaurant owner in Quang Tri province was furious because she thought that I prevented her from overcharging the Canadian group by telling them how much their meals should cost. This situation often happened to me when I was present at a negotiation between a Vietnamese and a foreigner (to buy merchandise, to take a rickshaw or a motorbike taxi, etc.)

My personal experience with gender issues in Viet Nam has also given me certain insights on the subject (and I am always aware of and careful with the personal bias I might bring into my research). I have become more sympathetic to women in general, and poor, underprivileged women in particular. It has sometimes come to my attention how different my status has become, from being just an 'ordinary' young woman when I was still living Viet Nam before coming to Canada, to being an overseas person with Western education and foreign affiliation when I came back. My new status gave me a lot of privileges, not just in terms of enjoying a better material life, but more importantly, having more social advantages. I became less subject to gender discrimination as my socio-economic status moved up, and I was mostly safe from everyday harassment by some other people including 'ordinary' men. I believe that if I had never had the experience as an 'ordinary' woman, I would have never understood the kind of problems poor, underprivileged women would encounter everyday, how they would feel about their situation, and in general, how the issues of gender, class, and ethnicity could intertwine.

Professionally, in my work, sometimes Vietnamese people have mistaken me for being a man by just looking at my name. When I delete one word out of the three in my first name (which originally sounds very feminine), my name would sound like that of a man,
or at least it is hard to tell if this is a woman or a man. Without this intention in the first place, I often then just used my name in this 'unclear' way, as I saw it as a more gender-neutral way to present myself.

Fieldwork in Viet Nam

The first thing that comes to mind for any foreigner to conduct research in Viet Nam and their host institution is to apply for police permission. This process could take at least one week and sometimes involves a lot of work for the host institution. When I travelled for fieldwork with other Canadians, all of us applied for the permission together as a standard procedure. However, when I was the only 'foreigner' travelling with other Vietnamese colleagues, I had a more difficult time to obtain the permission because some felt that I did not need a permission since no one could tell that I was from overseas. I however always insisted on obtaining a permission because otherwise it could be risky.

Before carrying out my own PhD research, I often participated in fieldwork with Canadians as a facilitator/organizer/translator in about 20 provinces and cities. Although my role was often put down as 'merely a translator', I was in fact having a crucial role in helping to get the message across especially when misunderstanding or cultural differences was perceived as potentially causing problems for both sides. But the most satisfactory aspect of doing this work was to be able to receive the most information from both sides, and this has given me knowledge and experience which later became invaluable for my research.

We often spent about two to four days in each commune to collect data and information from interviewing local leaders and members of households and from observation. I was often impressed with the persistence and tireless efforts by the Canadian teams I was with in trying to achieve as much as they could during such as short time with a lot of language and cultural barriers.

The teams' sense of humour was one of the key factors to keep us moving despite everyday difficulties we faced along the road. The 'pigs and chickens' incident in Thái Nguyên province became one of my 'legends'. In our country-wide poverty research trip in 1997, we were repeatedly told by the group leader that each time we visited a
commune, we would need to listen to the People's Committee reporting on exactly how many pigs and chickens the commune had produced. The group leader often further commented that after the lunch following the meeting, we would need to reduce the number of chickens by one, because one chicken had been served for lunch!

We did well in many meetings during the trip, although the atmosphere often became humorous for us each time the People's Committee was preparing to report the exact number of pigs, chickens and other livestock. It was only in the meeting with a government organization in Thái Nguyên province that the humour went too far, while I was too exhausted to keep it under control and thus not able to translate for the group.

**Photo 1. Field Trip in Thái Nguyên Province, 2000**

The presence of Canadian researchers could sometimes be an obstacle in fieldwork. Most of all, Vietnamese local leaders and people saw the Canadians as outside guests, and thus tended to answer the question in a general, diplomatic way. A local guide (usually male) was always assigned by the local government to take us to places that had been planned beforehand, which sometimes greatly limited us to where we could go and whom we could meet. With the presence of the local guide who was often a local leader, members
of households sometimes felt intimidated and often tried to be very careful in their interviews.

Therefore, in order to 'offset' this limitation, I often tried to meet with some of local leaders and people without the participation of the Canadians, usually during lunch and dinner or other idle time. This was to establish an informal relationship with local people and to obtain additional local information which they would not provide in the presence of the 'outsiders'. Each time our bus or car had a problem and we had to wait to get it fixed, I would take advantage to meet with local people around the area to have an unstructured, informal interview with them. Sometimes, the information seemed to be trivial but when put together, it could be useful. I often listened to stories about some households getting rich thanks to their successful businesses, while some falling into difficulties due to unexpected illness or death; stories about local internal conflicts; or stories about domestic violence against women, unreported child rape, or children being born out-of-wedlock.

A common problem which most researchers encounter was the expectation by local people to be given immediate assistance. This is a very subtle issue, and I became very careful about it. People in different regions have different ways to express their expectation. Northern people would almost never ask for anything directly, while Southern people are more direct, and Central people would be even more insisting in receiving something.

It is also a problem when it comes to compensation for local people who participate in interviews or discussion groups. The most common problem involves the selection of participants. Since there was money involved, it sometimes happened that the participants were not representative because most of them were friends of the local guide whom we asked to select the participants. In these cases, I often had to choose the participants myself based on the basic information on the households in the area, and at the same time, tried not to upset the local guide. Another problem, which rarely occurred but it happened to me one time when I did fieldwork in a Central province, was to keep the meeting time and location a secret in order to avoid too many uninvited guests.
Ph.D. Fieldwork in Tân Tạo Commune

I carried out my own PhD research from December 1999 to June 2000 in Tân Tạo commune, Bình Chánh district, HCMC. I received tremendous support from the Vietnamese colleagues from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (CSSH) in HCMC. They helped arrange police permission, prepare transportation, introduced me to local leaders, and provided me with their previous research results and data and information on the commune. I could say that the help I received from CSSH colleagues was the best compared to what I could have had from other institutions in other parts of the country. It could be partly because HCMC has had more experience in working with foreign researchers and also received more funding (except in comparison with Ha Noi), and the overall living standards of the city is higher which made it easier for CSSH members to support their guests.

However, despite all the help I received, there remained certain problems while doing fieldwork in HCMC, which seemed to be unavoidable. It would not be fair if I mentioned too much about these problems here, because I think they exist everywhere in Viet Nam and even to a much higher extent in other parts of the country. So instead, I just want to provide an excerpt\(^2\) (see Box 1) on the problems of sharing information, written by a scholar from the Ha Noi Institute of Sociology, in order to illustrate some of the problems which any researcher would encounter in Viet Nam.

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**Box 1. Some Real Stories on Sharing Information in Social Research**

*Not knowing availability of books located in the same building:* In 1994, I visited the Institute of Southeast Asian Research, National University of Singapore. When I saw some interesting book titles, I asked our friend if I could have them. The friend said s/he already gave 300 books to our Institute of Southeast Asia Research last year, which I did not know of.

*Helping researchers to find information is very important:* Also in 1994, when I visited a research centre in University of Michigan, I went to the library of the centre to see what they had. I asked for some books which seemed to be interesting. The two librarians could not find them, asked each other, then asked others, then found out that these books were only in the university library. The librarians then tried to show me where to go and how to borrow these books. A few days later, one of them saw me and enthusiastically

\(^2\) Translation note: I translated all the excerpts from the Vietnamese sources cited in the thesis (which could be identified by the Vietnamese scripts in the authors’ names).
asked me whether I found them. [The story implies that he would not have received the same kind of help in Viet Nam in finding the books he needed.]

_Not knowing who in the same research institution is doing what:_ In 1998-99, I participated in an ADB project in health care for ethnic minority people in four Mekong River countries. In a meeting, representatives from the countries addressed the difficulties in obtaining information. During a break, a project manager told me: ‘You have lots of advantages, because last year your Institute had a very good report done on this topic.’ I did not know anything about this, but quickly responded: ‘Oh, yes, yes.’ Then when I went back, the first thing I did was to look for the author of the report.

_Can not sell what has been paid for or what one does not own:_ In 1999, when implementing the ADB project mentioned above, I visited a university in a mountainous area to look for materials. When I asked if I could have access to the reports by the university, a university manager replied: ‘These are the results of a lot of work done by many people, so if you want to have them, there should be something in return.’ I guess he meant ‘paying’. But I asked him: ‘That’s right. But whose money was used to carry out the research?’ There are still many people who are confused about copyrights and ownership of materials and information.

_‘I want to have information from you, but I will not share the information I have’:_ In 2000, a government organization who was in need of information organized a workshop to discuss collaboration among research institutions and policy-making organizations. This organization had a need to receive and to provide information. The director spoke very enthusiastically at the workshop about his organization’s need to receive and to share information. However, as I know afterwards, it was very difficult to obtain any information from his organization. Many people still do not understand that information needs to be exchanged and shared, that this process can not be just one-way, and that once given, information is not lost but on the contrary [it is still there and further developed.]

The above stories imply common but serious problems in sharing information in social research in Viet Nam which already suffers from the lack of research and development in social sciences and humanities due to many years of war and international isolation. The problems vary from the lack of sharing foreign materials even among scholars working in the same building, to having to deal with unenthusiastic librarians, lack of information on colleagues’ research activities, having to pay for previous research reports, to encountering countless difficulties in receiving data and information from certain organizations.

Source: Bùi Thế Cương (2001)

**Collecting secondary data and information**

In collecting secondary data and information to prepare for my proposal and field research, I read books and other publications on the emerging issues in Southeast Asia which are related to my research focus, such as the link between women’s issues and
urbanization, the prevailing conventional application of WID (women in development) and GAD (gender and development) in various countries, women’s and economic issues in socialist countries, and the overall relative situation of Viet Nam in the region and in the world.

Publications on Viet Nam since đổi mới (1986) are very useful and contain valuable information on the current situation of the country on different issues and from various standpoints. I had access to these publications mostly through the Viet Nam Resource Centre organized within the UBC Centre for Southeast Asia Research (collected by Dr. Hainsworth in his numerous trips to Viet Nam) and also through UBC libraries. Statistics books on Viet Nam are also useful but need to be put in a particular context to make sense of data.

Publications in the Vietnamese language are especially useful and interesting. I would have missed much information and knowledge on the country if I had not had access to them. In my view, they contain much relevant information concerning Viet Nam to which researchers need to have access in order to give a more accurate picture of the country. In deciding on which Vietnamese sources to be used for this study, I tried to carefully select only the sources written or edited by known authors in the subject areas.

The most pertinent are publications in Vietnamese language on issues related to gender. They are a valuable and credible source to obtain data and information on gender issues from a Vietnamese perspective. Most of these books were collected during the time I was working or doing research in Viet Nam. I believe that if these materials are accessible to non-Vietnamese researchers, it would greatly improve the richness, relevance and quality of gender research in Viet Nam (to name a few, Lê Thị 1996, Nguyễn Linh Kiều 1999, Nguyễn Minh Hòa 1998, Nguyễn Thị Oanh 1996, Trần Thị Văn Anh 1995.)

Collecting primary data and information

In general, data and information provided by commune leaders through key informant interviews and commune reports are helpful in providing an overall picture of the changing socio-economic situations in the commune. However, it is often fragmented, subject to unreliability and errors, and often not gender disaggregated. Therefore, only a
small proportion of this data was actually used. Data and information on women are mostly in forms of reports from the Women's Union, with much emphasis on women's achievements in planned programs without much discussion on emerging gender concerns.

I relied much on qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, life histories, and observation within the selected sample. Discussion subjects were often changed from gender issues to credit needs since people were more concerned about improving their livelihoods. Often, I had to approach gender issues indirectly to gain the information and opinions. As gender relations are embedded in the culture, it takes a longer time to record the relevant observations and to stimulate rich discussions from the informants.

Using and analyzing information and data

Part of the quantitative data came from commune reports as mentioned above. Data from a survey of 300 households by CSSH in April-May 2000 was particularly useful to back up findings resulting from qualitative data, from individual interviews, focus group discussions, life histories, etc., within the sample. A small survey were also carried out within the sample to determine people's perceptions on certain issues such as the importance of girls' education and women's and men's domestic roles. Both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated and used to make sense of data by identifying patterns, making comparisons, and looking for relationships among factors. Data were interpreted and analyzed within the context of the commune, scaled up to the country-level by including previous research findings and data in other parts of the country in order to properly generalize for the case of Viet Nam.

Like most Vietnamese women, as well as women around the world, I have also been part of the struggle between work and family. When my Vietnamese colleagues learned that I was about to have my first child during my studies, they often joked that I would do a 'research on giving birth' ('nghiên cứu đẻ') before doing my research as a 'Ph.D. candidate' ('nghiên cứu sinh'). In Vietnamese language, 'Ph.D. candidate' is 'nghiên cứu sinh', with 'nghiên cứu' = 'research', and 'sinh' means 'sinh viên' = 'student', but 'sinh' can also mean 'sinh đẻ' = giving birth.
Although personal bias would be unavoidable, I hope to use my personal and professional experience to make a contribution to knowledge on social research and development in Viet Nam, and to make the voices of disadvantaged people heard and bring greater well-being and broader opportunities to them.

My realizing what I call higher gender equity in the ‘First World’ has often been my inspiration to be part of the efforts in improving ‘Third World’ women’s well-being, not only economically, but even more importantly, their social and cultural welfare. By including historical and cultural variations, it is hoped that the study gives an accurate picture of women’s experiences and the values attached to these experiences. The purpose of this study is thus to offer a perspective which might be closer to an *indigenous* approach as an attempt to present one interpretation of Viet Nam in the larger international women’s movement.
CHAPTER ONE.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS, OBJECTIVES, DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research Problems

The research focuses on women’s well-being in the context of *đổi mới* in Viet Nam from an *indigenous* perspective. The concept of indigenous in the context of Viet Nam refers to its cultural foundation which is often described as ‘three-layer’: an indigenous culture being transformed by Confucianism and then by recent Western influence (Trần Ngọc Thế 1997, Phạm Xuân Nam 2000). It examines how cultural traditions play an important role in gender relations in the development process in Viet Nam. It analyzes human development issues in Viet Nam from a cultural perspective, and deduces implications of how cultural factors can affect the well-being and future prospects of women and female children.

The rationale for this research is to identify and analyze factors related to Vietnamese history and culture which shape gender relations, which can be relevant to the process of gender development. These factors need to be further researched in order to develop more effective socio-economic policies and to ensure the objectives are achieved. International perspective on gender development can provide a useful framework through which to promote women’s emancipation, but Viet Nam may need to follow its own evolutionary path to gender development which involves blending with the living roots of its distinct history and culture. This will facilitate local people’s aspirations in a manner to which they can relate and participate.

The research relies upon a conceptual framework to examine key selected gender-related human development issues in Viet Nam during the transition period, analyzed from a social and cultural perspective. Most research on human development in Viet Nam addresses issues such as education and training, legal protection, and social and family relations, but does not always look at or present much analysis of the gender aspects from a socio-cultural, indigenous viewpoint. While human development is strongly related to the social and cultural environment in which people are living, a careful examination of gender issues in the socio-cultural context is indispensable in order to capture a more
realistic picture of the opportunities and challenges faced by the people, especially women and female children.

One approach that might be taken to the thesis is to discuss how Viet Nam has adapted to the international gender and development approach and related feminist studies in efforts to improve women’s well-being. There is no doubt that many governmental and international programs draw active stimulus from this approach. While this approach is important, the author has chosen to focus on the Vietnamese contextual setting in which gender development is carried out. Basically, it might be argued that the Vietnamese are negotiating and adapting such approach from an indigenous perspective and it is this process of that the author wishes to investigate.

Thus, the five main questions to be investigated in the thesis are:

a) Regarding the concept of and efforts to achieve women’s emancipation that characterize the international discourse on gender and development, how applicable are these approaches to Viet Nam’s historical, cultural and political context?

b) How have history and cultural traditions helped shape gender relations in Viet Nam today?

c) Given the impacts of cultural factors on gender relations, how successful have the national and international efforts been in supporting and improving the interests of women and girls in Viet Nam since doi moi was implemented? What are the constraints caused by the persistence of social and cultural norms?

d) How has the process of transition from central planning to a socialist-oriented market economy improved women’s well-being at local levels? Has the struggle to adapt to new socio-economic environment, while at the same time preserving traditional values, placed women in more disadvantageous positions than men?

e) With regards to women’s well-being, how do different aspects of women’s situation, and different sets of values, need to be identified and included in a socio-economic and cultural analysis for policy making?
It is noted that there are two main perspectives on gender research in Viet Nam as follows, according to Nguyễn Linh Khieu (1999: 93). The author’s approach is identified as coming from the former:

'The first perspective is based on Western feminist theories to apply these to the case of Viet Nam, taking into account Eastern-Asian socio-cultural traditions. This perspective considers women as community members, therefore their situation and development are closely related to those of other community members. Through this lens, family is a community, and the woman is one of the two most important people in every family.

The second perspective considers feminist theories as standard and applies them to research on Vietnamese women... The main focus of this perspective is to give prominence to individualism, which in this analysis is 'the woman'.

1.2 Research Objectives

The main goal of the research is to contribute to an understanding of the gender aspects of human development in Viet Nam from an indigenous perspective, and to identify the scope for more effective national policy-making and international development initiatives in promoting gender equity and human development. With an emphasis on a Vietnamese perspective, the five main objectives of the research are mainly corresponding to the aforementioned five research questions, i.e.:

(1) To identify how the gender and development approach can be applied in Viet Nam in a way that is compatible with its history, its fundamental cultural values, and its political context;

(2) To examine the role of cultural traditions in gender relations in Viet Nam today;

(3) To analyze the success of national and international efforts in supporting women and female children since đổi mới, as well as the limitations caused by the persistent of social and cultural norms;

(4) To analyze the dynamics of changes in gender relations at local levels in the transition period from a social and cultural perspective; and

(5) To deduce implications of cultural factors in policy making to achieve human development for women and female children.
1.3 Research Design and Methodology

In order to address the above research questions and meet the above five research objectives, research methods used were decided to be both qualitative and quantitative in a dominant-less dominant design, with the dominant paradigm as qualitative and a minor component of the whole study drawn from the quantitative paradigm. According to Creswell (1994: 177), '[t]he chief advantage of this approach is that it presents a consistent paradigm picture in the study and still gathers limited information to probe in detail one aspect of the study.' He also indicated the disadvantage of this approach which stems from the concerns from both qualitative and quantitative purists in terms of the match between the two paradigms. However, in this study, the design combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches was adopted due to its perceived benefits and significance which outweighs the shortcomings, as discussed below.

The underlying reasons for selecting a qualitative paradigm as the main component and a small quantitative segment of the study involve factors such as my worldview, training and experiences, the nature of the research problems, and the audience. First of all, in selecting a main qualitative approach in this study, the assumptions, as suggested by Marriam (1988), include factors such as, as a qualitative researcher, I am:

1. concerned primarily with process rather than outcomes or products, and would like to have close communication, contact and relations with the people selected in the sample in particular and with the population in the site in general;

2. interested in meaning, that is, the way people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their points-of-view and structures of the world; and

3. focused on seeing reality as subjective and would like to make an effort to present the issues from the people's perspective rather than an outsider's one. This is particularly unique and significant in the study, since I intend to incorporate my own personal experience and living skills in this community setting to closely interact with the people in order to further explore aspects in their lives regarding gender and well-being issues.
My extensive fieldwork experience in Viet Nam, my training in qualitative methods, gender studies and international development in an interdisciplinary approach, and library experience with qualitative publications and texts have also set a firm background for my qualitative approach in this study.

The nature of the research problems in this study is also better suited for a qualitative approach. The need to explore fuller information on these issues so as to shape an understanding of the situation from an indigenous viewpoint is better suited to a qualitative approach. In addition, the use of a qualitative approach is suitable because the research process tends to be inductive since I intend to build abstractions, concepts and hypotheses from empirical information.

There are a few reasons for having a small quantitative component in this study. Since there were a limited number of informants, interviewees and focus groups, a quantitative survey of a sample from the commune can be used to obtain certain types of data. As Morse (1991) suggested, this ‘methodological triangulation’ can be used for qualitative and quantitative approaches. In this particular study, simultaneous triangulation was used, i.e. qualitative and quantitative research questions were answered at the same time, and they might or might not relate to or validate each other. As well, I can use my skills from training in statistics and econometrics to work in this quantitative component. Overall, I find that mixing methods can help ‘to find contradictions and new perspectives, and to add scope and breadth’ (Creswell 1999: 189) to this study.

Primary and secondary data are used intensively and complement each other. Secondary data sources in English and Vietnamese were carefully reviewed before doing field research, including literature on studies on the international discourse on gender and development, reports on women’s issues in Viet Nam since đổi mới by international organizations and by Vietnamese researchers, as well as various Vietnamese sources such as newspapers, journals, arts, etc., and especially Vietnamese sources of cultural studies relating to the current socio-economic situation.

Primary data on the concerned gender issues (see conceptual framework on page 25), both qualitative and quantitative, was collected by the author in a six-month fieldwork period in Tân Tảo, a semi-urban commune in Ho Chi Minh City (see Appendix 2 for a
selected list of open-ended questions and survey questionnaire used for individual interviews; also see section "Methods and Tools".\textsuperscript{3}

There was also quantitative data collected by CSSH researchers in a survey carried out in April-May 2000 which I was permitted to use. This used a sample of 300 households randomly selected from the list of the four hamlets (the number of households selected in each hamlet corresponded to its population). This data was used in this study for the purposes of providing background information on the commune (such as the demography and the economy) and supporting the findings resulted from the data on the commune collected by the author.

I have also consulted the quantitative data from the statistics in the Viet Nam Living Standards Surveys 1992-93 and 1997-98, and two important reports by Desai (1995 and 1999) using data from the two surveys, as well as other macro data available in published documents. However, I have come to the decision to place less emphasis on macro data because the gender differences revealed by this data needs to be put in particular socio-cultural contexts which are not available from the source.

\textbf{Sample selection.} With a total population of about 22,989 people (in 3,606 households) as of 2000, the sample selected for this study (mainly qualitative with a quantitative survey) consists of 72 people, covering different groups according to the following three main criteria:

\begin{enumerate}
  \item sex: females and males
  \item residency status: permanent residents and migrants
  \item age: children, youth, middle-age, and elderly
\end{enumerate}

Other criteria that were also used to take into account the wide variation in people’s social and economic background include:

\begin{enumerate}[i)
  \item wealth: rich, average, poor, very poor (assessed by commune officials based on their reported income and also by other social factors, e.g. involvement in social evils)
  \item employment/work: market traders, farmers, service providers, factory workers, and government-paid employees (cadres, teachers, nurses, etc.)
\end{enumerate}

\textsuperscript{3} My fieldwork in the commune was from early morning till evening (the routine day was much similar to where I grew up so I decided not to stay overnight considering the logistics involved.) During the six months, I spent about five weeks away for other research-related work which was very useful later on for this study in terms of collecting relevant research materials.
The sample chosen also represents a wide range of situations, including households receiving international project assistance and those which do not, those receiving varying levels of assistance received from the National Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) programme, having either active or non-active mass organizations at the quarter level, and informants having various traditional handicraft, differential access to market and to remittances, etc. in order to ensure the widest possible representation of local situations to enrich the research findings.

The participants were selected in all four hamlets based on the list suggested by commune officials at the request of the researcher to include the main demographic characteristics specified in Table 1. About 30 from the list were removed by the author due to lack of cooperation, difficulties in setting up the appropriate time to meet, or repetitiveness (after the criteria of wealth, occupation and others were taken into consideration). They were replaced by other community members (selected by the author) who were seen fitted the required criteria for the study.

**Table 1. Main Demographic Characteristics of Tân Tạo Survey**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>72 people</th>
<th>48 females</th>
<th>24 males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32 residents</td>
<td>16 migrants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8c 8y 8m 8e</td>
<td>4c 4y 4m 4e</td>
<td>4c 4y 4m 4e</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$c =$ children, age 6 to 17  
$y =$ youth, age 18-34  
$m =$ middle-age, age 35-60  
$e =$ elderly, age over 60

**Methods and Tools**

Literature from Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese sources were reviewed before the field trip. Secondary data on the commune were collected from CSSH researchers and from commune officials, using techniques of key informant interviews, mapping and well-being ranking. Key informants were local government officials and staff of mass
organizations (Women's Union; Farmer's Association; Agriculture/Forestry Extension Association; Savings Group; Veterans' Association; VAC Association, etc.)

Quantitative data on related gender issues was gathered from the following three sources: published official data from the General Statistical Office, unofficial data collected from government officials and representatives of international organizations, and surveys within the sample (in the form of face-to-face interviews with selected participants on the concerned issues.) Qualitative data was collected using research techniques such as key informant interviews, field observation, case studies, and life history.

Specifically, in individual interviews with 72 people of the sample (about two to three hours each), the tools used included division of labour analysis, seasonal activities calendar, social network mapping, gender myths, institutional diagramming, well-being tree (and ill-being tree), women's subordination tree, gendered priority ranking, and solution ranking. These tools offered visual and conceptual perspectives from the respondents on the concerned issues, which were drawn on paper by the interviewees or with help from the author. However, these perspectives often needed to be clarified and followed up for in-depth information by open-ended discussions later in the interviews.

Structured focus groups were organized for women (one group), men (one group), mixed women and men (one group), and children (two groups, one for older and one for younger children), with seven to nine participants in each group selected and invited by commune or hamlet cadres. These structured focus groups were useful in getting general discussion about the issues being raised. In addition, to overcome problems of some participants hesitating to speak in a group, and of a few participants dominating the discussions, about eleven unstructured and spontaneous group discussions (three to five participants in each group, often on a voluntary basis rather than with compensation as in structured groups) were also conducted during the fieldwork whenever the opportunity came up. Efforts were made to include migrants and local residents and those with different socio-economic and occupational backgrounds in these discussion groups.

One-third of the participants (24) were selected to be interviewed for life histories. The selection was based on representativeness of their situation, their ability to express their opinions, and their availability and willingness to be interviewed.
1.4 Conceptual Framework

The research focuses on three main areas: (1) education and livelihood security, (2) social and family relations, and (3) legal protection. These are areas in which gender and human development are closely inter-related and might have synergistic cause-and-effect inter-dependingencies on one another, and arising from which there are many gender-related problems faced by women and girls.

**Education and livelihood security.** Two of the most fundamental issues regarding policy design to address persistent poverty are education and livelihood security. Women's employment in particular has become a particular concern since doi mői due to the lack of state support for them in the context of the increasingly impersonal market economy. The extent to which state-owned enterprises have laid off female workers, for example, along with the promotion of private sector that has absorbed female labour, deserve closer analysis.

Meanwhile, in rural areas, with the collapse of cooperatives, the move to greater reliance on the family production unit has given households more autonomy and wider production choices, but at the same time, it has also in many cases imposed a heavier burden upon women. Credit programmes targeting women, on the other hand, have provided some improvement in livelihood opportunities to women and their families. However, the process of economic and social change has raised many additional problematic issues such as sexual discrimination in job recruitment, women's displacement, wage differentials, an increasing number of female-headed households, women's relative lack of land ownership, and frequent lack of access to credit and technical assistance, etc. (UNDP 1998) Many of these issues had been mitigated or 'solved' under the socialist system (before doi mői), and have now reappeared, or emerged in a different form since then. Sexual division of labour within the household was not much challenged even during the socialist period (Molyneux 1987), and in many ways has been reinforced and made more rigid and inequitable since doi mői.

The 'feminization of poverty' has shown signs of charting a noticeable trend upward in that there are now many more poor female-headed households, higher rates of unemployment among women, and their tendency to concentrate in informal sector
livelihoods (Trần Thị Văn Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng 1997). Issues of unpaid household labour, work overload, and the assumptions regarding the elasticity of women’s labour, all need to be closely analyzed in the current socio-economic context of Viet Nam. Education and training for girls and women are often considered the main means by which to improve women’s access to employment, though many social and cultural factors seem to play a crucial role as well. Micro-credit programmes for poor women in Viet Nam have met with some success, but more extensive availability, flexibility, and effective planning are needed to effectively reach the poorest (Đỗ Thị Bình and Lê Ngọc Lan 1996). Other outstanding issues include improving market access for women’s domestic production, and other poverty-related issues such as child labour especially the exploitation of female children.

**Social and family relations.** Many gender issues in Viet Nam are embedded in the nature of family relations, which all require detailed intra-household and cultural analysis. Social relations are the larger context of family relations, within which many aspects of gender inequality must be understood in order to provide an informed social background for effective planning. Trần Ngọc Thêm (1997) points to certain key cultural characteristics of the Vietnamese people and society that are especially relevant to gender and poverty reduction planning, such as their respect for stability and relationships, and stress on the need for harmony in social relations, including gender relations. These ‘cultural identities’ have significant implications for gender planning. For example, a flexible and non-confrontational approach would be more appropriate and more strategic (likely to succeed) in planning for practical and strategic gender interests. It is also necessary to assess the relevance of gender and feminist theories and approaches (Baden and Goetz 1997) in regard to the Vietnamese context. For instance, women in Viet Nam might prefer ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ to confronting and challenging it due to the high social value placed on harmony and conformity.

**Legal protection.** Legal protection is one important aspect in gender planning for poverty reduction, as the poorest are also the most powerless in society, and women’s inferior status makes them economically, physically, emotionally and sexually vulnerable in their families, in the workplace, and in the community at large. Domestic violence is still
widely prevalent partly due to economic hardships impacting poor families (Đỗ Thị Bình 1997), and especially when more women have to enter into undesirable marriages due to shortage of men in their cohorts or localities. Ownership rights for women, protection from employment discrimination, and harassment in the workplace all have critical legal implications that concern women's well-being.

The root cause of gender inequalities can be clearly seen to be linked to unequal negotiating power between women and men, and Viet Nam is a special case in which women have substantially lost this power over men after reunification (Goodkind 1995). Apart from losing their formal (or allegedly) equal economic, political and legal status, the severe demographic imbalance, with high female/male ratio over most age cohorts, has seriously affected women's negotiating power in the household and in the marriage market. Negotiating power can also be related to the socially and culturally formed 'entitlements' governing access to resource shares and the process of 'socialization of inequality' (Papanek 1990). The allocation of more household and social responsibilities to female children makes them more vulnerable to exploitation for their whole lives compared to the less onerous obligations assigned to boys.

Gender-sensitive planning can be a means to challenge gender hierarchy in society and in the family especially when it is combined explicitly and effectively in poverty reduction programmes and projects (Ostergaard 1992). The task is to challenge gender bias in the entrenched and socially prevalent perceptions of women that are harmful to them in so many ways, and to get at the root-cause explanations arising from socially-induced rather than biological causes. This calls for policies and programmes targeting women's needs in integrating good health and nutrition practices, education and training for girls and women, adequate child care provision, and enabling and facilitating support for women's social and occupational mobility. As for intra-family patriarchy, careful intra-household analysis is required in order to provide information for policies designed to reduce the power gap between women and men in household decision-making.
CHAPTER TWO.

GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT -
AND OVERVIEW OF ITS APPLICATION IN VIET NAM

The last few decades have witnessed much improvement in women’s position in society and in the family. In Western societies, and also to a lesser extent and in a very different arena, in Viet Nam, gender and development has become one of the main themes in the development discourse. While being mainly initiated in developed countries, the women’s movement has tremendously benefited women in developing nations by raising these key issues and prompting attention of scholars, the media, women’s organizations and policy makers. The extent to which developing countries can integrate into this gender and development process to be discussed later in the chapter varies from one to another, depending on each country’s specific history, cultural, social, political, and economic situation.

Viet Nam has shown itself to be one of the ‘special cases’ because it has not been able to be part in this international gender development discourse partly due to war disruption before 1975 and international isolation between 1975 and 1986. There are also more fundamental and entrenched factors, as well as a wide consensus among policy makers, in society at large, and even it would seem among women and women’s organization that favourable conditions already exist for the improvement of gender relations. The following is a short survey of the historical development of gender and development theory and practice, and an overview of how it is conceptualized and relevant to the case of Viet Nam.

2.1 Historical development of gender and development theory and practice

This section will start by recognizing the initial stage of the inclusion of women in the development process by referring to Boserup’s pioneering work, and then briefly discusses the main events of the international women’s movement. It will outline the main trends in theory and practice from Women in Development (WID) to Women and Development (WAD) to Gender and Development (GAD), and identify the main theories on the ‘woman question’. Finally, it will consider the policy approaches to Third World
women, and the main gender issues in international development, and sum up the preceding sections in terms of its relevance and potency for Viet Nam.

1. Historical background

During the 1950s, national, international and multilateral ‘development projects’ were planned supposedly to ultimately help the poor in developing countries through what was subsequently known (and belittled) as ‘the trickle-down effect’. The aid (mostly in the form of loans to purchase materials, advice and technology from the West) did not work (certainly not in comparison to confidently announced expectations), and in fact led to the widening gap between the First and Third Worlds while the problems of poverty persisted. In the first UN Development Decade (1961-1970), the disparities continued due to the dominance of political and economic interests of donor countries and administering agencies (Nerfin 1977). In the early 1970s, while the key priority issues of economic development were being challenged, the issue of women’s socio-economic situation emerged as a previously neglected and increasingly urgent topic for discussion in the international development arena (and especially within the Western more developed countries).

Ester Boserup’s *Women’s Role in Economic Development* provided economic data from three continents as a documentary evidence that Third World women were being increasingly marginalized due to their lack of access to resources and technology. Other problems included the imposition of ‘Western values’ in administering aid and policy advice, which seriously undermined the value and dignity of work done by women, while elevating that done by men, and especially the under-recognition of women’s role in agricultural production, and the negative impacts this depreciation of ‘women’s worth’ had on societies. Her work thus called for major changes in the development of programmes on the grounds of both justice and efficiency (Tinker 1997: 34). Some concerted, continuing efforts were then made to include women in project planning and to emphasize the improvement of women’s livelihoods.

The International Women’s Movement provided the impetus for the UN International Women’s Decade and three UN conferences (Mexico City 1975, Copenhagen 1980 and Nairobi 1985). The fourth conference in Beijing (1995) highlighted women’s rights in
terms of gender equality in decision-making, representation, education for girls, freedom from violence, and called for governments' commitment in implementing the Beijing platform. Women's issues also emerged in other UN conferences (Visvanathan 1997).

2. Trends in theory and practice of WID, WAD and GAD

The WID approach was applied in the early 1970s, following Boserup’s study which highlighted the sexual division of labour in agrarian economies, and the differential and relatively negative impacts of ‘agricultural modernization’ on women. Closely linked with the prevailing ‘modernization theory’ and striving to take a non-confrontational conciliatory approach, the WID campaign contributed to making the ‘woman question’ much more visible in the development discourse. It called for the need for women to be integrated in economic systems, planning and implementation, emphasizing women’s productive roles, and minimizing the negative impacts of modernization theories and plans on women. Critiques of this approach began to emerge, saying that it wrongly assumed that women were not already integrated in some way into the development process, and did not question the root-sources of women’s subordination, because it overlooked issues of class, race and culture, and ignored the undervalued reproductive aspects of women’s lives (Visvanathan 1997, Moser 1993).

To overcome the limitations of modernization theory and the WID approach, WAD emerged in the second half of the 1970s, drawing upon the ‘dependency theory’, and focusing on the relationship between women and development processes, the role of ‘women’s work’ in the public and private spheres in maintaining societal structures, and criticizing the ‘integration process’ as serving to sustain the existing international structures of inequality. However, this second phase of the women’s campaign also failed to offer strong analysis of class and racial issues, in analyzing patriarchy and women’s subordination, and in again not addressing the importance of women’s reproductive roles (Ostergaard 1992).

In the 1980s, being increasingly influenced by socialist feminist thinking, GAD emerged and provided a more holistic perspective on the various and different aspects of women’s lives. It sought to identify the social construction of women’s and men’s roles in production and reproduction as the fundamental cause and means of women’s
subordination and oppression; analyzes women’s oppression in the family; focusing on
gender relations, i.e. the relations between women and men, instead of just women, and
portraying women not simply as passive beneficiaries but rather as vital agents of change.
It also rejected the public/private dichotomy and recognized women’s many contributions
inside and outside the household; emphasizing the State’s role in providing social
services to promote women’s emancipation; focusing on strengthening women’s legal
rights and challenging the existing power relations between women and men in society
and in the family (Rathgaber 1997).

3. Approaches or theories on the ‘woman question’

The ‘woman question’ (Evans 1994) refers to the reasons for women’s subordination in
society and in the family, and the explanations of and elaborations being offered on the
causes, forms and variations of this subordination. The different approaches vary in their
ways of identifying the sources of women’s oppression, the mechanisms which
perpetuated the oppression, the proposed solutions on how to achieve gender equity, and
how the women’s movement and its campaign should be directed. The four main
approaches or theories as generally classified are (1) liberal feminism, (2) traditional
Marxist feminism, (3) radical feminism, and (4) socialist feminism (Freedman 2002, see
below). There are also many other approaches and variations, such as eco-feminism,
cultural feminism, and post-modern feminism.

*Liberal feminism.* This theory sees women’s subordination as primarily rooted in sexist
‘sex-role conditioning’. It suggests that women’s subordination is manifest in social
discrimination because of their sex, that the liberal values are also geared to benefit
women, and calls for reforms in sex-role socialization in the family and society, through
specific state support programs.

*Traditional Marxist feminism.* This approach links women’s oppression to capitalism,
rooted in the sexual division of labour and especially of industrialization. It proposes that
women’s liberation is thus dependent on the overthrow of capitalism, to be replaced by
socialism which embodies gender equity, and women’s struggle, as part of the broader
class struggle to overthrow the exploitative capitalist system.
Radical feminism. This theory considers patriarchal sex oppression as to be the main cause of women’s oppression. It proposes that patriarchy is the essential structure of all societies throughout history. The women’s struggle is thus seen as independent of the class struggle, and women need to organize themselves as a ‘class’ or politically focused interest group to assert their freedom from the biologically determined oppression.

Socialist feminism. This approach combines patriarchy and capitalism as the sources of women’s oppression. It endorses the need to eliminate capitalism (but by gradualist rather than violent revolutionary means), and recognizes that socialism per se is not a sufficient condition for women’s liberation, so women must also have their own autonomous liberation movement.

4. Policy approaches to Third World women

Many different policy approaches have been suggested or designed to assist low-income women in Third World since the 1950s. These approaches reflect changes over different periods in terms of macro-economic policy and social policy towards women. They differ in their origins, primary purposes, the roles recognized, the practical or strategic gender needs being met, and the means and methodologies to include participatory planning procedures. According to Moser (1993), the five main approaches are:

The welfare approach. The purpose of this approach is to bring women into development as better and healthier mothers. Women are seen as passive recipients, whose reproductive role is recognized, and policies stemming from this perspective are generally designed to meet practical gender needs.

The equity approach. Women are seen here as active participants in development, and thus the policy priority is to support and meet strategic gender needs in terms of women’s triple role (production, reproduction and community management.)

The anti-poverty approach. The purpose is more than a welfare approach and seeks to ensure increased productivity of poor women, with policies designed to meet practical gender needs to improve income earning.

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4 Practical gender needs are those ‘which arise by virtue of their gender in the existing division of labour’ such as income earning, housing, health care, food, fuel, etc., while strategic gender needs ‘arise out of their subordination and are formulated in terms of a more satisfactory organization of society’, addressing the issue of women’s subordination and the need to transform gender relations to achieve better gender equality (Ostergaard 1992: 91).
The efficiency approach. The aim, pragmatic rather than ideological, is to ensure more efficient and more effective development, through policies that meet practical gender needs by relying on women’s triple role and the elasticity of their time allocation.

The empowerment approach. The purpose is to empower women through helping them gain greater self-reliance. It recognizes women’s triple role, and aims to meet strategic gender needs through bottom-up mobilization around practical needs.

2.2 Overall situation of the application of gender and development in Viet Nam

Although protecting women has been a national goal in Viet Nam since the formation of the Women’s Emancipation Association in 1930, the country has, in reality, only started to be ‘open’ to influence by the international women’s movement since đổi mới. It evidently adhered to a broad ideology of ‘gender equality’ stemming from the international communist movement. On the one hand, this implies the need for time to catch up with the international level of gender development, especially in terms of the knowledge and research gap. On the other hand, Viet Nam has the opportunity to learn from the weaknesses of previous approaches such as WID and WAD, as well as the pros and cons of policy approaches taken in Third World countries, and revisions and refinements of theories and discussions of the ‘woman question’.

Theoretically, the GAD approach with roots in socialist feminism would seem quite compatible and relevant to the gender development process in Viet Nam. It could help to provide a holistic view, looking at all aspects of women’s lives, and seeking to identify different sources and causes of women’s oppression: socio-cultural (e.g. patriarchy), as well as economic and political. It recognizes that patriarchy operates within and across class and race to oppress women, and considers intervention to be necessary to prevent and mitigate the oppression at the family level. Socialist feminism thinking also recognizes the need for women to have their own autonomous liberation movement to ensure that women’s issues are fully and intelligently addressed. It is not concerned with women per se, but also includes men in the discussion, which enables it to be compatible with firmly held local norms. It views women and men as complementary, and thus their rights should not be discussed separately.
In practice, international programs and projects with a GAD focus in Viet Nam have met with positive results (National Women’s Union 1997, Lê Thị 1999b, Trần Thị Văn Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng 1996). Income-generating projects for women aimed at poverty reduction have not only supported women in increasing access to income-earning opportunities, enabling them to be more economically active, but they have also integrated social and environmental aspects of development with women’s interests. Promotion of good health and nutrition practices, maternal and child health care, education and training for girls and women, and gender and environmental awareness has been a part of most women’s projects and proposals in Viet Nam in recent years. The integration of women into these projects and planning processes can also help to challenge antiquated but still prevalent perceptions of women (such as being weak, intellectually inferior, and lacking in initiatives and self-confidence) by providing alternate explanations of their predicament which are recognized to be socially induced rather than biologically determined (Ackerly 1997).

International organizations have also provided many opportunities for Vietnamese to obtain gender training in and outside Viet Nam (Lê Thị 1999). Gender training has also been provided to government officials, teachers and selected students, Women’s Union cadres, and members of other mass organizations. These training workshops have helped raise gender awareness in Viet Nam to a considerable extent. These organizations ‘work within’ and ‘work to change’ (Ackerly 1997: 140): in general, they follow the structure of the prevailing institutional and cultural norms, and they also work towards changes in perceptions and practices that may be harmful to both women and men.

The success of GAD in Viet Nam, however, remains limited, as data on gender relations in the đổi mới period suggest that modernization, socialist reforms, and women’s increasing economic power have not necessarily led to improved gender equality or to have radically transformed gender relations (Goodkind 1995). Despite the relevant theories and approaches discussed above, many problems have emerged in practice as discussed in section 3.3 that will be elaborated upon in the chapters to follow. Addressing these issues will require careful adaptation and negotiation in designing a significantly improved gender development approach by the national government and international
organizations if their efforts are to more effectively support the women’s movement according to the GAD discourse.

2.3 Gender and development considered as not yet being applied in Viet Nam

Since 1986 when the country officially ‘opened up’ to the international economy and broader community, GAD has been integrated to varying degrees in different national and international programs and projects in Viet Nam. It should be recognized that, no matter to what extent this integration has or has not been formally assessed to have been a success, it has undoubtedly contributed significantly to improving gender equality and promoting gender development in Viet Nam, not only by raising gender awareness but also by practically putting it in action.

However, the fact that Viet Nam experienced extremely destructive wars with France and the United States, and subsequently endured constraining international isolation, has imposed many difficulties especially in the areas of economic and social development, and access to international assistance. It is to be expected therefore that Viet Nam would have considerable difficulty in ‘catching up’ with the world in this regard, even if the prevailing political and social outlook had been fully receptive to acceptance of foreign values and lifestyles.

After more than a decade since GAD was said to be one of Viet Nam’s ‘key approaches’ in development planning, programs and projects, there is a general consensus that Viet Nam has not been able to fully or effectively carry out this approach (Đỗ Thị Bình 1999, Phan Thanh Khôi 1999). Instead, it still seems to be in the period of ‘catching up’ with the WID approach, which was a prevailing international discourse as far back as the first half of the 1970s, and which now is seen to have serious faults and limitations. Đỗ Thị Bình, former Director of the Centre for Family and Women’s Studies in Ha Noi, has offered this assessment of Viet Nam’s application of GAD in gender research:

‘We recognize that the analysis and interpretation in our research in the beginning period [late 1980s to 1999] has been focused on women in development (WID), not yet gender and development (GAD). This is absolutely obvious, and also suitable to the development context of Viet Nam. We are a few decades behind the world in terms of the development of many areas of studies, and therefore we are also behind in theories of women’s studies, women in development as well as gender and development...
... In general, gender training materials have not been suitable for trainees who needed knowledge on gender. The materials often too much emphasized on *women in development* perspective, that is, focused too much on women, which often made male trainees strongly react in an opposite way to the intended purposes of these materials.' (Dỗ Thị Bình 1999: 39, 45)

Lê Ngọc Lân (1999: 138) also acknowledges that Viet Nam has not fully reached GAD in gender research:

'[F]rom theories to applying to research, there is still a gap. Although the issue identified as gender, research has still been on women and for women's benefits, and has not gone beyond the 'women in development' approach. This has led to a situation in which some workshops on evaluating women's haves and have-nots in the beginning period of đổi mới often became the time for women to 'air their grievances' [đỗ khờ, the term often used during the land reform period when landless labourers accused landlords with their grievances, as the author wants to make the analogy that women tend to accuse men for their grievances.]

Phan Thanh Khôi (1999: 274) has addressed the consequences of Viet Nam's being behind the world in not seeing the differences between WID and GAD in gender research and teaching:

'Gender perspective refers to a standpoint in research which addresses the relation between women and men. However, current gender perspective in Viet Nam (in both research and teaching) has had a weakness, which is the insufficient attention to its philosophical foundation. As a result, it has affected both the depth and attractiveness of gender knowledge. At the same time, it has caused common limitations in current gender research and teaching. We addressed some of these limitations which need to overcome, such as considering 'gender' the same as 'women', without seeing the differences and progress of GAD compared to WID...

Not seeing the differences between WID and GAD will be not seeing new progress in women's movement in the world during the last decades. In gender research and teaching, it will lead to the lack of representative relatedness to great values of gender perspective to the development of women's movement in particular and of the movement of social progress in general.

Although the above excerpts only addressed the situation of gender research and teaching in Viet Nam rather than the overall application of GAD in women's programs and projects, they can reveal the difficulties Viet Nam has encountered in applying the GAD approach partly due to the chronological gap causing it to be behind in women's movement (see Table 2.)
Table 2. Viet Nam Has Been Behind in the Application of GAD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International</th>
<th>Viet Nam</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First half of 1970s</strong></td>
<td><strong>Women in Development (WID):</strong> Linked to modernization theory; calling for the need to integrate women in economic systems, emphasizing women's productive roles, and minimizing negative impacts on women. Viet Nam was engaged in war with the United States; the North pursued socialism, putting women's and men's efforts in the cause of national liberation; the South supported by the United States pursued capitalism but unstable due to the war.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second half of 1970s</strong></td>
<td><strong>Women and Development (WAD):</strong> Linked to dependency theory; focusing on the relationship between women and development processes, emphasizing the role of women's work in the public and private spheres in maintaining societal structures, and criticizing the integration as sustaining the existing international structures of inequality. Viet Nam was reunified in April 1975; women and men mobilized to build the country from aftermath under socialism in the context of international isolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1980s</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gender and Development (GAD):</strong> Influenced by socialist feminism; focusing on gender, the relations between women and men, instead of just women, and seeing women not simply as passive beneficiaries but rather agents of change; emphasizing state’s role in providing social services to promote women’s emancipation; and focusing on strengthening women’s legal rights and challenging the existing power relations between women and men in society and in the family. Viet Nam was under economic difficulties like other communist countries (former Soviet Union, the Eastern European Block, and China), and was still experiencing international isolation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Since 1986</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gender and Development</strong> has been the main international discourse. Viet Nam opened up with đổi mới policy; <strong>Gender and Development</strong> has been said to be integrated in development programs and projects; but until 1999 gender</td>
</tr>
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specialists in Viet Nam admitted that it was still under Women in Development and has not yet been able to apply Gender and Development.

The next chapter follows by addressing changes in gender relations over historical periods in Viet Nam and the main aspects of cultural and traditional practices affecting gender relations.
CHAPTER THREE.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN GENDER RELATIONS AND THE NEED FOR VIET NAM TO ADAPT TO GAD APPROACH AND THEORIES

This chapter aims (1) to provide information and analysis on the changes in gender relations over historical periods in Viet Nam, (2) to examine some of the cultural factors affecting gender relations in Viet Nam, and (3) to identify the underlying reasons for Viet Nam to negotiate and to adapt to the GAD approach and theories in order to be effective in improving gender relations and women’s well-being.

3.1 Gender relations over historical periods in Viet Nam

3.1.1 Chinese colonization (214 BC - 937) and Independence period (938 - 1874)

Under the prevailing Vietnamese system prior to the commencement of Chinese colonization (before 214 BC), women had clear individual property and inheritance rights, were economically and politically active, could act in their own right, and enjoyed high status in society, and children did not bear their fathers’ name. Women are reputed to be the discoverers of rice and other crops and to have been mainly responsible for establishing irrigated wet rice cultivation in the Red River Valley (independently of its being ‘invented’ at about the same time in Java and in China). Land was periodically divided among the families and the work of cultivating fields was done collectively. Dignitaries were both female and male, mainly exercising political leadership at local levels, and leaving little power at the central level (Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết 1973).

Under Chinese rule (214 BC - 937), the introduction of Confucianism created a link between poverty and the decline in women’s relative status in family and in society. Confucianism was gradually reinforced in Viet Nam, due to strong identification with the upper class. Allegiance to Confucianism also came from many male Vietnamese peasants who were given administrative privileges in their villages and control over communal lands (Wiegersma 1988).
The Chinese also extended their influence through the introduction of new methods of production, which gave men a more important role in agricultural production than earlier, and created the modern patriarchal peasant family. The new production and administrative system favoured individual peasant landholding with families (represented by male villagers) assigned 'private rice fields' (tự điện). Villagers were required to work on 'public rice fields' (công điện), produce from which accrued to the village leaders. High taxes were also imposed on peasant families to support Chinese officials in Viet Nam and to provide tribute to China (Wiegersma 1988). Poverty for the majority of households was a logical consequence, which later helped the Vietnamese administrative and landowning class in mobilizing support from the peasants in overthrowing Chinese rule.

After independence was regained (in 938), Confucian practices were overthrown to the extent that they were considered as having been culturally and politically inappropriately imposed by the Chinese invaders, and indigenous Vietnamese institutions were re-instated. Mandarins lost their central power, while local aristocrats resumed their political leadership. Women regained some of their property rights, were able to become more economically active, making transactions on their own behalf (rather than only through men). Their position in society and among the aristocracy was heightened. Peasants participated in labour conscription and paid taxes to the Emperor, and in some areas, were obliged to provide income to local aristocrats. (Nguyễn Tài Thư 1997)

During this time, conflicts in political power began to arise between local aristocrats and the mandarins (who were often small landholders and public administrators). Mandarins gradually reinforced their central power through alliances with the peasant patriarchs who started to take control over village administration away from local aristocrats, and through the Emperor, limiting the power of local nobility (Wiegersma 1988). As this process occurred, the Confucian hierarchy was again reinforced, women's status gradually deteriorated (although the effect this had on the incidence of poverty is not clear.) The rest of this section shows that, with independence from China, Confucianism was by no means totally overthrown. It reappeared from time to time, and worked to consolidate central power and to defend Viet Nam from outside attack.
At the time, Viet Nam was under threats of invasion from both China and Champa (now Southern Viet Nam, at the time the homeland of the Cham people, whose descendants are today’s Cambodians), in addition to its own peasant revolts and outbreaks of anarchy. In the 14th century, an upper class of Vietnamese mandarins and scholars started to gain control through Confucianism. However, Buddhism was still popular among the lower class due to its consistency with Vietnamese indigenous traditions of pacifism, renunciation of property and power, and respect for women. Tensions between the Vietnamese indigenous tradition, which showed high respect for women, and the practice of Confucianism, which put women in lower positions in family and society, became part of the social gap between the villagers and the ruling class. Scholars and bureaucrats made a conscious effort to maintain the Chinese-style family system and to distance themselves from the peasants by using only the Chinese language. In contrast, the villagers preserved their historical Vietnamese culture and used the Vietnamese language (Nguyễn Dàng Duy 1998).

Confucianism became the new religion-philosophy increasingly central to both urban and village political and social life. It was the domain of men, who wielded the real power, while Buddhism, in contrast, was the main domain of women, especially older women. The two doctrines co-existed and often required the rulers and local leader to make careful compromises so as not to cause any contradictions and factionalism among their subjects. The interweaving of Confucianism and Buddhism carried on over the succeeding centuries and still co-exists even today. (Phạm Xuân Nam 2002. This will be further discussed in Chapter Five.)

The urban ruling class was well aware of the tensions between traditions and official rules, and tried not to create conflicts. One of their compromises made in regard to the rights of wives and daughters was the Hồng Đức Code (1483) of the Lê dynasty, which gave women equal inheritance rights, the right to divorce, and legal protection from domestic violence. In this period, although poverty did not seem to be as prevalent due to the low tax payments and greater security of people’s basic livelihoods that followed from the creation of peasant private-property-holding, the patriarchal peasant family did result in men’s increasing control over women in domestic spheres.
Subsequent political conflicts occurred in the 1560s between the Trịnh, a family of administrators in the North, and the Nguyễn, a family of high officials in the South. Heavy taxes were imposed on all productive activities to pay for the frequent wars and the costs of expanding bureaucracy. Rice prices rose to a non-affordable level for many poor tenant farmers. Poverty became more widespread, and the recurrent crises triggered several unsuccessful peasant uprisings. The Tây Sơn Rebellion in the 1770s reunited the country, and Nguyễn Huệ became king. Under the Tây Sơn dynasty, the Chinese model was abolished and replaced once again by the indigenous Vietnamese system: women were given more rights, and participated in production and in the army; the bureaucracy was reduced; the heavy tax system was removed; and, village education was improved to help bridge the gap between rich and poor families. However, following the death of Nguyễn Huệ, and under French influence, the next five kings of the Nguyễn dynasty (from 1802 to 1874) made a strong return to the Confucian bureaucratic system, which reached new heights of complexity and excess. The old tax system was enforced, and women’s rights once again were deflated or taken away (Shackford 1992).

In summary, the analysis of this period of Vietnamese history (938 - 1874) shows that women’s status largely depended on whether Confucian practices were in place and being enforced, and people’s well-being in turn depended significantly on whether internal/external conflicts were occurring. Confucianism was used to reinforce central power, which worked to prevent external invasion, but which also created the potential for internal conflicts. Patriarchy took away women’s ownership rights and worked to confine them to domestic spheres. However, to a certain extent, the impact of Confucianism was moderated, and its influence varied in degree by different regions, and by the resilience of indigenous Buddhist beliefs that assigned women higher positions in society. Confucian practices were first introduced under Chinese rule, but by no means disappeared after Viet Nam finally gained its independence.

3.1.2 French Colonization and Anti-French Revolution (1858 - 1954)

Insofar as profits are seen as the main focus of colonization, the French occupation and control significantly affected the poverty situation in Vietnam. Forced labour, heavy taxes, and monopolies over many products were introduced. Land was put up for sale
with ownership becoming much more concentrated, which resulted in a larger number of
landless tenant farmers. Raw materials (such as rubber, coal, and tin) and commercial
crops (such as coffee and tea) were extracted for export, and peasant workers were paid
extremely low wages.

Although Christianity had certain influence on a small part of the population (Trần Ngọc
Thêm 2000: 19), gender relations in this period were again influenced by the persistence
of Confucian practices from the previous Nguyễn dynasty. In the traditional villages
before the revolution in 1945, women were not allowed to participate in the council of
notables, which was now a domain strictly exclusive to men. Women’s spheres of
influence were mainly in the domestic and lower-respected community-management
contexts, and thus they had much less social and intra-family power than men. Their main
functions included transplanting rice, working with other women in community work,
and marketing local products. Having control over trading activities did not necessarily
signify a high status of women. In fact, trading was considered the lowest rank in the
occupational hierarchy under the Confucian system (in the following order: sỹ: scholar,
nông: peasant, công: craftsman, and thương: merchant). Men’s disengagement from
trading was also due to their wish to avoid the suspicion of officials regarding the
potential for uprising, while women were not considered to be in the public sphere and
thus were not seen to pose a potential threat (Wiegersma 1988). Child-marriages,
concubinage, arranged marriages and polygamy were commonplace, although polygamy
and concubinage were mostly practiced only among high officials and other wealthy
strata of society.

An early form of feminism, which advocated women’s rights and protected them from
social injustice stemming from Confucianism, emerged in this period. In Huế where the
Nguyễn Dynasty was based, a progressive woman named Đặm Phương (1881-1947)
became one of the pioneers in advocating women’s rights (Lê Minh Quốc 2001). The
main messages she communicated to other women were that, in order to achieve gender
equality, women first must have good characters (dực hạnh) and talents (tài năng), both of
which came from a combination family education and formal school training, at least
through primary level, and that with the basic knowledge accumulated, women must then
have an occupation to become economically independent and be able to contribute to their families, rather than being dependent on husbands and sons. In 1926, she founded the ‘Nữ công học hội’ (the Union of Women’s Work Learning), with its teaching going beyond housework to cover career training for women. This was a radical movement and received support even from strict parents who often allowed their daughters to participate. However, the Union activities became difficult when the French intervened and arrested her in 1929. Subsequently, the Women’s Union was established with a larger scale and higher political structure, but with the same principle of ‘gender equity’ and recognizing the importance of women’s participation in the revolutionary force seeking national independence.

Another advocate for women’s rights, Phan Bội Châu, a revolutionary and intellectual in the late 19th century, came across the progressive thinking of gender equality in his efforts to participate in national defence. He educated the people to overthrow Confucian-type gender discrimination to give women better lives. In his article in ‘Phụ nữ Tần Văn’ newspaper on Confucian theory of ‘three submissions’, he said:

‘The ‘three submissions’ were invented by the Confucian rulers in previous time. Not only did they want to control their followers’ lives but also to decide the fate of their wife and children... ‘Submitting to father’ might be necessary, because female children need to listen to adults. But then ‘submitting to husband’ [after getting married] starts to become wrong. Both husband and wife must be good for the family to be good. If a woman unfortunately marries an evil husband, why does she have to submit to him to become evil as well? Then the third submission to son [after becoming widow] is absolutely wrong. Why do mothers have to submit to their sons, especially in case their sons are mischievous, destroying the family, why do they still have to submit to them? (cited in Lê Thị Quý 1998)

The nationalist movement to overthrow French colonialism was led by Ho Chi Minh, who established the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930. The Women’s Union was founded in the same year, with its main functions being to encourage women’s support for the Communist party and the national independence movement, and to generally advocate for women’s interests. Following the end of World War II and Viet Nam’s Independence Declaration in 1945, and as part of the introduction of socialism in the North, the first Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in 1949 stipulated that ‘women are equal to men in all respects’.
In Vietnam’s southern and central villages in the 1950s, the introduction of capitalism accelerated the breakdown of the traditional patriarchy family, which was increasingly replaced by nuclear families. The males still had a dominant role in production and marketing but lost substantial village patriarchal control, and their authority was largely dependent upon the social network of extended families. Widows and separated women could be recognized as heads of their own families, and, as such, their property rights were recognized. The shift from unpaid to wage labour also significantly improved women’s status in the family and in society, although their wage rates were only about two-thirds those of men. Marriages were still often arranged, although free choice of marriage partners became more common. Wives were not obliged to move into their husbands’ family’s house (or just for a short period), and this greatly helped women avoid conflicts with mothers-in-law, as often had been the case before. The buying and selling of land created a gap between two classes, the wealthy landlords and the landless tenant farmers, but the gap was not as serious as under French colonial rule.

Interestingly, in poor landless families, women tended to gain more power, while in better-off families with large land holdings, women did not have as much access to paid employment and thus often did not gain this independent economic power. Traditionally, the male head controlled all family property, and also had ultimate domestic decision-making power. When he and the family became landless, his wife’s unpaid labour no longer went to him and they both had paid work, resulting in what might be regarded as an impoverished but more equal status between husband and wife.

3.1.3 Viet Nam War Period (1954 - 1975)

**Socialism in the North.** Following the Geneva Accords in 1954, Viet Nam was divided into two parts at the 17th parallel. The North was under control of the government of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, and pursued a socialist path. Land reform occurred subsequently, under which women were officially given a share in the land redistribution. Before the reform, a majority of women did not belong to the ruling elite, so now were officially deemed to have been ‘victims of crimes committed by landlords and the elite’. The reform gave them opportunity to participate in landlord trials. At the same time, the reform also became a campaign to overthrow ‘feudal’ (phong kiến) attitudes and
practices, such as arranged and child marriages, polygamy, social acceptance of wife-beating, etc. (Wiegersma 1988: 140) The first Marriage and Family Law in 1959 emphasized the principles of free choice of marriage partners, monogamy, equality between husband and wife, and the legal protection of women’s and children’s interests. Collectivization was institutionalized in the socialist economy, and, overall, substantial economic equality was ensured. As for gender equity, the Article 24 of the Constitution states that:

‘Women enjoy equality with men in all spheres of activities - political, economic, cultural, at home and in society. ... There should be equal pay for equal work. ... The state guarantees women employees fully paid maternity leave both before and after birth.’

Women could earn incomes (mostly in kind) by working in cooperatives, and this greatly improved their status in the family (although their incomes were still lower than those of men for reasons stated below). Women also benefited from the provision of child-care facilities. The war with the United States in the South in the late 1960s necessitated higher women’s participation in decision-making and management in both agricultural and industrial production, as well as in high-level village administration. The WU in this period was assigned three main responsibilities: to take up slack in agricultural and industrial production, to assume leadership positions in both household and local administration, and to encourage their male kin to fight for reunification (Goodkind 1995).

Nevertheless, patriarchy in the family economy still persisted in the North (to a much greater extent than in the South). Under the cooperative work-point system, male work often was assigned more points than female work. Women also worked on their families’ small private plots of land to support household consumption, and made traditional handicrafts for sale in the private market. Women’s leadership roles during the war, however, were regarded as only temporary, as it was generally accepted that men would resume their leadership status after returning from the war. Overall, however, women in the North made significant advancements toward greater equity and acceptance of equal participation in social, economic and political activities as a result of socialist movements and official proclamations of gender equality.
US-supported capitalism in the South. The changes in gender relations in the South were marked by women’s involvement in wage labour and the breakdown of extended families (as discussed above). A small women’s movement in the South was led by Trần Lê Xuân, the wife of Ngô Đình Nhu (a brother of Ngô Đình Diệm, President of South Vietnam). According to Lý Nhán (1998), the ‘Movement of Joint Women’ (Phong trao Phụ nữ Liên đội) and ‘Half-Military Women’ (Phu nữ Ban Quân sự) were organized within the South government. The movement was also seen as serving the military purpose of recruiting women into the army. Other involvement by Trần Lê Xuân in government affairs, such as the Family Law No. 1/59 in 1959, appeared to many traditionalists (male and female) to fundamentally violate the principle of harmony in Vietnamese gender relations. ‘Domestic and international press at that time strongly opposed the law, because it went against the traditions in daily life of Vietnamese families, and especially not suitable to the current socio-political context’ (Lý Nhán 1998: 134). Moreover, the women’s movement did not provide a systematic and explicit plan to support and advance women’s interests. The movement dissolved after Ngô Đình Diệm was assassinated and a new government took over under the leadership of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

Polygamy was most common among the rich and high-level officials, and prostitution was widespread in larger cities (and especially Sai Gon). Under forced villagization and urbanization, aimed at destroying the rural bases of communist insurgency, many rural women moved to cities and to settlements adjoining United States military bases, where there was a high demand for sexual services. Much of the blame for such ‘social evils’ have been attributed to American imperialism, and to the fragility of Vietnamese social fabric during a period of major upheaval, while the internal and traditional causes of prostitution were generally not emphasized in the public or official discussion (Truong Thanh-Dam 1990: x).

The communist movement in the South also organized interest groups of women, mostly for political purposes. Nguyễn Thị Bình led the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Viet Nam and also the Long-Haired Army to mobilize women’s forces against the United States and the South government. The Women’s Committee to Defend the Right to Live, also emerged as part of the political struggle in the South (Eisen-Bergman 1974).
3.1.4 Post-reunification period (1975-1986)

After the fall of Sai Gon in April 1975, Viet Nam began the process of reunification, post-war national reconstruction and consolidation of socialism in the context of international isolation. It was intended that the whole country would follow the socialist model that had been established in the North. This implied major changes in many aspects of political, economic and social arrangements in the South, but not as extreme as in the North. A major setback in gender relations, however, did occur in the North, as men took back leadership positions and began to re-assign women to traditional roles.

In the South, gender relations were most strongly affected by the break-up of many families (temporarily or permanently), as many men went to ‘re-education camps’, or left the country as ‘boat people’. Young men, especially, left to avoid reprisals and economic impoverishment, hoping to send remittances home to support their families, and to avoid being conscripted into the army in the new outbreak of wars with China and Cambodia (after 1978.) Many women thus became ‘head of their family’ during this economically difficult time. The persistence of prostitution in the South, despite government’s attack on ‘social evils’, was still blamed as one of the negative ‘U.S. imperialist legacies’. Only a decade or so after reunification, with the introduction of đổi mới, was prostitution recognized to be an indigenous ‘social evil’ and a much more complicated problem.

The socialist ideology on gender equality was introduced in the South, and was embraced by many who had hopes for positive social change. However, the nation-wide traditional sexual division of labour was still reinforced at home and at work due to an eroded commitment to social equity. Resistance to collectivization was common in the South including incidents of ‘fence-breaking’ (Fforde 1996).

Women’s employment patterns in this period also differed between North and South. The North had a longer experience with the state-owned enterprise economy, while the informal sector was more dominant in the South. It has recently been recognized that the ‘socialist woman’ in Viet Nam was not so much liberated as assigned ‘double’ workloads and responsibilities. Although the state tried to support women’s employment by providing education and training, job opportunities and social services, the forms and effects of sexual division of labour did not simply disappear (Molyneux 1987). Moreover,
the imposition of collectivization in the South to some extent reinforced the patriarchal peasant family economy, which had partly disintegrated due to the switch from unpaid labour to wage labour during the 1954-75 period (Wiegersma 1988: 241).

Gender equality was also affected by the demographic imbalance in the post-war period due to the incidence of war deaths, family separation, and male out-migration. Besides a number of single women who could not find a husband due to a shortage of men, many others had settled for unequal relationships. Single women are still highly represented among state forestry workers and other occupational groups with low income, such as textile workers, teachers and nurses. Since đạo mới (1986), with the establishment of industrial zones and male migration to cities, the number of single women employed as industrial workers and farmers who were left behind in villages has increased.

In general, during this post-war period, women have played a crucial role in the survival and resilience of the family economy, and have been characterized by their patience, endurance and the many sacrifices made for their families during a very difficult time of national crisis and transition. However, they were also the group most prone to poverty and subject to various kinds of violence. The đạo mới policy introduced in 1986 has led to significant improvement in living standards, and there have been more specific policies promoting women's well-being, as well as stronger law enforcement to protect women. However, gender inequality still persists.

3.2 Cultural aspects of gender relations in Viet Nam

In this section, the concept of 'culture' in the context of development in Viet Nam will be discussed, followed by an analysis of three main aspects of Vietnamese cultural dualism (matriarchy vs. patriarchy, Buddhism vs. Confucianism, and tradition vs. modern values.) The importance of community and family in Vietnamese culture will then be examined.

3.2.1 'Culture' defined

The term 'culture' has been used extensively in the general academic literature, and has been the subject of a huge literature produced by anthropologists, sociologists and ethnologists. As Geertz quoted Ward Goodenough, 'culture [is located] in the minds and hearts of [people], and that 'a society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know
or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members’, with the school of thought of cognitive anthropology maintaining that ‘culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behaviours’ (Geertz 1973: 11). He also quoted Clyde Kluckhohn’s *Mirror for Man* list of definition of culture as

‘(1) ‘the total way of life of a people’; (2) ‘the social legacy the individual acquires from his group’; (3) ‘a way of thinking, feeling, and believing’; (4) ‘an abstraction from behaviour’; (5) a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; (6) a ‘store-house of pooled training’; (7) ‘a set of standardized orientations to recurrent problems’; (8) ‘learned behaviour’; (9) a mechanism for the normative regulation of behaviour; (10) ‘a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men’; (11) ‘a precipitate of history’; and turning, perhaps in desperation, to similes, as a map, as a sieve, and as a matrix.’ (Ibid: 5)

Relating the concept of culture to human behaviour, Geertz said:

‘Culture is most effectively treated...purely as a symbolic system (the catch phrase is, ‘in its own terms’), by isolating its elements, specifying the internal relationships among those elements, and then characterizing the whole system in some general way – according to the core symbols around which it is organized, the underlying structures of which it is a surface expression, or the ideological principles upon which it is based’ (Ibid: 17).

Within the Asia-Pacific region, the concept of culture is often related to the issue of values, such as ‘Asian values’ and ‘family values’, with basic cultural patterns being influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism, Shinto, etc. The region’s seemingly political inferiority but cultural superiority has inspired many academics to undertake research on the positive impacts of cultural factors on national development, such as ‘work ethic, thrift, diligence, respect for educational achievement, avoidance of overt conflict in social relations, loyalty to hierarchy and authority, stress on order and harmony’ (Berger 1998: 19).

The term ‘culture’ currently being defined and used in Viet Nam has been under the influence of its new, ‘opening up’ situation. The launch of the *đổi mới* policy, or socio-economic and administrative renovation, has been credited for the subsequent rapid development of a multi-sector economy in Viet Nam, and a significant improvement in the living standards of the majority of its people. However, this process of rapid socio-
economic change has also given rise to serious concerns regarding cultural integrity, such as the need to promote cultural development while preserving indigenous cultural values and national cultural identities in the face of modernization and the relentless spread of globalization. Many Vietnamese scholars have pointed to the shortcomings of strategies to promote rapid economic development based on other-country experience, and their perceived negative consequences such as widening inequalities, economic polarization, rising unemployment, environmental pollution, in addition to social, cultural and ethical deterioration. At the policy level, these concerns have also raised many issues, including the role of culture in development, and how to promote a more harmonious and effective integration of traditional culture with modernity.

The popular Vietnamese perspective regarding culture, and specifically morals and ethics, can be gleaned from an old saying ‘People can build ethics only after having enough food’ (Có thức mới vực được đạo). With Viet Nam’s long history as an economically under-developed country, its people are accustomed to having to struggle for their basic needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Meeting these basic needs is the most urgent and indispensable prerequisite that takes priority over all other aspects of human existence. However, as Phạm Xuân Nam (1998: 9) has pointed out: ‘No matter how important food (thức, or human needs in a broader sense) may be, we must not forget that the ultimate purpose of having food is to build ethics (dào, or non-material aspects of life in a broader sense), with a meaning of human morality (dào nghĩa).’

In Viet Nam, concern over ‘preserving national cultural identities’ refers to the need to maintain the positive aspects of its culture, such as family values and human morality, in the midst of the rapid changes in those aspects of human and social relations that could be considered immoral or improper. How the term ‘culture’ is used, understood and appreciated is critical to the urge to preserve cultural traditions, respecting morals and ethics, a civilized way of life, and defending these traditional values from intrusive influences that might negate, depreciate or undermine them.

There have been many definitions of culture to be found in Viet Nam, as in most other societies. For example, Vũ Khiev (ibid: 309) has said that ‘Culture reflects the
achievement level which people and the society have built', while Nguyễn Hồng Phong (ibid: 309) defined culture as 'what people have created; it is human creation.' In his 'culture for development' approach, Phạm Xuân Nam defined culture in terms of a people’s accumulated knowledge and how it should rightfully be used:

'In this approach, the first and foremost factor of culture is knowledge, including scientific knowledge, experience and wisdom accumulated in the process of learning, working and struggling, in order to maintain and enhance the life of each national community and its community members. However, knowledge alone cannot build a culture. Knowledge can become culture only when it works as a foundation for right conduct, and provides directions for human behaviour in relations with other people, with society, with nature, and with oneself, in order to attain 'the genuine, the good, and the beautiful' (chân, thiện, mỹ) inherent in human capabilities.' (ibid: 22)

In a similar manner, Hoàng Trinh (1999: 91) also defined culture as 'the development process of a community through which people continuously expand their activities in order to achieve a more improved living environment, and a more peaceful, more stable and better future in terms of both material and non-material aspects'.

Culture can thus be understood either in a more restricted sense, as in literature and arts, or in the broader sense as the whole system of thought, values, morals, ethics, behaviour and lifestyle, and including the mass media (Phan Hồng Giang 2000: 451). Nguyễn Hòa (2000: 148) observed that 'Whether in a broad or restricted meaning, culture is always working towards the ultimate objectives of human development, for the improvement and development of human capacities.'

_The role of culture in development_ has been a major focus for scientific research, and is now an especially important consideration for Viet Nam’s policy makers since the opening up of the country for foreign trade, investment, tourism, and all the related cultural influences that have entered and permeated Viet Nam under đổi mới. Scholars and political leaders have studied the recent development models of other countries, and have observed that, while many have achieved accelerated economic growth and development, they have also experienced serious social, cultural, and environmental problems (for example, Phạm Xuân Nam 1998). This has given Viet Nam’s planners and policy makers pause for thought.
In 1991-92, following the International Decade for Cultural Development of UNESCO, the Institute of Social Sciences of Viet Nam organized two workshops on culture and development. Among the topics discussed were: the cultural approach to development, Vietnamese culture in the course of development, and culture and development from a Vietnamese perspective. In general, participants strongly agreed on the important role of the national cultural identities as a driving force and a moderator of development, 'through liberating, stimulating and multiplying the creative resources inherent in each person at both individual and community level' (Vu Khieu 1993: 309). At the policy level, there were many recommendations, especially the need to develop the strength coming from the community tradition, but at the same time, to overcome the downplaying of the role of individuals in economic development, as well as the need to pay attention to preserving family values and protecting the environment.

Under the heading 'building and developing a Vietnamese progressive culture with strong national identities', the government’s National Resolution 5 has stimulated a diverse and rich discussion on the current relationships and possible harmonization between Vietnamese traditional and modern cultures. The discussion has been especially extensive and animated in regard to the role of families as the rock or foundation of national culture. In a study on the impacts of industrialization and urbanization on families in HCMC, Nguyễn Minh Hảo (1997) has offered the following assessment of the current trends in this regard: ‘Families are losing their economic function, and instead their function is becoming as consumers and service users. The function of raising and educating children is gradually transferring to the society. Family’s function of taking care of family members both financially and emotionally is gradually less and replace by the society’. Lê Thi (1994: 247) also posed the questions: ‘What elements from the traditional family model should new families maintain and develop? What should they receive from the modern family model? How do they combine traditional and modern cultures?’ Culture can play an important role in reinforcing positive traditional roles while allowing new roles to form in adapting to the new economic, social and cultural environment. In general, the issue of balancing tradition and modernity has been a challenge for Viet Nam since the opening up of the country (as well as in many other nations in the world.)
Folklore and popular culture are widely considered to be the deepest and most long-standing expression of indigenous culture, the deep roots or sinews of national identity, and the fullest manifestation of the character, values and insights that the people have built up across the generations. Many Vietnamese scholars and political leaders have stressed the imperative to preserve and develop this popular culture in a way that protects the positive aspects of the traditional culture and the unique values and cohesiveness of national identity.

In discussing Vietnamese traditions in a new, modern culture, it has been observed that, after thousands of years of international cultural exchange, first with Southeast Asian culture, then successively with China, France, the United States and the former Soviet Union, Viet Nam has been able to maintain its own strong (vững chắc) traditional identities, while still being relatively open (mở) to new cultural influences through international exchange (Dương Trọng Đạt 2000: 255). In terms of how these foreign elements have been received and made part of a national culture in the process of international exchange, similar to the process which can be observed in other cultures, it has been claimed that, in general, Viet Nam only adopts those values that are consistent with the existing basic morality, instead of adopting a whole neo-colonial system or fully surrendering to an alien cultural system.

When a value system is adopted, it is always re-ranked, or somehow made appropriate to the Vietnamese context. Similarly, new forms of arts and literature, after being received, have often been transformed (cải biến) to express and reinforce key Vietnamese cultural values. In this regard, the issue of the differences between Eastern and Western cultures have also often been involved in the discussion, such as the relative emphasis on community and family (vs. individual) in Eastern cultures (Phạm Xuân Nam 2000: 291).

As mentioned in Chapter One, the focus of this research is on the well-being and the evolving roles and status of Vietnamese women, analyzed not only from a cultural perspective but also from a Vietnamese perspective. The definition of culture and how it is applied in the research should thus reflect how culture is understood by the Vietnamese people, and how it is used in the context of Vietnamese history and current development.
In this research, *culture* will be defined as a set of knowledge, perceptions, mentality, values, ways of thinking, customs, practices, lifestyles, etc, that people have accumulated and to which they have become accustomed, generation by generation. All these aspects of culture are subject to change and adaptation in face of new developments in the society, and impacts emanating from Viet Nam’s international relations. Culture is thus closely related to the concepts and interactions of *tradition* and *modernity* that are integral parts of national development and that evolve in this context.

Tradition and modernity in fact are key elements in all aspects of the life of any nation, and in all aspects of the development process, in which culture is the aspect that is most pervasive. These two elements are neither static nor separate; instead, they constantly change and interact with each other to form an on-going cultural evolution in a society. The dynamic relationships between them are thus important for all countries, and especially for those like Viet Nam that are in process of rapid modernization and development.

It should also be emphasized that tradition and modernity are only relative concepts. What is considered ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’ varies from country to country, from time to time, from generation to generation, and even from one person to another. In general, *traditional* often goes with *national* or *indigenous* attributes working from inside, while *modern* goes with *foreign*, *international*, or *external* influences, especially those impacting developing countries from more industrial nations in the globalization process.

The concept of *indigenous* in the context of Viet Nam thus refers to its cultural foundation. According to Trần Ngọc Thêm (2000), Vietnamese culture has experienced two main transformations since its foundation based on South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures: the first was Chinese influence over thousands of years, and the second was Western exposure during the last several decades. The three ‘layers of culture’ intertwine and sometimes conflict with each another, not only as between the indigenous culture and Chinese influence, but also between the so-called ‘Eastern’ traditions and the new experience of Western way of life. *Indigenous*, therefore, refers to the long-standing traditional foundation while acknowledging the influence of these externalities.
In Viet Nam’s development process (as in any other country), people’s freedom of choice, self-determination, local autonomy, and scope for human development and cultural adaptation will work to fortify the ‘wellsprings’ of indigenous cultures, cultural pride and local identity, and allow the people themselves to be the guardians and shapers of their own cultural development. At the same time, the most important policy issue regarding culture is how to maintain the good elements of indigenous traditions, while rejecting or abandoning those that are no longer appropriate, and how to select from the many new aspects of modernity that are emerging and adapt these to the indigenous needs and core values for them to be harmoniously included in a new culture. The dynamics of development and of the changing culture requires policy makers to identify and facilitate those factors which can help accelerate the speed of development, and also to improve the indigenous culture, while preventing or mitigating possible negative impacts and undesirable outcomes. The following section discusses the difficulty of doing this, given the inherently dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture.

3.2.2 Cultural dualism: Co-existence of conflicting doctrines and practices

Viet Nam’s culture and history are characterized by the co-existence of conflicting philosophies and practices. This dualism is an important aspect of Vietnamese culture, since the lack of consideration of one side of the duality can lead to an incomplete and misleading analysis of reality. In many cases, the co-existence of opposing doctrines and ideologies works to moderate the extreme impacts of one or the other operating on its own. In addition, a deeper understanding of the prevailing cultural dualism can help us recognize that, at any one time, Viet Nam often experiences two or more models of development. The mixed and countervailing impacts of this dualism can also vary according to the prevailing issues being addressed, the region in the country, the social class involved, and the specific historical and political context.

This section on cultural dualism addresses three types of dualism that are often closely inter-related. First, it has been well documented in Vietnamese literature that (unlike most other countries where patriarchy emerged and curtailed women’s rights) the process of transforming from matriarchy to patriarchy in Viet Nam came about relatively smoothly, if often by spurts and with some regressions, and did not entirely condemn women to an
irretrievably low position. Instead, women in Viet Nam have always had and retain important roles in the family and in society, which can be seen as the vestiges of matriarchy that have persisted even until today. Second, the conflicting impacts of Buddhism and Confucianism co-exist and accentuate the cyclical nature of women's changing historical status. The former is more compatible with the indigenous culture of gender equality (as 'both men and women are Buddhist believers', 'thiên nam, tân nữ'), while the later emphasizes gender discrimination (by endorsing 'looking up to men, looking down on women', 'trọng nam, khinh nữ'). Third, in more recent history, the experience with socialism, especially in the North, and the exposure to foreign cultures, such as under the French and American occupations, has led to a changing mix of traditional and modern values regarding gender relations.

**I) Vestiges of matriarchy, and patriarchy**

Patriarchy has been identified as one of the main sources of women's oppression, for example, according to radical and socialist feminism. The transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy in many countries around the world thus took away many of women's important roles and reduced their relative status in the family and in society.

According to Lê Thị Nhãm Tuyệt (1973: 30-3), matriarchy (chế độ mâu quyền) in Viet Nam refers to the importance of women's roles and status in production, in family and in the society (with all members in the primitive commune being equal rather than with any form of exploitation or oppression). Matrilineality (mâu hệ) was formed when children lived with their mother and often did not know their father, and matrilocal residence (ở rể, ở nhà vợ) was common in some parts of Viet Nam when married couples went to live with the wife's family.

In Viet Nam, matriarchy apparently attained its highest expression about four to five thousand years ago. The vestiges of matriarchy in Viet Nam could be seen, for example, in the forms and customs of marriage, in which maternal relatives are assigned more important roles, and in certain spiritual and cultural activities, where there are many female deities, especially included in revered figures in Buddhist temples with female names. Women also have always played crucial roles both in their families and in their communities, in the strong traditions governing agricultural production, in taking care of
children, and in managing domestic finances and other social responsibilities (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1997).

As in some other Southeast Asian countries, it was because matriarchy had existed in Viet Nam for a long period of time that its vestiges on the important roles and status of women remain deeply embedded in society. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết (1973: 68) argued that the transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy thus did not occur thoroughly, but instead, matriarchy continued to exist and offset many of the impacts of patriarchy that tended to erode the relative status of women:

‘In Viet Nam, the transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy did not follow the usual ‘classic’ path, but having the characteristics of complexity and prolonged transitional time, going beyond the last period of the primitive era to the first period of society with classes... While in many places, in the context of patriarchy, there was a thorough elimination of the vestiges of matriarchy together with the roles, status and traditions which women had built during the beginning period of history, women in Viet Nam avoided this extreme situation... In this historical change which caused losses to all women, the smooth changes for women in Viet Nam have been such that they have been able to maintain their important roles and status to some extent. Therefore, their capacity and virtues, which had been formed during the primitive era, continued to exist and develop to become uninterrupted traditions of Vietnamese women... This has a special significance to women’s issues in Viet Nam, not only in the period of transforming from matriarchy to patriarchy, but also having continuing and important effects to many periods later.’

It can be argued that certain aspects of matriarchy, which give women high status in the family and in society, remain until today, while patriarchy has generally taken hold in Viet Nam. The co-existence of two systems thus prevents any extremes and particularly offsets the negative impacts of patriarchy on women.

(2) Buddhism and Confucianism

Buddhism has been practiced in Viet Nam since around 200AD, both among the Champa people in the south and also the Chinese in the North. It promotes pacifism and opposed killing of any living things, for example, and the practice of meditation and the curtailment or elimination of human desires. On the other hand, Confucianism, which was introduced later, was based on beliefs about ‘the order of the universe’, showing people how to create order by learning proper codes of behaviour, that included a hierarchy of leadership in family and the low status of women.
In general, factors causing gender inequality mainly came from the orthodox perception and ideology, while traditional perceptions and ideology remain more favourable to improving women’s positions in the family and in society. The orthodox perception and ideology imposed rules and laws in support of the feudal hierarchical system, but the edicts and laws were not always applied at local levels, because village customs often prevailed regarding how gender relations should be conducted. The co-existence of both practices created the dualist characteristics of social and gender relations in Viet Nam (Le Ngoc Lan 1999: 132) (and the implication of dualism will be further analyzed in the following chapter). Today, the impact of Confucianism in Viet Nam can be said to gradually decrease from North to South (Đỗ Thái Đông 1991, Trần Ngọc Thêm 1997).

The three main Confucian principles on family relations of feudal class are: (1) order of precedence, in which husband dominates wife, father dominates children, older brothers dominate younger brothers and sisters, and in society at large, boys dominate girls; (2) looking up to men and looking down on women; and (3) exercise of supreme power from the oldest man in the family. With all these principles, women were placed in inferior and lower positions. Under the Confucian theory of ‘đường tôn âm tý’ (looking up to yan and looking down on ying) in the ying-yan framework, ‘wife’, ‘child’ and ‘follower’ are totally dependent on ‘husband’, ‘father’ and ‘king’. According to its precepts, ‘a woman of chastity and faithfulness must not have two husbands, just like a faithful follower must not have two kings’ (trung thần bất sử nhi quân, liễt nữ bất giả nhi phụ). It said:

‘...ying is dependent on yan... wife is dependent on husband, child is dependent on father, and followers are dependent on king... The relationship of husband and wife is stemming from the ying-yan morality. Husband is yan, and wife is ying. The fate of relationship is from Heaven. Heaven is king to produce. Earth is followers to support it. Yan is husband to be produced, and ying is wife to support him’ (Xuất Thu book, Lộ section, cited in Nguyễn Bá Ngư Tường 1999: 24).

However, the full appearance to and impacts of Confucianism on gender relations in Viet Nam has often been said to have been mainly limited to feudal laws and to certain upper classes:

‘... reality has proved that, although Confucian thinking had been propagated for hundreds of years [in Viet Nam], even at points being raised to be ‘state religion’, and the thinking of ‘looking up to men, looking down on women’ had its drawn-out existence, Confucian ethics have not
always been the fixed standards for social interaction in all places at all time. The ‘three submissions’ rule has not been the only way of interaction for women.’ (Lê Ngọc Lân 1999: 129).

Lê Ngọc Lân (1999: 130) also cited Insun Yu (1994) on the relative higher status of Vietnamese women despite Confucian influences as follows:

‘Many scholars considered that in general, women’s low status in family and in the society is caused by their economic dependence on men, and because they do not have legal ownership rights. This is not the case for Viet Nam. Like their husbands, they also have asset ownership and they participate in economic activities...
The level of freedom of Vietnamese women depended on their social status. Women of mandarin classes tended to be constrained in the family. They were taught Confucian rules... Women of lower classes often participated in farm work and petty trade. Moreover, in Northern lowland areas, there were two crop seasons a year, so there was unlimited demand for labour, requiring women to work as hard as men. Under this condition, husband trying to control their wife became impossible and also unnecessary...
There exist two realities here: The strong power of a husband over their wife in theory, and the relative equality between husband and wife in practice...’

In practice, the level of success of gender and development, as well as the women’s movement in general in Viet Nam, apparently heavily depends on the level of success in removing the negative Confucian influences that persistently tend to put women in inferior positions in the family and in society. It is understandable that, as Confucianism has existed in Viet Nam for thousands of years, it would not be a simple process to remove it, even if its negative impacts have been clearly recognized, and if there have continuously been campaigns to eliminate feudal practices. The matter even becomes even more complicated when part of Confucianism is clearly being considered relevant and positive for the current development situation of Viet Nam.

It has been said that, along with other traditions and ideologies, Confucian influences are still in place in Viet Nam, as observed in Nguyễn Tài Thu (1997: 179) as follows:

‘[Confucian] influence is widespread, from individuals to families and the society, from daily activities to work and training. For individuals, it is the way of feeling and thinking, manners and way of living; for families, it is family customs and habits (gia phong), disciplines (gia ky), and family rules and codes of behaviours (gia pháp); for the society, it is the individual responsibilities to fulfill his/her roles. This influence is, of course, not the same everywhere; it is more or less intense, depending on each individual, each family, and each social class. This influence is
sometimes shown by unconscious forms. But no matter what form it takes, they are still the effect of the same influence; they exist subjectively, not depending on anyone's desires or perceptions.

...The criticism [of Confucianism] needs to be more in-depth, not only in terms of unclear theoretical points but also in their modification; not only in political and ethical perspectives but also in economic perspectives, not only in principles written in books but also in habits, norms and customs, etc. Furthermore, the target should be not only the Confucian world outlook, but also the subconscious Confucian thoughts and actions. Professor Trần Đình Huệ was right by saying: 'There are many people considering themselves as being cleared of Confucian influence, vehemently criticizing Confucianism, but they still live and think in a very Confucian way'.

Despite the tremendous positive aspects of Buddhism that are in line with indigenous culture, the co-existence of Confucianism and its negative influences on gender equality thus continue to pose a major challenge, and will take concerted efforts to overcome. Socialism has been successful in removing many of the 'feudal' customs unfavourable to women, but the root cause of the problem seems to remain wherever Confucian thinking still persists.

(3) Traditional and modern values

There are certain fundamental differences in the way people think and act between the traditional way of life and the recent modern lifestyles, specifically the new setting of market economy. Traditional culture is generally based on an agricultural society, where people place higher priority on community and relationship than on individual rights and benefits. People rely on social connections (as a form of social capital) and tend to use 'village norms' in a flexible way, rather than complying strictly with the law. On the other hand, with the challenges posed by market economy, and with the society becoming more industrial and commercial, people tend to place more importance on individualism and self-determination.

Traditional and modern values can therefore often be in conflict, but they will co-exist with each individual, family and community. Efforts to promote gender development will need to consider the positive and negative aspects of both tradition and modernity. For instance, certain aspects of tradition can help preserve family stability and gender harmony, but can also pose challenges to achieving gender equality. According to Trần Ngọc Thêm (1997), examples would be: not having the habit of complying to the law, but
rather an excessively flexible set of rules in a community monitoring system based on emotions and relationships (which can pose a challenge in ensuring women's ownership and in curbing domestic violence); depending on the community and family for behavioural values, rather than on one's own initiative and ability (which might cause inertia among women rather than addressing their own interests and defending their rights); the attitude of 'envy and egalitarianism' (đố ky cáo bằng), not wanting any person to achieve more than one's own situation (which might create difficulties for women to create support structures among themselves to achieve common strategic gender interests).

Modernity can facilitate the women's movement in terms of improved working and living conditions for women, enhanced individual roles and rights to freedom of choice to be critical, and broader links to women's movements around the world. However, it can also lead to excessive individualism and pragmatism, posing threats to family stability, and undermining family values attached to the responsibilities to care for family members, especially children and the elderly.

Therefore, in the context of new socio-economic challenges, tradition and modernity need to be carefully assessed, adapted and adopted so as to promote positive values while minimizing potentially damaging impacts or conflicts that can be harmful to both women and men, and their social and economic relationships. The next section will discuss the importance of family and community in Vietnamese culture.

3.2.3 Importance of family and community

In the Vietnamese community tradition, the family and line of descent also play a very important role. According to analytical statistics, idioms concerning family and ancestry relations account for 77% of those governing social relations. 'The sense of family is the most basic characteristic of the Vietnamese people of all classes' (Pham Minh Hạc 1996: 23). There rarely are direct relations between individuals and communities, but rather responsibility relations among the communities at various levels. A family (or a line of descent) has responsibilities to the village, which has responsibilities to the country, and vice versa. An average individual therefore only has a role in the family, while, within a community, the individual is not considered an independent subject, and his or her
personal status, reputation, and responsibilities will be evaluated in the context of a family-specific relationship within the community.

The emphasis on family and its harmony has often been portrayed as a key characteristic of Vietnamese culture. The importance of family throughout Viet Nam’s history has been described as follows:

‘Family [in Viet Nam] has always had a very important significance. Fundamentally, the Vietnamese society, with a wet rice culture, has sedentary life and thus considers family as a basic unit. In mental and spiritual terms, people’s emotion is very attached to their families, which are also with close ties to descent lines and village. Family is one of the three relationships which profoundly reveal the country, the people, and the history of Viet Nam: family, village, and country. The close relationship among these three factors is the characteristics of the process of national development in Viet Nam.’ (Le Thi 1997: 47-8)

The importance of family has often been said to be associated with high respect for women, who are traditionally considered ‘internal master’ (nội tuồng) of the family. According to Trần Ngọc Thểm (1997), many Vietnamese proverbs contain the principle of respecting women, such as ‘Wife comes first, God second’ (Nhất vợ nhị trời), ‘Having deep fields and breeding buffaloes is not as good as having a daughter as a first child’ (Rượn sầu ruồi nái không bằng con gái đầu lòng), etc. Vietnamese women are also often recognized as being in charge of financial management in the family (tay hóm chia khóa), and to have a decisive role in raising children (phúc dục tại máu). Because of the importance of the mother, in Vietnamese language, the word ‘cái’ which means ‘mother’ is used with the same meanings as ‘big’, ‘important’, ‘main’ (sông cái = main river, đường cái = main street, dũa cái = big chopsticks, used for the rice pot, Trọng cái = main drum, ngón tay cái = thumb in a hand, etc.)

In the process of renovation, along with such positive changes to family as improving living standards and certain aspects of family relations, there have also been concerns about negative impacts such as the decline in family coherence and stability. Despite these corrosive impacts, the family is still always considered the most important unit in the society, and much effort has been given to addressing family stability and family values in face of the forces of modernity and global interdependence that are creating many new changes and challenges in socio-economic conditions.
3.3 The need to negotiate and to adapt to the *gender and development* approach

As mentioned in previous sections, the history of Vietnamese culture has always occurred in a ‘relatively smooth’ fashion, and has always been based on the principle of harmony and non-confrontation, even when potential conflicts do exist and have to be reconciled. The imposition of Chinese culture and the influence of Western way of life, although often in conflict with indigenous traditions, have been adopted and transformed in a gradual, non-confrontational way, creating the present ‘mixture’ that is today’s Vietnamese culture. The principle of harmony, in family and in community, in gender and all other social relations, is thus extremely crucial as the key stabilizing influence in social and cultural evolution.

The application of the *gender and development* approach in Viet Nam therefore requires necessary adaptation and negotiation in order to relate to the main characteristics of Vietnamese culture. This section will discuss three underlying reasons for Viet Nam to negotiate with and adapt to the GAD approach in order to achieve higher effectiveness: (1) the need to maintain harmony in family and community relations when addressing issues of gender inequalities and women’s relative disadvantageous positions; (2) the need to pursue a non-confrontational approach in dealing with issues of patriarchy and defending women’s rights to avoid men-women opposition which can be counter-productive to achieving its objectives; and (3) the need to overcome certain difficulties within the current social and political situation in Viet Nam in implementing GAD agendas, such as the persistence of Confucianism, the government’s promotion of ‘preserving national cultural identities’, and the lack of sufficient time for it to have taken root and be comprehensible in Viet Nam, due to the nation’s previous international isolation and the lack of an adequate level of cultural exchange with other countries, both in the Asian region or around the world.

3.3.1 The need to emphasize the importance of harmony in family and community

GAD theories (as written in literature, research, training materials) when translated into practice for Viet Nam need to be adapted to the Vietnamese ‘collective’ way of resolving issues. Intra-household surveys and analyses, for example, relating to the concept of ensuring more equal access and control over resources and benefits among family
members, have shown the need to use the GAD approach in a culturally sensitive way by reducing the focus on each individual in the household competing for shares, and by paying attention to the way people consider resource use and allocation collectively as a family. GAD theories and assumptions are thus being ‘Vietnamized’ in order for their essential purpose to be effectively applied, for example so that the issue of patriarchy can be correctly identified and analyzed in order to come up with effective solutions to persistent gender attitudes and inequities.

Recognizing the fact that the Vietnamese have a tradition in emphasizing the importance of family, practical approaches to improving women’s status requires extreme caution so as not to disturb cultural traditions. Although intra-household analyses could be used to identify where women are being kept in disadvantageous positions (such as GAD tools to analyze control and access to resources and benefits), the research should be carried out in a way that ensures respect for women’s traditional status and their role in maintaining family harmony. The risk entailed in not adequately considering this can lead not only to fomenting unnecessary conflicts in the community, but can also bring gender approaches in general into disrepute and can damage the respect and power that women can utilize in improving their status and prospects within the prevailing Vietnamese political, economic, cultural and social system.

The emphasis on family in Vietnamese culture, and its relevance to gender research, has been commented upon as follows:

‘Family is still a fundamental value for the Vietnamese... Therefore, research which does not take into account women’s roles, position and status in the family will be very unfamiliar to the heart and mind (tâm thức) of the Vietnamese. Unsuitable foreign (lâi cảng) perspectives could have negative impacts on the Vietnamese harmonious cultural traditions, on the strong foundation of the family, such as those... considering women as slaves of family, and family as the place where women are oppressed and abused... will surely not receive support from the mass of Vietnamese people.

These perspectives might be suitable to other societies and cultures, but it is fundamentally not suitable to the Vietnamese tradition of benevolence and righteousness (nhân nghĩa). We can say that, to the Vietnamese society, the above extreme thinking is very unfamiliar and is indeed harmful to the stability of family and society.

In practice, the [Vietnamese] State, as well as the majority of Vietnamese people, think highly of the family. Family in Viet Nam today is still considered the root of the society...Therefore,
research on women, gender and family in Viet Nam needs to be put in the whole picture... Receiving and inheriting new scientific theories are very necessary; however, every scientific theory emerges from a specific social structure and usually is intended to solve pressing issues in that society. The application of a social science theory from one society to research on another one requires the consideration of socio-cultural differences.

One important point is that feminist theories and gender perspectives found and developed in Western post-industrial societies have many progressive and universal parts which can be applied to many societies including Viet Nam, but, at the same time, will surely have many aspects which are not suitable to the Vietnamese society. (Nguyễn Linh Khiêu 1999: 97-8)

The emphasis of harmony in Vietnamese culture especially in family has also been raised in gender research:

'[Gender] division of labour also depends on each condition, environment and occupation, especially during the đổi mới process when economic development is the main objective for every family. In research, abstracting relations and clearly distinguishing each type of work often exclude community responsibilities and the realistically logical aspect in each family. If we only see, in the family, the inequality between the sexes, between husband and wife, gender 'oppression and exploitation' among blood family members, then how can we talk about the traditions of 'love others like you love yourself' (thương người như thế thiuong thân) or 'healthy leaves protect broken leaves' (lá lành dửm lá rách) in the society?' (Lê Ngọc Lân 1999: 138)

There is thus need to have adequate concerns for the emphasis of family and community when the GAD approach is applied, especially the characteristics of harmony and non-confrontation. Feminist theories underlying this approach will need to be used adaptively as further outlined below.

3.3.2 The need to apply feminism adaptively in approaching women’s issues

The concept of ‘gender’ has been newly introduced into discussions of social relations in Viet Nam, along with ‘feminism’. In general, the need to apply feminism strategically and adaptively in Viet Nam stems from the two facts that in the socialist ideology on gender equality which has been established by the Constitution, any feminist movement can quickly be perceived and labelled as (a) unnecessary (by some governmental organizations), and (b) culturally incompatible because Viet Nam has cultural emphasis on social and gender harmony and thus feminist approaches tend to be seen as potentially affecting social cohesion and gender relations.
Apart from the translation problem discussed above, ‘feminism’ has received both positive responses and strong criticism. Although it might be true that the concept of feminism and feminist theories have not been fully or fairly expounded or debated in Viet Nam (see Box 2), which might result in the lack of sufficient knowledge or ability to give precise response to critics, the overwhelming response among Vietnamese social scientists, researchers, policy makers, and even women’s advocates, need to be considered.

Box 2. Understanding Feminism in Viet Nam

The term ‘feminism’ (‘nữ quyền’) has been increasingly known in Viet Nam since doi moi, but it is still a new concept to many. Those who have been exposed to it include: teachers and researchers in areas related to women’s issues, cadres of women’s organizations, those who have had opportunities to participate in gender training involving foreign trainers, and especially those who have studied abroad. How each person understands ‘feminism’ is different, and depends on his/her professional and personal experience. It is thus difficult to determine in general how the Vietnamese understand feminism. Therefore, it can be helpful to explore how to encourage positive understanding and application of feminism as a useful and suitable theory, perspective and approach in addressing gender issues in Viet Nam.

Source: Author's notes

It is notable that, while many researchers and cadres have adopted the concept of ‘feminism’, others have embraced it to a lesser extent than the concept of ‘gender’ and the GAD approach. For instance, how feminism is perceived in Viet Nam was analyzed by the National Women’s Union as followed:

‘In the East, including Viet Nam, women’s low status through history has its own characteristics, thus women’s as well as feminist issues are not totally similar to those in the West.

It is true that during thousands of years, women in some countries which applied Confucianism as the official ideology have been put in lower positions than men. In this tradition, women are always put in absolute dependence on men... there exists a ‘literature’ only for this area.

Because women were placed in such low positions, the movements of revolution and liberation in the twentieth century had attracted many women in some Eastern countries when it strongly called for ‘gender equality’ (nữ bình đẳng). Viet Nam provides a specific example, that is, when the Indochinese Communist Party was found in 1930, with a political guideline of ‘gender equity’ (nữ bình quyền).
In this aspect, women’s and feminist issues in Eastern countries, including Viet Nam, fundamentally are not outside the international discourse. The main characteristic here is the unification between national liberation and women’s emancipation movements.

However, this is only part of the issue. In Eastern countries, women’s issues are also examined through another lens. In reality, women’s positions through history of some countries including Viet Nam are not as low as people might think: women are considered ‘internal masters’ (nội tưởng) of the house, having certain power in the family with their role as ‘safe box key keeper’ (tay hòm chìa khóa), ‘Husband’s orders are drowned by wife’s gong’ (Lệnh ông không bằng cống bà), or at least the saying ‘In harmony, husband and wife can dry up the Eastern ocean’ (Thuyên vợ, thuyên chồng, tắt biên Đông cung can) has been a solid principle of family life. There are communities in mountainous areas in Viet Nam today which still are matrilineal. This is why the idea of gender equality in Eastern countries is more easily accepted by the people, and the women’s movement here does not go to extremes, and does not look to feminism which totally confronts men’s power, as has occurred in the West.

Looking down on women is obviously unacceptable, especially in today’s civilization. However, making the two sexes confront each other, as a way to criticize or undermine the other, is also not part of the [acceptable path of] development, not bringing any benefits even for women.

...In Eastern countries in general, and in Viet Nam in particular, women’s and gender equality issues are still not solved at the root. The road is clearly still far. It is also clear that, unlike Western countries, there are no large and strong women’s and feminist movements. This can lead to two consequences/results: one is that women’s and feminist issues here will be solved more slowly; changes in traditional norms must require profound cultural movements; and social policies must increasingly prioritize women’s positions in society and in the family. On the other hand, this will also help avoid extreme perceptions on this issue, without leading to confrontation between the sexes as in some cases in the West.

...However, like in any country, women’s independence and freedom cannot be achieved by itself. The equality Vietnamese women are striving for is not from confronting men, but the one that results from their own movement in the broad social and cultural movements in the country.’ (National Women’s Union, 1997: 292-7)

It is also notable that, while most Vietnamese scholars and practitioners working on gender issues now are able to see its connection with feminism, they are still mostly very cautious about how to apply feminism effectively in promoting gender equity in Viet Nam:

‘From any approach, gender is always coming from a feminist perspective in its nature... [t]his is a valuable contribution to science. It gives a sense of more integration and equality to all aspects
of human life. It discovers many aspects of gender inequality which are wrapped by the glory of culture and emotion.

However, the gender approach, when mixed with extreme feminist perspectives, will be unsuccessful and surely will clash with the traditional cultural identities. This will unwittingly limit the social effectiveness of gender perspectives. In Viet Nam, for the gender approach to bring more benefits to women and to truly contribute to social development, this matter must be considered.' (Nguyễn Linh Khieu 1999: 95-6)

3.3.3 Other concerns

The cultural aspects of gender research and propagation of feminist ideals are frequently raised by Vietnamese researchers. While recognizing the progressiveness and valuable contribution of gender/feminist theories to gender equity, they have also often expressed concerns regarding the persistence of negative influences of Confucianism, and possible inertia and confusion resulting from government promotion of preserving Viet Nam’s various and distinct cultural identities.

The concern also pertains to the short period during which Viet Nam has been opened up to the international community and the slow process of cultural exchange with other societies:

'[G]ender equality imported to Viet Nam has only been at the stage of coming in contact (tiếp xúc) with Vietnamese culture, and not yet at the stage of cultural exchange/integration (giao lưu/hợp nhập). Cultural values, ‘sub-cultures’ which are influenced by Confucianism at different levels, as well as the current government promotion of ‘bringing into play the traditions and preserving national identities’ (phát huy truyền thống và giữ gìn bản sắc dân tộc) need to be considered as the foundation for research, reception and propagation of gender in Viet Nam.

Debating on cultural aspects of gender research and propagation should not be against the process of promoting democratization or gender equality, but it should be noted that international cultural exchange/integration should start from the national culture itself, not from the imposition of any subjective framework... There will be no universal way, because each culture has its own characteristics and identity.' (Le Ngọc Lan 1999: 138-41)

In conclusion, the need for Viet Nam to negotiate and adapt to the gender and development approach can be summed up by a statement below by Lê Thi, former Director of the Centre for Family and Women’s Studies. This maintains that, although gender/feminist theories developed in the West are considered progressive, Viet Nam has
already clearly recognized its problem of gender inequality and has been willing to adopt appropriate approaches to work toward curbing these inequalities, there is still a need for substantial cultural modification of international perspectives before they can be seen as suitable and applicable to the case of Viet Nam:

'The struggle for gender equality needs to be supple, soft-mannered (mềm mỏng) and step-by-step. The West tends to give prominence to individual rights, while the East, like Viet Nam, pays more attention to the benefits of family and community.' (Lê Thị 1999: 355)

This chapter has introduced the main historical periods in Viet Nam in which gender relations have been moulded and modified, and has analyzed some of the major cultural factors relating to gender relations, and the need for Viet Nam to negotiate with and to adapt to the international discourse on gender and development. In the next chapter, the cultural characteristics of gender relations in Viet Nam, especially cultural dualism, will be further analyzed in order to recognize their positive as well as negative impacts on the well-being of women and men.
CHAPTER FOUR.

CULTURAL FACTORS IN GENDER RELATIONS IN VIET NAM

This chapter discusses positive and negative aspects of cultural factors for the well-being of women and men. These contradicting aspects stem from cultural dualism – the co-existence of conflicting beliefs and practices. In particular, while the vestiges of matriarchy and Buddhism persist, which are consistent with indigenous practices of gender equality, and exert their positive influence in preserving community harmony and respect for women, patriarchy and Confucianism also assert their counter-influence of keeping women in dependent roles and a lower status than men. In addition, the impacts of socialist ideology on gender equity, and the exposure of Vietnamese people to varying degrees of French and American culture, have also worked to modify traditional practices and gender relations. This chapter sets out to analyze both the positive and negative aspects of gender relations in Viet Nam, following thousands of years of evolution and transformation, and which still today retain characteristics of these various sources of influence.

While there is surely a need to strive to overcome the negative aspects regarding gender relations, it is equally important to identify the positive influences so as to maintain and develop them as part of the indigenous social and cultural evolution. National policies and international women’s programs thus need to take these cultural factors into consideration to take advantage of and build upon the positive characteristics, while seeking to prevent the negative factors from impeding the progress of positive policies and programs.

This chapter starts by presenting an account of the image of women in Vietnamese history and literature. Two conflicting images of women co-exist in this regard: one with positive characteristics, of women as heroic figures in national defence and in occupying important roles in the family and social development, and the other showing them with low status and living often miserable lives, which is often associated with feudalism and Confucianism. This introductory discussion is followed by an analysis of gender relations from a cultural perspective, focusing on three selected aspects of human development: (1) employment and education, (2) social and family relations, and (3) legal protection.
4.1 Images of women in Vietnamese history and literature

A vast Vietnamese literature exists, both classical and contemporary, regarding women. Their roles in national defence, in the community and in their family are portrayed to illuminate their characteristics and important positions. In contrast with their influential roles in the public sphere, especially their patriotism and participation in defending their country from invaders throughout history and notably in the more recent revolutions against France and the United States, women have also often been depicted as victims of social injustice usually considered to have been mainly caused by the Confucian practice of 'looking up to men, looking down on women'. Indigenous traditional folklore, in contrast, tended to portray women as being wise, resourceful, with often equal or even more power than their husbands. The contradictory images of women in literature demonstrate the dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture in regard to gender relations.

Women in national defence

Vietnamese history has long had a strong focus on national defence, especially from successive waves of Chinese invasion, and the image of Vietnamese women is often respectfully depicted in recounting the exploits of national leaders such as the Trung Sisters (Hai Bà Trưng), Lady Trieu (Bà Triệu, see Box 3) and Bùi Thị Xuân. In 40 AD, Trung Trắc, upon learning of the murder of her husband by the Han dynasty, rallied the nation, and with her sister Trưng Nhị, led them to successfully defeat the Chinese invasion. In 248, Triệu Thị Trinh (known as Lady Trieu), together with her brother Triệu Quốc Đạt, successfully defeated the Ngô dynasty. In the 18th century, Bùi Thị Xuân, the wife of an important Tây Sơn leader Trần Quang Diệu, led five thousand troops to fight against the feudal systems of the Lê, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn.

Box 3. Lady Trieu’s Famous Statement
Triệu Thị Trinh had a famous statement which reflected her patriotism and also revealed the important role of women in national defence: ‘I want to ride the strong wind, push away the surging waves, cut the whales in the Eastern sea with my sword, and oust the invaders to save our people from the war. I will not then accept to bend my back to be concubine for a man!’ (‘Tôi muốn cội con gió mạnh, dap song dữ, chem cá kinh ở biên đồng, quyết sắc bỏ cội đề câu dân ra khỏi vòng chiến đấu, chử đầu chịu khom łam làm tù tiếp cho người!’)
Meanwhile, heroic images of ordinary women, seen as faithfully supporting their husbands and sons at the front, though less emphasized, are widely depicted and appreciated. They are also portrayed as successful farmers, fishers, singers, street vendors, shop and restaurant owners, boat service providers, etc. who contributed great efforts in fighting the invaders, using their tenacity, creativity, bravery and patriotism.

During the revolution against France and the war with United States, again many female role models were made famous for their patriotism, such as Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, Võ Thị Sáu, and Út Tịch. The image of women during this period, showing ‘heroism, dauntlessness, loyalty and resourcefulness’ (anh hùng, bất khuất, trung hậu, dám dang), has also been depicted in many Vietnamese films.

Throughout the history of wars, and especially in contemporary periods of defending the nation against the French and the Americans, one of the most distinguished characteristics of gender relations was the love and fidelity between men fighting at the front and women supporting them at home. Their spatial distance, and the uncertainty of their husband’s, son’s, or brother’s survival, created a special bond and a potent hope for a peaceful and united life in the near future. Many poems and songs were dedicated to such strong men-women relationships during the war, with the portrayals and propaganda being somewhat stronger and more positive in the North, while those in the South tended to be more emotional.

**Box 4. Women and Men During Wartime Portrayed in Contemporary Arts**

During wartime, the relationship between men and women, between husband and wife became even stronger, which further strengthened the tradition of harmony in gender relations. The poem ‘Purple Flowers’ by Hữu Loan has at least three different versions as popular songs. It told the story of a young woman who had three older brothers already at the front, who also married a soldier who had to go back to the front immediately after the wedding. The soldier worried about his wife since he could die at the front and leave a young widow. But then she died in a battle at home. The drama of the story lies in the fact that her three brothers received the news of her death before the news of her marriage, since bad news travels fast.
**Women in the community and in the family**

Among the upper class and the political and social elite, women are frequently recognized as being highly educated, often functioning as strong civil service mandarins, and as being fully capable of assuming their husband’s roles and responsibilities to run the country when there was a foreign invasion (examples include Queen Ы Lan, Bà Huyền Thanh Quan, and Đoàn Thị Điềm). Ordinary women are often praised for fulfilling their traditional roles in the family, for their fidelity, and for their effective financial and moral support of their husbands (who might spend all their time studying or focusing on public and other more important types of work), or in making sacrifices for their husbands and children, and in their roles as the family’s ‘safe box key keeper’ (*tay hòn chìa khóa*) and ‘internal master’ (*nơi tướng*).

In Vietnamese literature, the image of women is also often depicted as being victims of social injustice and of unfair gender discrimination (as in The Tale of Kieu, Quan Âm Thị Kính, and stories written by Tự Lực Văn Đoàn). As described in section 4.2 below, women had to be dependent on men in all aspects of life, and to be responsible for all domestic responsibilities, as well as ensuring financial support for the family’s daily needs. They had to accept polygamy, oppression from in-laws, and other forms of discrimination in the society, while public opinion was very strict when it came to issues of virginity, fidelity (e.g. widows were not supposed to remarry), and were often even held responsible for their husbands’ vices such as domestic violence, gambling and extra-marital affairs.

Hồ Xuân Hương was a rebellious poet who had a difficult life due to her restricted choices in life in being a woman, and in her poem she wished ‘Only if I could change to be a man’ (*Thin nay vĩ đổi làm trai*). She was also famous for her poem being full of references to sexual power as a way to oppose the sexually repressed society especially to women.

**Women in traditional folklore**

Women are often portrayed in traditional folklore as being wise, dependable, hard working and generous. They take care of their families and support their husbands. In some cases, they are cited for the capacity to generously forgive their husband’s mistakes
and failings, or for being smart in showing their husband right from wrong, even though seen to be in a subordinate position. They are rarely portrayed as having undesirable characteristics such as infidelity, laziness, dishonesty, or being greedy for food, etc.

In humorous folklore, women are often portrayed as controlling their husbands, in characters depicted as ‘being afraid of their wife’ (sợ vợ) (see Box 5 for a popular folklore story). This is sometimes meant to reveal men’s capacity for adaptation in maintaining family harmony by going along their wife’s wishes to avoid irresolvable conflicts.

**Box 5. Traditional Folklore: ‘Association of Men Who Are Afraid of Their Wife’ (Hội sợ vợ)**

A group of married men are shown feeling they are being controlled by their wives, who make them afraid. They have a meeting to discuss this problem, and decide that they should form a group of brave men who are not afraid of their wives and who can stand up for themselves. Suddenly, the wives come to the location of the meeting, because they hear about the men’s get-together. This frightens all the men who try to escape. When they later come back to the meeting place, they see one member still sitting there. They think this man, staying to deal with the women, must be so brave for not leaving, but when they come close to where he sits, they realize that he was too scared and has died instantly when the women appeared.

This section has presented the image of women in Vietnamese history and literature. In the next section, there will be a cultural analysis of selected gender issues in education and employment, social and family relations, and legal protection.

### 4.2 Cultural analysis of human development related gender issues in Viet Nam

‘Human development is a process of expanding choices so that people can improve their overall well-being in a sustainable manner’ UNDP (1998: i). While human development refers to a process, and well-being refers to an ultimate goal, these two concepts apparently are closely related. The process of human development requires efforts by the people, the State and the international community in addressing many goals such as economic, social, cultural political and environmental improvement. While economic development has often been the focus of the process, it has often been shown to be not sufficient to ensure that human development is taking place or that the people’s (especially women’s) well-being is being enhanced.
In a broader sense, whether people’s well-being is being improved depends on changes in the overall quality of life as perceived by the people themselves. This in turn depends heavily on their own value systems that consist of a complex set of factors related to their beliefs, customs and practices that have been accumulated over the years from previous generations. It is therefore important to understand and assess their needs, perceptions and values from their own perspective, in the context of the actual choices available to them, to determine what level of well-being they are achieving in the process of human development. In other words, the concept of well-being being generated in the process of human development must be seen in a broader context, able to incorporate both economic and non-economic issues, and in this context cultural factors have to be considered.

For example, the issue of single women resulting from objective circumstances (as distinct from choice) has thus far received little attention in Viet Nam, and whenever the concern has been raised, the economic hardship faced by these women was often the main focus of discussion, with help (if any) provided mainly in the form of economic assistance. However, a few research surveys on single women have shown that for many of them, poverty was not their main concern, although they belonged to the lowest income group (ActionAid 1996). In fact, through in-depth interviews, some of them said they were willing to have a poorer life as long as they could have a husband. A few even distressingly refused any interviews when they knew they were being identified as single women since this is culturally a very sensitive issue. Therefore, to assist these women to improve their well-being, it would take considerable effort to identify and resolve the social and cultural burdens that are on them, rather than merely providing them with material assistance.

This section will undertake a cultural analysis of three selected human development gender-related issues, with references made to popular songs and proverbs (ca dao tuc ngu). Popular songs and proverbs reflect the beliefs, social norms and cultural identity of the people at various times, and that are being passed on from generation to generation. Although research has not yet been undertaken on the effects of popular songs and proverbs on gender relations today, it is clear that they still provide informal guidelines to social values and behaviour, and have a particular emphasis and influence on ‘where
women and men should be' in gender relations, especially as they were and still are often recited or sung to children at an early age.\(^5\)

A dualism is discernible in the content of these popular songs and proverbs: one theme reflects gender inequity and discrimination as influenced by Confucianism, and the other celebrates gender harmony and fairness as reflected in traditional practices. It can be noticed that the latter sometimes takes the form of a voice to oppose the oppression of Confucian practices, especially seeking to expose unfair gender discrimination and being intended to protect women and girls.

In undertaking research on Vietnamese cultural identity, several Vietnamese authors have suggested the importance of studying popular songs, especially in contrasting indigenous Vietnamese traditions to the Chinese influence of Confucianism. Trương Tứu said in *Kinh Thi Việt Nam*:

"If the Vietnamese people have their own characteristics which are distinguished from other people, especially the Chinese, these characteristics, in my opinion, can be found through research on popular songs, that accurately reflect the broad masses of the people... Vietnamese popular songs have perfected the strong voice opposing Confucianism of the Vietnamese people, and clearly document the economic conditions enabling this voice to develop and win" (cited in Nguyễn Tấn Long and Phan Cánh 1998: 10-11).

In an article in the *Loa* newspaper in July 25, 1935, concerning the co-existence of two conflicting sets of norms of Confucian beliefs and the traditional way of life, the same author also said:

"In the pretended silence of the Vietnamese society, there still exists a hidden opposition. Our people live with two conflicting vital forces. At the higher level, loyal followers of Confucius sacrifice their individualism for the system handed down from generation to generation. In contrast, at the lower level, the rustic common people still live with Nature.

Popular songs and proverbs which are jesting and tricky, in my opinion, are the people’s revenge upon the lack of richness in the Confucian outlook on life.’ (Ibid : 21-22)

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\(^5\) The popular songs and proverbs cited in this study are known by heart by the author (as most people growing up in Viet Nam) and also translated by the author. A dictionary of Vietnamese popular songs and proverbs by Việt Chương (1996) was consulted for accuracy. Other sources including Nguyễn Đình Hào (1997) and Võ Thành Tân (1999) were used for analytical purposes.
Dao Duy Anh also placed great importance on popular songs and proverbs for an understanding of Vietnamese culture. He wrote in \textit{Van Lang} journal:

‘In our old culture, I see that popular culture embodies many things that are still socially acceptable. In popular culture, popular songs and proverbs have a crucial role, therefore I highly value them. If we see the need to do research on the old culture for a cultural reform, it is necessary to undertake research on popular songs and proverbs.’ (Ibid: 15)

The following sections will discuss three key human development issues in this regard, with a focus on cultural analysis: (1) education and employment, (2) social and family relations, and (3) legal protection.

1. Education and employment.

\textit{General perceptions on livelihood and the economy}. For a long time, the Vietnamese considered the essence of development to involve ‘No stability without agriculture, no development without industry, no mobility without commerce, and no prosperity without knowledge’ (\textit{Phí nông bất ổn, phi công bất phú, phi thương bất hoạt, phi trí bất hưng}). Vietnamese farmers have placed great importance on human resource development, with sayings such as ‘Having a specific profession will ensure prosperity’ (\textit{Nhất nghề tính, nhất thân vinh}), ‘Having a lot of land is not as good as having a profession’ (\textit{Ruộng bề bề không bằng một nghề trong tay}). They always place special emphasis on ‘\textit{nhân}’ (benevolence) -- such as \textit{nhân ái} (compassion), \textit{nhân đạo} (being humane), and \textit{nhân văn} (humanities), and on ‘\textit{trí}’ (knowledge of nature, society and science) (Phạm Xuân Nam 1998: 66)

\textit{Harmonic gender relations in rural life}. Under the centuries-long culture of wet rice cultivation, agriculture has been the main occupation of thousands of successive generations. The harmony of gender relations in a simple rural life is often cited in popular songs and proverbs.

Together we do farm work \hfill \textit{(Rủ nhau đi cây đi cây)}

It is hard work now, but we will be prosperous in the future. \hfill \textit{Bây giờ khó nhọc, có ngày phong lưu}

Above is a shallow field, below is a deep one, \hfill \textit{Trên đồng canh, dưới đồng sâu}

Husband ploughs, wife transplants, and the buffalo draws a rake. \hfill \textit{Chồng cây, vợ cây, con trâu đi búa)}
With the advent of the more modern development process, many issues have emerged that require further examination of this concept of harmony, such as *gender access and control over resources and benefits* and *ownership rights*. Traditionally it was assumed that all family members, and especially husband and wife, have equal rights and responsibilities within the family, and many rural people still hold to this tradition as their main belief and source of confidence in the family institution. However, the emerging and challenging issues regarding family harmony and cohesiveness have only slowly been brought to people’s attention in public discussion. Previous research, such as that of Trần Thị Văn Anh (1996) on land ownership rights, has shown that many rural people still base their family function on a belief in gender and family harmony, rather than looking at it from a perspective of legal equity and fairness. There has not yet been much documented data on the positive results of raising awareness among rural people on the issue of *gender access and control over resources and benefits*. However, there have been some concerns expressed about the possibility of officials and academics being induced to be more culturally insensitive to the implication of the issue, and this could imply a growing awareness of the ‘exploitation’ of one sex by the other, and the effects this can have in disturbing existing family and social harmony (cf. reference to Lê Ngọc Lân, p. 65).

While these emerging issues are important to consider, and have increasingly captured attention in gender research in Viet Nam, there is still need to fully appreciate that harmony and stability have long existed between the sexes and among family members for thousands of years, and can still be seen to play a positive role in protecting the well-being of both sexes and in providing a stable home life for children. Social and cultural expectations of harmony, even when achieved at the expense of one group (usually women), need to be carefully considered, while efforts are also being made to introduce new concepts and approaches for reducing exploitation and in ensuring greater equality.

**Division of labour under Confucian influence.** The influence of Confucian thinking has thus helped to secure and perpetuate stable gender relations for centuries. The thinking of ‘looking up to men and looking down on women’ (*trọng nam khinh nữ*) has been institutionalized as a set of powerful rules and social norms in most villages. In terms of
division of labour, women have traditionally been expected to provide the main subsistence and organize the financial support for the family (and only men could expect to pursue their studies and became mandarins if they ranked high enough in the national examinations). This division of labour was obviously unfavourable to women, because men were assumed to be more capable of intellectual work involving higher level leadership and management, while women were assigned manual labour to support the family. The perception that women should accept the main role in agricultural work, so that men can do public work, is depicted in many popular songs sung by women, such as:

December is season for sweet potatoes
January is for beans, February for eggplant
March is time to plough land,
April is to plant seedling to keep harmony everywhere
May is good time to harvest
Then rain comes and fields is full of water
Dear husband, please keep your public work
Leave farm work for me and I will take care of it.

Men’s pursuit of studies was considered to be of utmost importance for family economic well-being and social advancement, with studying considered the noblest profession. Women were thus shown as wanting to marry studious men, hoping to gain wealth and prestige:

I do not want a lot of planting land or ponds,
I prefer the pen and ink-slab of a studious man.
I do not want his full paddy basket
but prefer his thirty thousand letters
so my family can do best in this world.

However, the Vietnamese traditionally did not ‘put down’ agriculture, nor did they always praise the special value of study. They often protested the ranking of professions that placed scholars (sĩ) above peasants (nông), followed by craftsmen (công), and then merchants (thương):

Scholars first, peasants second
When one is out of rice to eat,
One has to run around to look for food
Now peasants first, scholars second.
Women themselves also often criticized the value and the desire to marry studious men:

Do not marry a studious man  
His back is so long that his shirt needs lots of cloth;  
He eats till full then just lies down  
During the day, he wanders around with his books  
At night, he keeps the oil light for himself.  

(Ai oi cho láy học trò,  
Đài lưng tôn vai ăn no lại nằm  
Ban ngày cắp sách đi rong  
Toi ve lại giây đèn chồng một mình.)

Since women were not allowed to study, their human potential was usually not realized, and their life decisions and progress depended totally on their husbands. Many women protested against this unfair arrangement. The famous poet Hồ Xuân Hương, a talented, educated and capable woman, led a miserable life as she was forced to be a concubine to several incompatible men. Her poems represent a strong voice for women who were discontent with their dependence on men and had no control over their lives.

Damn the fate of being a concubine!  
One has a warm blanket; the other one is cold by herself.  
(Chém cha cái kiếp láy chồng chung!  
Kể dắp chăn bồng, kể lạnh lùng.)

(i.e. since the symbol of marriage is ‘sharing blanket and pillow’ (chung chăn gối), when the husband and wife are sharing the blanket, the concubine is left cold by herself.)

Gender division of labour in the family is often stated as women doing ‘light’ work and men do more heavy work:

Cooking is women’s work  
Repairing doors and building houses are men’s work  

(Nấu bếp là việc dàn bà  
Sửa cửa làm nhà là việc dàn ông)

The division of labour that supposedly gives women ‘light’ work as they are considered physically weaker, and assigns men heavier work or work that involves higher risks, is still popular and is in principle intended to protect women. Men are thus expected to undertake work that requires strong muscular development, such as ploughing, or hazardous work such as spreading pesticides. However, it is increasingly recognized in gender research, and also in people’s perception, that women’s ‘light’ work is often not light at all since, compared to most men, they have to work longer hours a day, often must do heavy and strenuous tasks, and typically have to manage multiple tasks at the same time. For women without a husband, or women whose husband is absent from home, they have to perform every type of work (Lê Thị 1996).
Women were assigned household responsibilities, including childrearing, as well as securing the family’s daily financial needs, supposedly so that men could focus on more important outside work (the intention of which was to provide higher, ‘official’ income especially for the future of the family’s well-being, as opposed to the ‘coins and change’ that women earned through ‘little’ work such as raising pigs). Bearing both productive and reproductive responsibilities, women had to work long, multi-task hours every day. Their burden became even heavier if their husband failed in their ‘outside, important, high-income’ work. The image of women with heavy workload while men assume few household responsibilities was also popular, as in the following humorous popular song:

In the chaos of rice boiling the fire goes out,
pigs grunt wanting to be fed, children crying,
and my husband wants to have sex.
Now I have kindled the fire,
fed the pigs and stopped the children crying,
if you want I can please you.

*Migration to cities.* When earning income becomes difficult at home in the countryside, men often leave their rural home to look for non-agricultural work in the cities and other urban areas. Traditional folklore relating to this issue often refers to their disappointment, partly coming from the hardships encountered in urban setting. It is thus the harmonic life back home that still keeps many of them from leaving:

Thought that I would work with submarines or airplanes,
So I left farm work to go to the city
Had I known it was only jobs for coolies and bobbies
I’d rather have stayed home with my wife.
Here we have families and relatives
We have neighbours to help each other in difficult times.

And those who have left in the cities are often shown as longing to return home:

When I leave, I feel nostalgic for the home place,
for the water morning-glory soup,
for the soy sauce pickled eggplants,
and for the girl who works hard under the sun
and the fog, who scoops water into the fields every day.
In summary, traditional norms regarding education and work consider women as suitable only or mainly for domestic work, while men should assume heavier, outside, public, and more important work. The burden on women due to their reproductive and household responsibilities, as well as their supporting economic role, has often been identified and criticized as unfair. Women being denied access to education and having to be dependent on men economically (as well as in every other aspect of life) led to tremendous social injustice to women. It is, however, noticeable that a great deal of traditional perceptions on women’s and men’s work concerns the harmony of family life and the community spirit that it creates, and that under indigenous norms can result in the people’s opposing the social and economic arrangements of Confucian hierarchy and advocating justice for women.

2. Social and family relations

This section presents a cultural analysis of social and family relations in Vietnamese society, with particular consideration for women’s well-being. Since these relations are socially constructed, it is important to examine the way that people are influenced in their socialization process to eventually shape their perceptions and direct their future actions. This section will thus start with an analysis of gender education which children receive, including education on gender identity, sex, and gender interaction. This will be followed by an analysis of selected gender issues, including issues of virginity, marriage, polygamy, son preferences, and women’s roles and status in the family and in society.

Gender education is a crucial factor in determining how children will learn to perceive the relative roles of the sexes when they grow up. It is often said that, on becoming an adult, it is very difficult or almost impossible to change the gender perceptions one has absorbed as a child. In Viet Nam, gender education has been influenced by many factors: the traditional practices which emphasize equality between males and females, Confucianism which places men and boys higher than women and girls, socialist ideology which at least in principle confirms equal legal rights between women and men, and other factors including religious values and practices. The negative impacts of Confucianism on gender education are often considered to be one of the biggest obstacles to changing attitudes toward the need to achieve greater gender equality. These impacts...
are identified below in terms of gender identity education, sex education, and education on gender interaction, which are often taken to be the main components of gender education (Lê Ngọc Văn 1996: 55-59):

Gender identity education. The gender identity which Confucian Vietnamese families teach their younger generations is based on social rather than biological differences. It is a society with institutionalized gender inequality, which emphasizes the differences between men and women based on Confucian ideology of 'looking up to men, looking down on women'. Sons have more power than daughters, become the masters of families, have ownership and inheritance rights, and receive priority in going to school, while women do not have ownership and inheritance rights, are often not allowed to go to school, and do not participate in key social activities or in the national system of government. Gender identity education under Confucianism is thus intended to make men see their superior 'role' and 'mission', and to make women recognize men's superiority, accept their sacrifices, and be content with their subordinate position in the family and in society, and to see all this as natural and logical.

Sex education. This is not usually considered a fundamental, appropriate or necessary part of education in Confucian Vietnamese families. They even condemn the mentioning of sex, seeing it as 'shameful', as a very private thing, never to be discussed in public. Parents seldom talked to their children or younger generations about sex, because they fear that this could 'show the way for the deer to run' (vé đường cho hươu chạy). This attitude also originates from the main concept of family in Confucianism, a place for individuals to fulfill their responsibilities to the communities, not to satisfy individual needs or seek emotional happiness. The lack of sex education in Viet Nam has been recognized to be one of the main causes of unwanted pregnancies, abortions, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases, of which women are most often the victims.

Gender interaction education. In Confucian Vietnamese families, free association or interaction between girls and boys is not permitted, according to the principle 'Men and women must not get close to each other' (Nam mĩ thủ thụ bất thân). Girls are taught not to talk to boys, especially in private, because it is illicit and unrighteous. Emotional relationships between people of different sexes are even more strictly forbidden.
Premarital love between men and women is not recognized as ever justifiable. Girls are not allowed to decide on their marriage partners, as decisions on marriage are made by parents and relatives, as in the saying ‘Children sit where parents put them’ (Cha me đặt đầu con ngồi đây). If children do not listen to their parents and relatives, they are considered undutiful (bất hiếu). Education on gender interaction in Confucian Vietnamese families, from a certain aspect, is anti-interaction education, and not intended to facilitate mutual understanding between the sexes, nor to satisfy the need for socialization with the opposite sex. On the contrary, interaction between the sexes is obstructed or prohibited, causing a psychological and emotional burden in the lives of both women and men.

Mai Hữ Bích (1991: 122) has analyzed some of the negative impacts of the socialization restrictions in Confucian families, as follows:

‘[C]hildren receive the teaching of morality of filial duty (hiếu) not only through parents’ advice, but also in daily life experiences, and in what they see and hear in their surroundings. Traditional families strongly under Confucian influence attached special importance to social order (lê) to various degrees in raising their children, whether they were families of mandarins, teachers, or farmers.’

Today, especially with the rapid socio-economic changes resulting from đổi mới reform, and with even more Western influences in urban areas, the impacts of Confucianism have inevitably been reduced. For example, instead of obeying the prescription that ‘Children sit where parents put them’, young people today have much more say in their choice of marriage partner, so that increasingly often ‘Parents sit where children put them’. The extent of changes in terms of relations among family members, as well as between males and females in general, can vary considerably, depending on many factors such as the family’s living standard, geographic location, and exposure to outside influences.

Due to the process of gender socialization as discussed above, in the past (and also until today, to certain extent), girls tended to face limited choices in life and to lack power to make decisions regarding their own lives. Since women were confined to the domestic sphere and were economically dependent on men, their well-being and prospects depended on their husband in every aspect of life. Having no say in deciding on their marriage partner, their lives were thus considered to be determined by ‘fate’. Popular
songs and proverbs on this theme account for a large proportion of literary references on women:

My personal lot is like a piece of yellowish-red silk
Loiters in the market and wonders whose hand I will fall into.

or:
Girls have two river wharfs
If unlucky they have a muddy river,
if lucky they have a clear river.

Women in Viet Nam, as in some other cultures, have a passive role in choosing partners. It is common, especially in rural areas for a young girl at marriageable age (sometimes as early as 16) having to wait for someone to propose to them through their parents, and that whether or not she has been ‘asked’ is often the most important information about her for other people to know.

Doves do not perch inside a house
Like women do not propose to men.

And once a woman has been married, her fate has been decided. She has to accept everything, however unfair it might be, such as overloaded domestic responsibilities, and sometimes being physically and/or mentally abused by her husband and her in-laws. In case of divorce or widowhood, women were generally not considered re-marryable. Therefore, the image of a young girl after being married, lacking any possibility of changing her fate, is often described as resembling ‘a bird being caged’:

Now I am a married woman
Like a bird in a cage, like a fish being hooked
How can a hooked fish unhook itself?
When can a caged bird in a free itself?

In the husbands’ families, women are expected to assume the main responsibilities in running the household. A daughter-in-law’s role in the family is very important, especially if she marries an oldest son. She is responsible for childrearing and thus gets all the blame for her children’s mistakes (*con htr tài me*). While her ‘important role’ could signify a high status, it could more often be a form of exploitation, as the family considers her as being ‘bought’ and thus she is obliged to work hard to serve the family (in this regard, concubines were often seen as a cheap way to have maids in the house.)
Women having children must be hard working miserably  
(Cô con phải khổ vì con)

Women having a husband must shoulder his family’s work.  
(Cô chồng phải gánh giang san nhà chồng.)

Traditionally, when a daughter is getting married, it is her mother’s responsibility to teach her appropriate behaviour for living with her husband’s family. The blame would go to the mother if the daughter acted inappropriately. It is sometimes a worry and a pain for mothers since they understand the difficult experience of being a daughter-in-law. As depicted in the following popular song, mothers often teach their daughters to learn marketing skills so as to be able to make an income, to speak modestly, to eat last and sleep less, to manage the family finances, and overall, to make her husband look good.

My daughter, I advise you  
(Con cô, mẹ bảo con nay)

(when you go to live with your husband’s family)  
Hoc buón, học bán cho tay người ta

Learn to do trading so as to be as good as others  
Con dùng học thói chua ngoài

Do not learn to be sharp-tongued  
Hờ hững ghét bỏ, người ta chê cười

Relatives would hate you and neighbours sneer  
Đụ no, đủ đôi cho tức

When full or hungry, always be fresh and smiling  
Khoan ăn, bền ngủ là người lo toan

Give up food for others, sleep less:  
That proves you are a resourceful person

Be thrifty in case a village contribution is required  
Phòng khi đóng góp việc làng

Make careful arrangements of money and rice  
Đồng tiền bắt gao lo toan cho chồng

for your husband, and by this,  
First, you bring good reputation for your husband

Second, relatives won’t sneer at you.  
Trước là đẹp mặt cho chồng

Sau là họ Đặc càng không chê cười)

Women having to make sacrifices for their husbands and children is also a major theme of Vietnamese popular songs and proverbs. Women were assigned to financially support the family so that men could put all their efforts in studying or learning skills to supposedly have a higher and more stable income for the family in the future. The burden of responsibilities created a popular image of women being worn out both physically and emotionally and making sacrifices every day for their husbands.

The stork ploughs a long way from the river side  
(Con cò lăn lời bờ sông)

Carrying two buckets of rice  
(Gánh gao nuôi chồng tiếng khỏe ni non.)

(dangling from the ends of a shoulder pole)

to make money to support her husband, crying by herself.
Because of silkworms, I have to look for mulberries to feed them. Because of my husband, I have to cross the bridge of hard work. Although being dependent on their husbands in all aspects of their lives, women were considered essential in maintaining the reputation and well-being of their husbands through their hard work and discretion. In this respect, women’s important role was often highlighted rather than the aspect of exploitation:

Smart women make their husband wealthy and elegant
Trading, working on fields, under the sun and in the fog.

Friends can make men rich, but a wife makes them elegant.

Since women’s many roles in the family are very important, having a ‘foolish’ wife would be absolutely disastrous for a family. This reveals the indispensable position that women have, and no one else in the family could replace it. Therefore, men were told to be careful in choosing their partner.

The worst thing is having a foolish wife in the house
Second is a leaking roof,
and third is creditors coming to claim debt obligations.

Tradition also sees men’s role is equally important, since women’s efforts to maintain the household could be wasted if their husbands cannot fulfill their breadwinning role to support the family:

Having a smart husband can make one rich
Having a silly husband is wasting all one’s efforts.

In this aspect, Carr’s (1998) research findings in Lang Beo Village show that improving a family’s living standards depends more on the man’s ability, since all women have already worked hard and fulfilled their role.

Despite Confucian influence, Vietnamese women’s positions in the family and in society are not as low and repressed as is more typical in China. Husband-wife relations do not always resemble the Chinese way: ‘husband orders, wife submits’ (phu xuong, phu tuy), but rather works ‘in harmony, husband and wife can dry up the Eastern ocean’ (thuan vo, thuan chong, tat bien Dong cung can). The Vietnamese traditional symbol of a mother has become sacred not only in the family, but also in popular songs and proverbs, in
legends, and also in holy places such as temples and shrines. In society, women’s positions are also more respected than was generally true in China. While Confucius said ‘Women are difficult to discipline: if you are too close they give you contempt, too far they can hate’ (Đàn bà là những kẻ khó dạy: gần thì nó nhởn, xa thì nó oân), the Vietnamese consider women and men to be more equal partners.

For instance, regarding the issue of polygamy, Confucian practices allow men to have many wives, while women should be loyal to only one husband. Confucian philosophy encourages people to have many children, especially sons. ‘Among men’s three faults of being undutiful to parents, having no children is the most serious’ (Ba hiefu tam, vo hưu vital). And ‘having children’ primarily means ‘having sons’, since ‘One son counts, ten daughters are worthless’ (Nhất nam viết hữu, thập nữ viết vô). Thus, women who cannot have a son could be abandoned, or their husbands were entitled to have more wives for the purpose to have a son to carry on the family name.

Talented men can have five, seven wives, Virtuous women should have only one husband. 

(Trai tài lấy năm lấy bảy, Gái chinh chuyển chỉ lấy một chồng)

The needs to have many children and also to have a team of domestic labour further encouraged men to have many wives. Wives had functions not only to reproduce but also to work free for the husband’s family.

Hiring domestic helpers will cost money So marry concubines and they will work for free.

(Muộc người thì phải trả công, Lấy lệ làm chồng lại khỏi tiền thuế)

In contrast, traditional Vietnamese values insist on monogamy, and there exist a large number of popular songs and proverbs upholding this precept. Public opinion also strongly opposes Confucian practice of polygamy, since indigenous norms promote monogamy. Legends of Vietnamese history before the Chinese invasions began always referred to a one wife - one husband relationship, such as Lạc Long Quân married to only Âu Cơ (and they then had 100 children who, according to the legend, were said to then divide to become the original ancestors of the various Vietnamese peoples in the coastal and in the mountainous regions), and Sơn Tinh (Mountain God) was married only to My Nương (after he defeated Thủy Tinh (Ocean God) in a talent contest). The society in general also expects both women and men to be monogamous.
Get married to only one person
Do not be like ships and boats travelling eight, nine, or ten parts of a river.

People themselves advocate a monogamous life even in poverty, and value this aspect of
gender equity as socially required morality.

No matter how poor and difficult, just one wife and one husband
Having only broken rice to eat, but we feel no guilt.

Women often strongly protested at being forced to be concubines (‘second or next-wife’).
They also knew that, without a husband, it might be economically difficult for them to
survive, but they still often insisted on monogamous relationships:

If hungry, eat some fig leaves
Marry the man if you are the only wife,
otherwise do not share a husband.

Similarly, while Confucian perceptions strictly control women’s virginity, creating a
great deal of social injustice for women, there are several instances of indigenous norms
appearing much more flexible and tending to protect women from the unfair practices
resulting from the Confucian emphasis of virginity.

Being pregnant without a husband, that’s cool and unique!
Being pregnant while having a husband, that’s too normal!

As in some other cultures, however, there exists a universal expectation of marriage for
both women and men.

Women without a husband are like a house without a roof
Men without a wife are like a picket without a strong root.

An emphasis on the importance of getting married, however, was much more imperative
for women than for men. Since women were considered dependent on men, having no
husband would general mean that a woman would eventually have no economic support.
Having a husband was also seen as necessary since women had low social status and thus
needed to rely on their husband to represent them and give them social identity.

Having no husband would lead to hundreds of difficulties
Having a husband with a few more difficulties would still be better.
Sometimes, for unmarried women who expected to get married soon, it was parental worry that placed most pressure on the daughters. Unmarried women who did not want to be ‘undutiful’ to their parents needed to ‘settle’ and get married for their parents to be relieved of the stress of this contingency.

When daughter is late in getting married, parents worry. (Gái chậm chồng, mẹ cha khác khoái.)

Considering the heavy household responsibilities that women must bear, however, especially their financial burden to support the family in cases where husbands cannot provide, many single women have protested regarding the pressured exerted on them by the social expectation of marriage. Women who have the possibility of being economically independent, and who are not intimidated by social expectation, can say:

Being alone, cold or warm, so simple
Two people, more worries!

The expectation for women to get married is often related to the need to have children. Women who cannot reproduce were often discriminated against, and seen as ‘wicked’, as in the saying ‘Toxic trees can’t produce fruits, like spiteful women can’t have children’ (cây độc không trái, gái độc không con), or in the poetic expression of dismay that:

Having a husband without children
Is like a flower blossom by itself on an isolated hill.

As mentioned above, Confucian practices put down women, as in ‘ten girls do not count’ (thập nữ vĩế vô). Girls also eventually go live with their in-laws and work for them, thus can be considered not so useful for their own parents when they grow up and move out.

Do not distinguish boy or girl
As long as they were born to be dutiful to parents.

Women are also seen as being strongly against social evils and concerned about the reputation of women in general. With the tradition of ‘Healthy leaves protect broken
ones’ (lá lành đùm lá rách), they are known as helping those in difficult situations to avoid vices related to women, such as prostitution, gambling, or over-spending.

Just one worm can spoil a whole soup pot
When one woman resorts to prostitution, all women have a bad reputation.

This section has discussed the issues of social and family relations. In the next, cultural aspects of legal protection will be analysed, including issues of ownership rights and domestic violence.

3. Legal protection

a) Ownership rights. Prior to the Chinese colonization period (i.e. prior to 214 BC), women’s status was still widely respected, and in general there was much greater equality between women and men, including in regard to ownership rights. During the Chinese colonization period (214 BC – 937), under Confucian influence, a patriarchal system was introduced and steadily strengthened. Since the father was the highest power figure in the family, he had ownership of all the land and other property. This ‘family headship’ system (gia trưởng) did not give even married children any ownership rights. During the Independence period (938 – 1874), the perception of ‘husband is King, wife is maid’ (chồng chúa và tôi) was still prevalent. There were very few laws on ownership, since Confucian rules already stated that the husband was the master of the family and thus had exclusive ownership rights to all family property (including property originating both from the husband and from the wife before marriage, and all property acquired after marriage). However, historical documents exist showing that during this period, all transactions relating to land had to have the fingerprints (as signatures) of both husband and wife, and that, although the husband had formal ownership, he was obliged to use the resources for the family benefit, with full co-operation from the wife (Phan Đặng Thanh and Trường Thị Hòa 2000: 96-7).

According to the statistics of 140 land registrations (địa ba) of Ha Dong area in 1805, about 20% of land ownership then belonged to women. Land ownership by women was confirmed in the Hồng Đức Law since the 15th century. According to this law, daughters
had the same inheritance rights as sons, and in the case of divorce, husband and wife were to receive equal shares of property. This is a very interesting case, which law researchers have found only in Hồng Đức Law during the feudal system, and not in provisions of other contemporary Asian countries, such as China, Japan, or Korea (Phạm Minh Hạc 1996: 35-36).

During the French colonization period (1858-1954), in the South, all properties belonged to the husband, while in the North and Centre, husband and wife could establish a prenuptial agreement (otherwise the husband would have the ownership). Concubines could have ownership of their properties if they lived separate from the husband and his wife. During the Viet Nam war period (1954-1975), in the South, Decree 1/59 (1959) stated that family properties belonged to both husband and wife if they had not signed a prenuptial agreement. The subsequent Decree 15/64 (1964) and the 1972 Civil Code were similar, with some minor adjustments regarding common and private properties. The Law on Family and Marriage in 1986, and amended in 2000, further reinforced the equal ownership rights provision between husband and wife: each has common and private property ownership and equal rights in decision-making regarding common properties.

Confucian traditions still persist, however, giving men the sole right of land ownership, while women are seen as dependent on them, and in some cases this has created huge disadvantages for women. The tradition of ‘husband contributes assets and wife contributes labour’ (của chồng công vợ) is still prevalent in Viet Nam, and is reflected in many songs, such as:

In summer afternoon, there are many showers
Manage the time to harvest early, dry paddy early.
My wife, please do not be afraid/reluctant
to work under the sun and the rain
Husband contributes assets, wife contributes labour,
and we will be prosperous.

Despite the legal aspect of women’s rights to ownership being recognized, prevailing traditions thus still give men somewhat higher power when it comes to issues of property ownership. It affects women in general in terms of their access to and control of family resources, and especially in unfortunate cases when women and their children are pushed
out of their home. Thus, while the tradition of family harmony needs to be encouraged (regarding co-operation between husband and wife to use their common properties to work towards a common goal), more effective law enforcement is essential to ensure that women have fair or equal rights to family assets and are protected from ownership exclusion by husband and their families.

b) Domestic violence. Domestic violence is often attributed to the Confucian habit of ‘looking down on women.’ According to Confucianism, there are two classes of persons among members of a family: ‘upper’ and ‘lower’. ‘Upper’ refers to those who have absolute power in the family; these include the grandfather, father, brother, son and other men. ‘Lower’ status relates to those who always have to be submissive, serving and even sacrificing their lives for the ‘upper’; these include wives, children, younger sisters, nieces and other women. All forms of violence can be ‘legitimately’ be used as a means to ‘discipline’ the ‘lower’ members (Lê Thị Quy 1996). In referring to men’s power over their wife, a Vietnamese proverb says:

‘Discipline children when they are young, and discipline the wife when she first moves to live in your house.’

It has been emphasized above that women were seen to have a crucial role in maintaining family harmony. This cultural imposition of how women should deal with family conflicts had a cause-and-effect relationship with domestic violence: When domestic violence occurs, it was normally considered that the wife must be at fault, because she had not fulfilled her responsibility for keeping the harmony and deferring to her husband. There exist several popular songs and proverbs that insist on this role by women, such as:

When husband is angry, wife should lower her voice
Like when rice is boiling, one should reduce the heat so the rice does not burn.

This popular song is particularly effective in teaching women about restraining themselves in conflicting situations with their husband, because at a very early age, most girls are taught to cook rice, the main food served at least twice a day. The traditional way to cook rice is to pour rice into boiling water, then it is crucial to gradually reduce the heat until the rice is boiled and the broth is gone. The analogy is particularly powerful partly because the consequences of letting the rice burn are incredibly heavy: not only the
family’s meal but also, and more importantly, the girl/woman’s reputation as a good homemaker (as one virtue required in all four stated by Confucius), are destroyed. To a certain extent, women were encouraged to maintain family harmony even at their own disadvantage for the sake of the whole family:

If your husband looks bad, who else would also be ashamed? (Xâu chồng thì lại hổ ai)
So make nine a ten: do not make your husband look bad. (Chân bỏ làm mười, tốt xấu mà chỉ)

Violence in the family sometimes can exist in invisible form, as described in Box 6. Physical violence can often be seen in families where the women tend to also suffer from overloaded responsibilities and emotional abuse. Efforts to curb domestic violence thus need to address not only physical abuse itself, but also to protect women from being treated as inferior in other aspects of their lives.

**Box 6. Invisible Violence against Women**

‘Gender discrimination in the family has created a form of horrible violence against women. It causes physical pain even without physical violence, and leads to slave work and submission without forcing this. The invisible violence is very dangerous, because it has negative impacts on women physically, emotionally, and intellectually. It can widen the gap between women and men in terms of educational attainment. Women’s tolerance and submission in unequal sexual division of labour leads to men’s habit of enjoying the benefits of being selfish. Some men may feel sorry for their wife but very few of them think about how to improve the situation. Many women themselves think that God has arranged for women to work hard, that this is ‘women’s fate’.


This chapter has presented a review of some cultural aspects of gender relations in Viet Nam, with some seen as positive but some as still having strong negative impacts on their lives. It was shown that the positive aspects often come from indigenous beliefs in the basic equality between women and men, while the practices of gender discrimination causing inequality and these came mainly from Confucian influence. The next chapter will discuss the evolving and changing situation of women today in the context of **đời mới**.
CHAPTER FIVE.

Doi Mới AND WOMEN IN VIET NAM

This chapter discusses the current situation of women's well-being in Viet Nam since the introduction of the doi mới (renovation) policy in 1986. The objective is to present the situation from a cultural perspective and to make a preliminary assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of national and international efforts in women-related programs. Section 5.1 provides basic information on the renovation policy and its cultural aspects. Section 5.2 then gives overall evaluation of the positive and negative impacts of doi mới on the well-being of women. Since the policy mainly focuses on national economic development, section 5.3 discusses the issues of education, employment and livelihoods of women in the changing in socio-economic since the policy was introduced in 1986. Section 5.4 presents issues of social and family relations, concerning women's well-being after doi mới, and, finally, section 5.5 analyzes issues of legal protection for women, including ownership rights, domestic violence, and social harassment.

5.1 Overview of the process of doi mới in Vietnam

In the late '70s and early '80s, Viet Nam was in serious socio-economic crisis, especially due to sluggish production, blocked commerce, and very high inflation. Life became very difficult for most people, causing them to lose trust in the government. Among the root causes of the crisis were the destructive impacts of the prolonged wars, the abrupt curtailment in international aid mostly from the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Europe, and the many mistakes in economic management and leadership of the Party and State. Recognizing the extreme severity of the situation and the errors being made, the Party introduced a major policy of economic and institutional renovation in 1986.

In terms of the economy, the renovation policy sought to switch from a centrally planned to 'a market economy with a socialist orientation', involving more decentralized decision-making and an opening up to foreign investment and economic advice and assistance. The new policy also set out to make major changes: (1) to reform the nation's economic structure by opening and freeing up both domestic and international markets, with a strong effort to promote to exports, (2) to promote and facilitate a multi-sector economy, and (3) to introduce a more liberal mechanism in economic management.
However, despite its economic focus, the renovation policy brought about a comprehensive reform in values and institutions that has touched all aspects of people’s lives throughout the country. The renovation aimed to promote change, synchronously and comprehensively, but first and most fundamentally, the Party’s perception of leadership, the strategy addressing international relations and foreign policies, and the organization and procedure of activities of the political system. The renovation has begun to fundamentally change the economic structure, state and local policies, and the mechanisms and relationships within the political system and in the whole society; and this includes cultural values and social arrangements to ensure that these are compatible and supportive of the new national identities and that able to meet the challenges of the new era (Nguyễn Khánh 1999: 7).

1. Đổi mới on policies towards women

After National Reunification in 1975, and in regard to policies concerning women during the period of 1976-1988, we might first note the strong emphasis of gender equality in the documents and basic principles being enunciated based on socialist ideology. Social progress was to be achieved through policies such as improved rights and public benefits available to women and through strengthening the management roles of organizations representing women. However, in the last few years of this pre- đổi mới period, the socio-economic crisis resulting from high inflation, and the increased focus on recipients of war-benefits, seriously affected the effectiveness of existing policies on women.

Changes in policies affecting women were then made to adapt to the new socio-economic situation of resulting from đổi mới policy. Especially, the Decision 163/HDBT on October 19, 1988 by Ministry Council stated that it was the responsibility of all levels of government to ensure the participation of the Women’s Union in State management. This was the first time that the role of the Women’s Union was institutionalized into State management arrangements.

Despite significant changes resulted from đổi mới policy, however, the number of policies on women made in this period was fewer than in previous eras, and the implementation of policies on women was still mainly based on those made before 1989.
Policies on women still mainly related to maternity benefits for female State employees, while there have been other changes in women's socio-economic conditions stemming from changes in the Constitution in 1992, the Land Law, Labour Law, Investment Law, etc. Budget cuts on benefits previously available to women were subject to extended debate, often causing contradictions between policy and practice, which indicates that changing such policies and making them adaptable to the new market economy was by no means a simple and straightforward task.

Trần Thị Văn Anh gave two examples on the effects of major changes in socio-economic policies on women. The Land Law passed in 1993, which gives agricultural households long-term land use rights, has had positive impacts on farmers' production and their living standards. However, although without any intention to discriminate against women, the implementation of the Law in practice has created disadvantages for women. Since the head of the household, usually the husband, has his name in the land use certificate, women are put in a disadvantageous positions in case of separation and divorce or other family conflicts. Women who are poor, who do not have a husband, or who are old and/or in poor health, also tend receive low quality land, or their land is more often confiscated due to debts outstanding to the co-operative. A second major example involves the Labour Law (especially Article 28 of Chapter V on labour contracts) which states that 'for domestic labour, the contract can be verbal.' With over 90% of domestic helpers being women, the lack of a written contract has been a loophole used to take advantage of women's vulnerability in labour exploitation, maltreatment, physical and sexual abuse, as well as trafficking women to neighbouring countries such as China (Trần Thị Văn Anh and Lê Ngọc Hüng 1996: 303-10).

It is thus important to pay closer and more systematic attention to key issues relating to policies affecting women. According to Phạm Xuân Nam (1997: 245-8), it is crucial to review recent policies and practices by ministries and other branches of government, to make adjustments and instructions on the implementation of important regulations such as those under the Land Law, the Labour Code, the Civil Code, and relating to policies on agricultural credit, credit for the poor, resettlement, etc., to ensure gender equality in specific social relations. Ensuring women's participation in national and local programs
is also essential, through setting out gender-equality objectives and striving to achieve them, as well as paying adequate attention to women’s interests in domestic and international investment projects, particularly in areas and sectors with high rates of female labour or potential involvement.

Reducing women’s domestic burden is also one of the major priorities in enabling them to more effectively participate in the workforce and in leadership roles. It is thus necessary to promote good attitudes and conditions for men to share in the burden of housework and childcare with women, and to develop social services to reduce women’s workload. NCFAW also needs to strengthen its role in coordinating the design and implementation of policies on women, and the capacity of Women’s Union cadres needs to be improved to facilitate the extension of various types of women’s organizations.

2. Cultural aspects of doi moi

Cultural policies (chính sách văn hóa), although having been less frequently thought of in relation to overall doi moi policy, have always been an important part of national policy, and a special concern to leaders and the people subject to contention and widespread discussion. Since gender relations have evident links to cultural issues, it is thus necessary to discuss cultural policies and their impacts on women and men in regard to various aspects of life.

As stated in the Resolution of the 4th Party Conference of the VII term National Committee, ‘culture is the mind foundation of the society, a driving force of socio-economic development, as well as a prime objective of socialism’ (Pham Xuan Nam 1997: 245). Doi moi policy has brought about significant improvements in people’s quality of life, but, at the same time, has raised concerns about the erosion of positive traditional values:

‘In the last decade (1990s), together with economic changes, there have also been profound social and cultural changes... Material life has been improved, the enjoyment of information and culture has been enhanced, and health services have been developed. The ‘booming’ of the need to study the democratization of economic, social and cultural life (including religious associations) are great achievements in the social and cultural areas. However, complex issues have emerged in the context of the market economy, along with negative consequences in the process of implementing new socio-economic policies, directions and mechanisms’ (Nguyen Khanh 1999: 27).
To mitigate and correct the negative impacts of the *đổi mới* policy on cultural values, one of the objectives of the VII term of Party Conference was:

‘...to build and develop a progressive culture, rich in national identities, to build the Vietnamese people in terms of thinking, morality, soul, emotions and lifestyles, to build a healthy cultural environment for social development... to establish new value systems and social norms which are compatible to national traditions and identities and to the requirement of the new era.’ (Phạm Xuân Nam 1997: 248)

Concerns about the need to preserve traditional values have been strongly expressed and are frequently reflected in discussion on cultural policies in the *đổi mới* era:

‘There is a need to develop a progressive culture, but it is necessary to preserve and enhance national cultural identity, to inherit and bring into play Vietnamese traditional culture, and to enhance national pride while widely opening door for cultural exchange with foreign countries.’

(Nguyễn Khánh 1999: 28)

Concerns about culture and its involvement in the process of *đổi mới* have often been raised, relating to many aspects of development such as modernization, democratization, and gender equity. In particular, although the opening to the international discourses has been considered necessary and inevitable, national and cultural identity has always been given priority attention, as well as the East-West contrasts in values and traditions. As Hoàng Ngọc Hiền (1993: 275-7) remarks:

‘For thousands of years, our national culture has been part of Eastern culture. Therefore, we have to consider Eastern identity when we consider the national identity of our culture... The concept of ‘human dignity’ as well as the ideology of ‘democracy’ are the basic values of modern human culture, in which our society as well as our culture must raise the issues of receiving and fully understanding in the process of *đổi mới*. However, our Eastern identity does not allow us to raise this issue and ideology in exactly the same way as in the West. Eastern traditional culture emphasizes ‘harmony’ and the ‘collective’. Therefore, in the cultural breath of our society, the determination of ‘human dignity’ and the ‘private’ aspects of individuals must closely connect with the ‘harmony’ into the community, the unity of the community, as well as the respect and recognition of the ‘communal’.

...The ideology of ‘democracy’ implies the sense of *dân quyền* (citizens’ rights) and *nạn quyền* (human rights). Western culture emphasizes human rights, while Eastern culture gives importance to human responsibilities. In the West, the unilateral claim for people’s rights is acceptable. The process of democratization in our society will sooner or later raise the
consciousness of human’s rights. But the way we raise the issue is not the same as in the West: the sense of rights must go together with the sense of responsibilities, which is suitable to Eastern traditional culture and not contradictory to morality in general.’

It is clear that scholars, political leaders, and the people in general in Viet Nam place considerable importance on the nation’s cultural policies, and particularly on the cultural exchange process between nations, seeking to preserve, national identities, to prevent or offset the negative cultural by-products of development and globalization, and to address the disjuncture between so-called Eastern and Western value systems and conventions. The dynamics of the changing cultural society, and the adaptation of cultural policies to reflect these changes, reflect and reveal people’s changing perceptions and values, part of which involves gender relations which are at the heart of all relations in the society. The next section will thus discuss the general impacts of doi moi on women’s well-being.

5.2 General impacts of doi moi on women’s well-being

In general, the doi moi policy has given rise to significant changes in the roles and position of women and men in the family and in society. The switch appears to have issued in more changes in gender relations in the North compared to the South, due to the emergence of a dynamic informal sector and the apparent erosion in socialist commitment regarding gender equality. The market economy, and new industrial and service sector developments have tended to reinforce the sexual division of labour, and this can be seen more clearly and dramatically in the North.

One important effect of doi moi, on gender relations was that it gave an opportunity to openly re-address the issue of gender equality. Before that, the issue was rarely addressed as the state always was confident that it had ‘assured’ gender equality and women’s well-being under socialism. Many issues remain to be addressed, such as the unpaid ‘promissory notes’ given to women by all the ‘announcements in principle’ under the socialist system, the differential quality of women’s access to health and education, the higher incidence of women’s poverty, and the lack of adequate legal protection, especially against violence to women, have all been raised but still have not come to the fore in public awareness, and have not been adequately reflected in government policy.
Government's response to increasing prostitution, for example, has not recognized that the problem must be examined in a broader context of sexual labour and gender relations.

In general, women's participation in leadership has also improved, despite a decade of relative decline after 1986 (see Figure 1), and their living conditions have also significantly improved, except for those groups and regions that have not yet been able to participate in the expanding and more prosperous economy (especially those such as ethnic minority women living in remote rural areas). Gender relations within the family have also generally been improved, as women now have more access to income sources and as more informed and sensitive gender awareness has begun to emerge. Women in some cases have easier access than men to new employment and income-generating activities, though discrimination against women in certain occupations has increased and become more visible. It should be noted, however, that the higher visibility of gender inequality under đổi mới should not necessarily be interpreted as indicating a deterioration in gender relations.

**Figure 1. Female Representation in National Assembly (1976-2000)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Female Ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Term VI (76-81)</td>
<td>26.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term VII (81-86)</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term VIII (86-92)</td>
<td>17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term IX (92-97)</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term X (97-2000)</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: United Nations Development Program, 2000

The improvement in women's well-being since đổi mới has been documented by the Viet Nam's Women’s Union as follows:

'Dổi mới has truly liberated women's potential in all activities and areas, in family and in the society. Women live with a new thinking, having more open attitudes, and are more dynamic and self-confident. Although there might have been hesitation at the beginning, the confidence has become clearer. The gender characteristic of practicality in Vietnamese women, formed a long
time ago in history, has enabled women always to be able to prove themselves by their work which brings practical effectiveness...

The interaction between tradition and modern in the perception of Vietnamese women has been clearly shown through the image of a woman as courteous but assertive, compassionate and soft but dynamic and made of firm stuff, resplendent but discrete, modest but not submissive, sharp and intellectual but not wicked and overweening. Vietnamese women in đổi mới have taken good steps to reach the convergence of these everlasting good characteristics, and it is among the responsibilities of the VWU to identify strategies for Vietnamese women to enter the 21st century, with action programs, policy recommendations at macro level, so as to fully develop the good nature of Vietnamese women in the course of achieving equity and development.' (National Women's Union, 1997: 278-80)

With significant improvements on women’s lives both from human and gender development perspectives, Viet Nam has consistently enhanced its human development index (HDI) from 1985 to 2000 (see in Table 3), and by the year 2000, its HDI ranking was 109 and gender development index (GDI) ranking was 89 in the world (out of 174). Sections 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5 below will discuss the changes in three main aspects of women’s lives in the context of đổi mới: education, employment and livelihoods; social and family relations; and legal protection.

Table 3. Viet Nam’s Human Development Index (1985-2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Human Development Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>0.583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>0.605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>0.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>0.688</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNDP Human Development Reports.

5.3 Women’s education, employment and livelihoods under đổi mới

This section will discuss the emerging issues concerning women’s well-being in terms of education, employment and livelihoods in the changing socio-economic context of Viet Nam. It also includes some discussion on the issue of migration.

1. Employment and livelihoods

As đổi mới policy encourages the emergence of a multi-sector economy, women (as well as men) have had more opportunities to find new and more rewarding work. They can
create jobs for themselves, find work in the State or private sectors, and have more freedom to migrate and find temporary residency in urban locations where jobs are more plentiful than in rural or resource-poor areas. With the increasingly dynamic economy, more people have found work and have significantly improved living standards for themselves and their families. The poverty rate has thus decreased considerably since the introduction of the **doi moi** policy.

The process of industrialization, while creating more opportunities for women and men, appears to have put more pressure on female State workers, as about 66% of those laid off were female (the percentage of State employees in the labour force was reduced to 9% in 1993 from 15% in 1985), and the demand for technical skills has become higher while they also still have to undertake their household responsibilities. Those laid off often had difficulty finding other jobs in the formal sector, and about 80% switched to the informal sector with generally lower paid and unstable work. Others had to change occupations due to lack of skills or conditions favourable to finding equivalent jobs, or due to their desire to find better jobs with higher incomes in non-State sectors (Lê Thi 1999: 90-1).

Table 4. Working Population Over 15 years Old by Sex and Rural/Urban, 1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Of which rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Those who can often find work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34,907,639</td>
<td>28,444,058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which women</td>
<td>17,731,924 (50.79%)</td>
<td>14,542,631 (51.12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working population</td>
<td>33,949,129</td>
<td>27,231,143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which women</td>
<td>16,404,055 (49%)</td>
<td>13,394,084 (49.18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who do not often find work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>958,217</td>
<td>583,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which women</td>
<td>419,408 (43.76%)</td>
<td>255,594 (43.78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working population</td>
<td>946,148</td>
<td>573,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of which women</td>
<td>411,686 (43.51%)</td>
<td>249,093 (43.29%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Source: Tông cục Thống kê (General Statistical Office) 1997.)*

The shortcomings of government policy towards women’s employment were documented as follows:
‘In the process of đổi mới, women have made excellent achievements in all areas such as politics, economics, culture and society, contributing significantly to the general achievements of the country... The Party and State are very concerned about women, however this focus is still mainly on mobilization and how to make full use of their contribution, without reasonably emphasizing training to increase their levels of productivity or facilitating them being able to develop the capability to more effectively cope with their lives’ demands.

However, some policies on women still have weaknesses, and are unfair and even contradictory. It is the case that some women cadres have morality and capability no less than men but still are not being considered as qualified to join the force of cadres for the Party and State. In general, the force of women cadres from national to provincial, city or grassroots levels is still not suitably planned ... and in the family, women are still considered to be the ‘painless server’ (người phục dịch)..., and in society they are considered the ‘executor’ (người thưa hành) or ‘the weaker sex’; in party or mass associations, women participate but only to ensure the desired male-female ratio; in scientific research, women still do not receive high levels of trust... There are some socio-economic policies that are still ‘gender blind’, without consideration of women’s interests, benefits or capacities, therefore the results have not liberated them but confine them to backward perceptions of gender stereotypes. Because ‘God’s mission’ for women is emphasized too heavily, or too much emphasis placed on women giving birth..., women have become disadvantaged and are treated unfavourably in the competition for employment.’(Nguyễn Thị Thanh Nhàn 2001: 249)

Women often faced difficulties in finding paid work, in both urban and rural areas (see Table 4). Due to the low availability of jobs compared to numbers looking for work, women lose out in competition if they have less education and training, are busier with family responsibilities, or are discriminated against by archaic perception that women are less capable than men. In addition, employers often prefer to hire men to avoid paying maternity benefits (except in those cases where hiring women clearly brings higher benefits for the companies, for example as in textile and footwear industries).

In rural areas, with the recent new land policy (khoản) to households, major changes have occurred in agricultural production. Production has expanded and diversified and living standards have often significantly improved. However, to achieve this, many farmers, especially women, have had to work hard, still using primitive production tools. Social surveys carried out by the Centre for Family and Women’s Studies in localities in the North, Centre and South of Viet Nam have revealed that the level of agricultural work done by female farmers has generally increased and is often excessive. During the
agricultural off-season, they do ‘side activities’ such as weaving, animal-raising, noodle making, planting vegetables, petty trade, etc. It is obvious that the combination of such tasks with other household responsibilities imposes a heavy burden on women, and especially on poor women.

2. Education and training

Despite the many economic difficulties after reunification in 1975, Viet Nam’s socialist commitment to providing social services has continued to have positive impacts on people’s access to education. The literacy rate in Viet Nam remains one of the highest in the region (see Table 5), as well as the overall educational achievement of the people.

Table 5. Literacy Rate for Population Aged 15 and Older (%), 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>90.6</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>30.2</td>
<td>61.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>79.5</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>96.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>94.6</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Poverty Working Group (2000).*

However, there are important gender differentials regarding education and training and related issues that need to be addressed. Low attendance of female children, especially among ethnic minority groups (see Table 6) and in rural areas (see Table 7), are still a major problem that is recognized by international and governmental organizations.

Table 6. School Attendance According to Ethnicity, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrolment</th>
<th>Primary (%)</th>
<th>Lower-secondary (%)</th>
<th>Upper-secondary (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ethnic minorities</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistical Office), 1996.*
Table 7. School Attendance of Primary and Secondary Education in Urban and Rural Areas According to Sex (%), 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>52.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-secondary</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>53.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-secondary</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistical Office), 1999b.

Overall, male enrolment remains higher than female, with gender differentials in school attendance being wider at lower-secondary level and even larger at upper-secondary level (see Table 8).

Table 8. School Attendance of Lower-Secondary and Upper-Secondary Education According to Sex (%), 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lower-secondary</th>
<th>Upper secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to school</td>
<td>79.24</td>
<td>85.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropping out</td>
<td>16.65</td>
<td>11.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never go to school</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistical Office), 1999b.

Although economic difficulties constitute a major obstacle to improving female access to educational opportunities, cultural factors also play a role. Research on female enrolment in upper-secondary school in Nghi Phong commune by Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Trinh (2001) showed that parent’s perceived benefits of their daughters’ education, birth order, common jealousy from the neighbour, and the need for young girls to learn income-earning skills as a local ‘requirement’ for them to be marriageable, can all be factors influencing a parent’s and a girl’s own decision to quit school (see Box 7).

Box 7. Factors Influencing Parents’ Decision on Their Daughter’s Enrolment in Upper-Secondary School in Nghi Phong Commune (Nghệ An Province)

Below is an excerpt from a recent research on girls’ education:

[Speaking of women’s education, a local person said] ‘...here everybody does not have much respect for those with high school education, especially for women. They (both commune leaders and local people) respect those with business skills and economic potential. They still look down on educated but poor people.’
Another factor affecting parents’ decision to send their daughter to upper-secondary school is the custom of marrying girls with some savings and business skills so that they can manage in the context of poverty. One man said ‘We don’t need an educated wife. We need those who know how to do business.’ ‘Knowing how to do business’ (biế̂t làm ăn) here means that at the age of getting married [usually 18-22 in rural areas], girls should have some savings made on their own, therefore they have to drop out of upper-secondary school to work so as to save money to prepare to get married. If not, they can be ‘on the shelves’ (đê) and this is very shameful for any woman here.’

Some families complain that it is difficult to send their daughter to school because their neighbours do not like that. ‘When our daughter goes to school, neighbour’s children beat her on her way to school. At night, when she does her homework, they come to make noises. They think we have high hopes for our daughter and will look down on them, because there are not many girls in this village who are capable of going to upper-secondary school.’ This reality was confirmed by commune leaders who said that they could not solve the problem because of the persistence of ‘King’s orders yield village customs’ (‘phep vua thua ्अला̂ng’).

Source: Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Trinh (2001)

Overall, women still account for a much lower percentage in higher education compared to men (see Table 9) Research on ‘Intellectual Women in HCMC in the 21st Century’ by HCMC National University (1999) shows some of the challenges they had to face in balancing work and family responsibilities. Gender inequalities still exist in terms of higher educational achievement and when pursuing professional careers, mainly stemming from the belief that, women should mainly bear the domestic responsibilities and thus their education and career greatly depend on their husbands’ attitude towards their success and his efforts or lack of effort in to sharing the burden of household tasks.

Table 9. Female Education Attainment in Viet Nam, 1997-98

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational levels/titles</th>
<th>Percentage of women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate professor</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>19.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universities and colleges</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional colleges</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical training</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In rural areas, training in agricultural extension for female farmers has been an important income support in addition to improved female access to credit schemes. However, inadequate concern for gender planning within the support programs has often led to situations where the support available has not been relevant to female farmers’ needs.

Gender differentials also exist in skill training, in which men tend to concentrate on more formal sectors with higher technical requirements, education and paid levels, and greater employment security, while women tend to fall into ‘technology simple’ sectors with lower pay, such as teaching, nursing, working in factories, informal sector activities, or doing contract work at home.

3. Migration. Another important aspect of women’s work in the context of đổi mới is the issue of migration. A considerable number of women have moved from their rural homes to city centers or urban fringes, either temporarily or permanently, seeking to earn income for their families. The reasons for women migrating evidently can vary considerably, but mostly they appear to be motivated by family economic difficulties. Many women migrate because they do not have agricultural land, or have insufficient agricultural land. Some lose their land due to the expansion of industrial zones or as a result of urbanization. Some have too little land because their families have too many people (đất chất người đông) and thus production land per head is very low. Some have children after the time of land division and thus cannot receive an adequate land allocation, or move to another place and are not given land. Some have to sell their land due to an unexpected family illness, or due to lack of financial planning skills (Viet Nam Living Standards Survey 1994 and 1999).

Many women migrate because income from agricultural work is low, unstable, or because agricultural production is only seasonal and thus has long idle seasons, or they are chronically short of cash due to other family difficulties. Women can migrate due to unexpected events in life that require immediate cash to take care of family needs. Some move to cities due to natural disasters such as drought, flood, pest problems, or a harvest failure. Some migrate to make money to support their children or themselves in school. Others migrate because of unfortunate situations where they have no one to turn to, such as after a divorce or being abandoned by their husband, or due to husbands or children
having drug and gambling problems, or being hopelessly in debt. They thus mostly migrate to find money to help their families, or to escape and change their lives.

There have been many rural women moving to cities mainly for their own sake. Many young women, with parents' approval, migrate to prove themselves and to escape from rural life and its hard work. Some migrate to cities to find a husband. Most of the reasons for women migrating to cities are economic-related, but there are also non-economic reasons in which the reality might be unexpected. Hồng Liên, in her article ‘Poor rural women marrying city husband’ in Phụ nữ Thủ đô (Women in the Capital) newspaper April 29, 1998 wrote ‘For many poor rural women escape from rural areas to cities, a sensitive, gender-related reason is that they must leave in order to find a husband... Rural women who are over 23 are considered ‘on the shelf’ (ế ẩm). In Northern lowland regions, each commune on average has about 100-200 women entering this age.’ (Hà Thị Phương Tiến and Hà Quang Ngọc 2000: 45-70)

**Box 8. Finding a Husband as a Reason to Move to Cities**

‘...Due to many influential factors, the number of men, especially young men, leaving their rural homes to find work elsewhere has been increasing, causing the problem of sex cohort imbalance to become more and more serious. To be able to get married, many rural women had to unconditionally settle for any man who had a residential permit in city, or move to cities on their own to find work, hoping to meet someone with whom to form a family.

In Hồng Liên’s article ‘Thôn nữ nghèo lấy chồng thành phố’ (‘Poor rural women marrying city husbands’) in Phụ nữ Thủ đô (Women in Capital), April 29, 1998, Mrs. C. said: ‘I am from rural Y Yen, Nam Hà. I am not good looking, my family is poor, so until when I was 29, no man had ever proposed to me. One day, a man asked me about having a family with his nephew who lived in Ha Noi. I agreed and we got married. When we had a son, I moved to his place.’ This story goes with a comment that her husband is unemployed, has a mother who is mentally ill, lives in a very small place, but still is able to get married.


There are many gender differences regarding spontaneous migration. The *decision on whether the woman should migrate* is a very crucial part of the migration issue. Although it may seem that women play a passive role in making such decisions, and there are different opinions about this, research shows that 55% of the migrating women decide on their own, and for 17% it is joint decision (Hà Thị Phương Tiến and Hà Quang Ngọc
This indicates that women more often than not have an active and important role in making this decision. The significance of this increase from the fact that women are considered, by both men and women, to often have more advantages and are more adaptable to working in cities. Many women confidently explained why it was decided that they should go instead of their husband. Petty traders often said: ‘My husband is not as quick as me’, while a garbage scavenger said: ‘My husband and children cannot stand the smell here’, and a porter remarked: ‘Women like me accept hard work and can live on little food like rice with salt, but men won’t do this’. Women especially dominate in short-distance seasonal migration due to their flexibility and adaptability to urban context.

Age and education are also significant factors determining gender differentials in migration. In general, migrating women have lower educational attainments than men. According to city statistics, among 265,500 migrants to HCMC as of July 1995, illiterates and those with little reading and writing skills accounted for 43%, of which 61% were women. They general had no skills except some petty trading experience, and had to rely mainly on low-paid jobs in which they can use their dexterous hands, their strong shoulders to carry heavy loads, and their feet to move quickly.

Women and men are also different in their concerns and interests in working and living in an urban setting. Women are more concerned with safety and with saving money, while men are more interested in finding good jobs and acquiring new skills and knowledge. The types of work that women and men do in cities also are quite different. Women tend to accept any type of work, often requiring patience, long working hours and low pay. Men, instead, prefer heavier work but look for higher paying jobs involving fewer hours.

Women and men also face different risks in living in urban areas. Migrating women are more vulnerable to being bullied, robbed and to being involved in illegal activities. They are also in more urgent need to find secure a safe shelter than men. In reality, this could be an advantage for some of them who more often than men receive housing assistance from relatives and friends in cities (Hà Thị Phương Tiện and Hà Quang Ngọc 2000: 173).

The level of remittances sent home to migrants’ families is an important aspect of the migration issue. Although migrating women on average earn less than men, they often
save and send back to their families the same or even higher contributions than men. They think more about these responsibilities, spend less, and work more hours than men.

In general, gender differentials in the process of migration indicate that traditional values are deeply embedded in social norms. In the migrating network and environment, women are more under influence of and dependent on social and working relationships, and are more conscious of their rights and responsibilities from these relationships than men (Hà Thị Phương Tiền and Hà Quang Ngọc 2000: 168-75), which can be either a relative advantage or a disadvantage for women. Both women and men see migration as a feasible option to improve their families’ livelihoods. The next section will discuss the issue of women’s social and family relations in the context of đổi mới.

5.4 Women’s social and family relations under đổi mới

It has been widely recognized that better social and family relations have been part of the overall improvement in people’s lives since đổi mới, and also have enhanced women’s non-material welfare. However, there is still a need to overcome social norms and practices that are harmful to women. In this section, the following three issues are explored: (1) the changes in gender roles in society and in the family, taking account of regional differences, (2) the issue of intra-household decision making, and (3) the persistence of gender stereotypes and discrimination.

1. Changes in gender roles in society and in the family

Traditional norms have existed for thousands of years regarding gender roles in the family and in society, basically requiring men to be the family’s ‘pillar’ or main breadwinner, while having women assume all child-rearing and household responsibilities, and take charge of the family’s everyday financial needs, including earning supplemental ‘little income’ as necessary to support their husband so they can look for outside work or focus on their studies or training supposedly to qualify for ‘much bigger’ income prospects.

Before đổi mới, the situation in Viet Nam resembled most other ex-socialist countries in that women participated more actively than in non-socialist developing countries in the State work force, while the State also provided more social services such as daycare.
Most Vietnamese women, however, still assumed household responsibilities. During this post-war, pre-đôi mới period (1975-86), men’s economic role was decreased in the context of economic under-development and widespread poverty as a result of war destruction, thousands of men in re-education camps or leaving the country, and Viet Nam’s involvement in subsequent conflicts with China and Cambodia. Women thus had to struggle more arduously, mostly in the informal sector, to supplement family income. Even salaries of State employees were often insufficient, meaning women also had to find extra sources of income for their families. Women’s economic role in this period was absolutely crucial to most families’ survival.

Since đôi mới, both women and men have faced expanding opportunities to earn income. Men’s breadwinning role in general has been largely restored, while women’s income earning ability has also been increased. The impacts on gender roles in family and in the society are complicated and remain in many respects unclear, but it is certain that women still assume most or all domestic responsibilities. In this respect, although they contribute economically to the family income, and often significantly, people’s perception still is that women should basically do housework, and this can seriously undermine their income earning capability. Social norms also tend to look down on men who perform housework. It is common for men not to help their overloaded wives with housework even if they are able to, but some might help only if nobody knows about or could see it, especially other members of their family. ‘You can ask me to do anything you like around the house, but not in my mother’s presence.’ (Viet Nam News, June 29, 2002). Women’s economic role is thus downplayed, although their income is usually very essential to family well-being, as illustrated in Table 10.

Table 10. Who is the breadwinner? Percentage of those who disagreed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of adults who disagreed</th>
<th>Percentage of children who disagreed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men must be breadwinners</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women must also be breadwinners</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The persistence of traditional norms which are less and less suitable to the challenges of a rapidly changing society has caused much confusion concerning the conflicting roles of women and men. Nguyễn Thị Oanh (1996: 46-7) has discussed the issue of gender roles in family and in society as follows:

'The attitude of 'looking up to men, looking down on women' is still deeply rooted in the mentality of many people. Conflicts arise when the men feel that sharing household and childrearing responsibilities with their wives is unacceptable. An inferiority complex often occurs in men when their wives' salary or social status is higher due to socio-economic changes. At the same time, women increasingly realize their human rights and new roles, and wish to have their legitimate needs met in terms of developing their potential and in contributing to the society.

Conflicts occur not only when there are discrepancies between women's and men's perceptions of the changing society, and when the changes in public opinions are slower than the new requirements. Many Vietnamese families end in break-up not only because of tensions between the couple, but also due to interventions from the extended family, especially the husband’s family, on issues related to gender roles. Improving the situation requires much time, and will be very difficult not only because men are still discriminating but also because women tend to accept their fate.'

In terms of solutions in breaking the norms that can be harmful to the well-being of both sexes (but especially women), she observed that:

'It is necessary to have micro and macro measures to change the situation, such as economic policy to support women to have economic independence for men to gain more self-confidence, and educational programs for women which should start for girls.

Most importantly, each of us needs to realize that we are products of a culture, and that we tend to think in stereotypes and to act through habit without even knowing it. The only way to remove the old thinking in the society is for each person to be self-aware and to remove it from oneself.'

The full burden of housework, on top being an income earner, is still a reality for most women in Viet Nam from all classes, but especially those living in rural areas. Confucianism keeps women in the domestic sphere, assigning men the role of household head even when they get involved in vices or cannot support their families.

'Women as daughters-in-law, especially the oldest son's wife, are in charge of all household matters. The conditions can get worse if the parents-in-law still have feudal thinking and see their daughter-in-law as a 'free maid'. When things go wrong, or when their sons or grandchildren make mistakes, it is the daughters-in-law who take the blame. Today, there are many men who
love, support and share the family burden with their wife, but there are still many others who just show indifference or leave all family responsibilities to their wife, from earning income, getting groceries, cooking, household chores, to taking care of children. These men spend time with their friends, drinking, gambling, etc. It should be noted that they are still accepted and morally supported by family members, relatives, neighbours, public opinion, and even women themselves.' (Lê Thị Quy 1996)

It should also be noted that the influence of Confucianism regarding women’s and men’s roles in the family tends to decrease from North to South. Table 11 illustrate these subtle differences in that domestic responsibilities in families in the Southern commune tend to be shared somewhat more evenly between husband and wife.

In terms of intra-household decision-making, Confucian practices give men absolute power while indigenous practices promote joint decision-making between husband and wife. In the context of socio-economic changes, changes in the dynamics of relative power sharing appear to be ambiguous. However, as with the previous case presented above, Southern families tend to be less influenced by Confucianism and thus have more equal decision making power between husband and wife (see Table 12).

**Table 11. Family Responsibilities in a Northern and a Southern Lowland Commune**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>N</th>
<th></th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housework</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tutoring children</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for the elderly/the sick</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 12. Household Decision-Making in a Northern and a Southern Lowland Commune**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>N</th>
<th></th>
<th>S</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career orientation for children</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s marriages</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and repairing house</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(N): Cẩm Vụ commune, Cẩm Binh district, Hải Dương province
(S): Mỹ Lương commune, Chợ Mới district, An Giang province

*Source: Adapted from Nguyễn Linh Khiesel (2001)*
The above section has discussed the changes in women’s and men’s roles and their decision making power in the context of doi moi. The next section will present some of the persistent, negative impacts of Confucianism on Vietnamese families in this context.

2. Impacts of Confucianism on Vietnamese families today

According to Mai Quang Hiền (2001), gender discrimination can be considered as one of five main vestiges of feudal morality (with the other four being (1) emphasizing hierarchy, classes, being eager for fame; (2) formalism; (3) conservative, being at a standstill; and (4) dogmatism, aloof from reality, and inconsistencies between theory and practice.) It has been recognized that the Law on Marriage and Family has had some effect in reducing negative practices of gender discrimination, but it is still prevalent in family and throughout society. Forced marriages, obstacles to free choice of partner, polygamy, physical and verbal abuse to wife, maltreating daughter-in-laws, giving more importance to sons than daughters are all considered to be quite prevalent, even among government officials and party cadres.

The same author asserted that the main cause of these ‘law-violating’ practices is recognized as being due to the influence of previous feudal system still deeply embodied in many classes of people. This influence is stronger in rural than urban areas, and although it is not as strong and visible as under Chinese Confucianism, it is still a common perception among the people. Only having a son endorses the power of ‘the family’s pillar’, and this makes family planning difficult among those who have only daughters because, as the popular saying goes, people want to ‘have both sticky rice and regular rice’ (‘có nếp có tẻ’). A husband should take his wife to his home (đón vợ về đinh) and not move in with the wife. Husbands should be higher than wives in terms of finance and social status to maintain family harmony and authority, and to avoid the inauspicious situation of being ‘gà mái gáy’ (chicken crows). When a son is born, big ceremonies are organized to celebrate. It is also common for government organizations to be hesitant in recruiting female employees, or to limit their number, although this is against official policy. At the same time, women themselves may not totally overcome self-pity and can lack of self-confidence, and this is also an obstacle in the process of gender development.
Box 9. Controversial over Whether Confucian Practices Should Still be Applied: A debate on the school slogan ‘Tien hoc le, hau hoc van’ (One must learn to comply with social order before studying), and reference to gender inequality

The following is an excerpt on the debate: ‘If the term ‘le’ refers to social order and regulation, we can inherit this concept from Confucianism. This is because in today’s society, there are people who have improper thoughts and actions without consciously knowing it and see still themselves as modern people. Some students do not respect their teachers and friends, being undisciplined, affecting orderly learning routines and the social environment at school. Therefore, it is necessary to remind then and to implement the Confucian saying of ‘One must learn ethical behaviour before studying’...

However, there are other views such as that of Dr. Hồ Ngọc Đại, who considered this as a return to Confucius. He said: ‘Today, when evaluating students’ behaviour, many simply say in short that it is ‘seriously degrading’, and put all the blame on teachers. Therefore, teachers become panicked, and try to look into the past and find an old slogan from thousands of years ago in era of Confucius: ‘One must learn ethical behaviour before studying’. Without careful thought, they put the slogan at school gates! I would like to comment that, complying to ‘le’ does not always lead to ethical behaviour. And even complying with a kind of ‘le’ leads to the same kind of ethical behaviour. Who can say that ethical behaviour in era of Confucius and that of today’s standards are the same?’

Relating to gender relations, ‘looking up to men, looking down on women’ was one of the most important Confucian principles on family relations related to gender inequality. Under this principle, ‘men of poor talent and strength still had higher respect than women with talents; younger men still had more power than older women; wives who financially supported their family still had to be emotionally dependent on lazy, no-talent husbands; men having five, six, or seven wives was seen as normal, while women were expected to have only one husband; husbands had the right to leave their wife if she did not have children, to have other wives, but the wife must not remarry, etc. Moreover, the feudal class shows contempt for women. Confucianists considered ‘little’ people and women as ‘difficult to discipline’.

When the debate on the relevance of the Confucian concept of ‘le’ (social order) in today’s society is still controversial, it is obvious that Confucian principles of inequities in family and gender relations will not be quickly relegated to the past.

Source: Adapted from Nguyễn Tài Thụ (1997: 102, 187-8).

According to Lê Thị Quý (1996), since the August 1945 revolution, the struggle for gender equality has occurred strongly in most areas of law, society and family, depending on each context and local situation. This has substantially improved the position and rights of women. However, this struggle still encounters many difficulties, especially in regard to backward attitudes, practices and norms that have persisted for thousands of
years. This is the reason why 40 years later (starting with the dön mới period), the tradition of ‘looking up to men, looking down on women’ still exists, and in a few respects may even have been strengthened.

The negative aspects of emphasis on community (vs. individual) perspectives and values are also often identified by the Vietnamese, in spite of the family and community ties which are the main thread of the so-called ‘Asian values’. Mai Hưu Bích (1991: 22-5) has the following comments regarding this negative aspect:

‘In Viet Nam, people give prominence to the community and undermine the individual to an unreasonable extent, using idioms such as ‘All being bad is better than one single being good’ (xâu đều còn hơn tốt lịnh), and ‘All dead is better than one alive’ (chết một đông còn hơn sống một người). People lay down a policy of eliminating personality, level (cào bằng) everything, aiming to make everyone the same... Since being children, people were trained to have community spirit, considering the community’s judgement as the highest standard, and trying to behave so as to be approved by the community, not according to concepts of right or wrong.’

In this respect, the author has analyzed some of the negative impacts of the method of socialization in Confucian families as follows:

‘...Social monitoring measures in traditional Vietnamese families aim to maximize passive conformity, to dissolve individuality into community. The mechanism involves imitating (bắt chước) and rewarding or punishing (thưởng phật). This is different from families that emphasize individuality, where the mechanism is mainly self-adjustment. Specifically, the difference is that, in the former mechanism, the monitoring is performed from the outside, and requires a specialized monitoring force, forcing people to conform to avoid punishment. On the other hand, in the latter mechanism, each individual can see right or wrong on one’s own, apply behavioural standards to judge one’s own behaviour, and self-monitor from the inside with an expectation for this to be accepted by others.

In a community-emphasized monitoring mechanism, punishment is often severe. Families attach special importance to strict punishment of those children’s behaviours considered to be in contradiction to the family’s well-being, often called ‘having no order’ (vô lê) or ‘undutiful’ (bất hiếu). The common guidelines are ‘Love means punishment’ (thương cho roi vợ), and especially ‘The more physical punishment, the less rationality is needed’ (giả đơn non lê), that uses power and physical force to suppress their children rather than using rationality, and not having to accept any reasoning regarding right or wrong.’
A notable example of ‘back to Confucianism’ is the reinforcement of Confucian values evident in recently published books. Since đổi mới, there has been an increase in the availability of books, including those dealing with culture, literature and popular songs and proverbs that include commentary on traditional and modern gender relations. Whether this represents an effort to reinstate traditional gender inequalities is debatable. However, as gender theories and the discourse on gender and development are still new in Viet Nam, and with the persistence of traditions in recently published books, it seems likely that this is likely to have the effect of reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example, Võ Thành Tân’s book titled ‘1001 câu ca dao về người phụ nữ Việt Nam’ (1001 popular songs about Vietnamese women, 1999, Nhà xuất bản Thanh niên (Youth Publisher) includes many popular songs which still look down on women, and the book calls itself ‘a night-time book for women, a guideline for families, and a book for young men seeking to understand young women’.

The struggle to overcome the negative impacts of Confucianism on gender relations has been difficult and will have to take a long time, as often stated by many Vietnamese scholars. The following section will discuss one important aspect of this negativity: gender stereotypes and discrimination against women and girls.

3. The persistence of gender stereotypes and discrimination

As in some other countries, gender stereotypes in Viet Nam are often learnt at a very young age through socialization in the family and in school. Children learn gender differences and form their set of beliefs accordingly to fit in with the society. Until now, without much gender planning or targeting to counter the introduction of gender stereotyping to children, schoolbooks continue to perpetuate the problems by often portraying women and girls as the ‘weaker’ sex, whose domain is mainly within the domestic sphere, while men and boys are depicted as strong, intellectual and in leadership positions (see Table 13).

The process of socialization in Viet Nam is thus teaching children to behave and act in certain ways depending on their sex. Table 14 shows the socially acceptable roles and behaviours for boys and girls, which clearly demonstrates their different status and roles that are often unfavourable to girls. Girls are taught to strictly behave, including not
speaking or laughing loudly, not being mischievous, and not exposing themselves in movement, or taking risks such as playing football, showering in the rain, or staying overnight at friends’ houses. They are raised to believe they belong to the ‘weaker’ sex and are emotional rather than rational. They are trained to limit their eating and sleeping, and to assume all the housework tasks like their mothers, grandmothers or other female family members. Most important, they are taught to believe that they do not have the power to decide for themselves or to direct others.

Table 13. Typical Gender Stereotypes in Schoolbooks of Vietnamese Language, Grades 1 to 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female Images</th>
<th>Male Images</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls: helping mother, taking care of grandmother, being shy, afraid of heights, singing, playing, teaching, being tender to animals, etc.</td>
<td>Boys: tending buffaloes, flying kites, running, jumping, playing football, playing with toy guns, drawing, discussing, having big dreams, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sisters: looking after younger sibling, doing housework, raising animals, doing embroidery to sell for exports.</td>
<td>Brothers: discovering stars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers: knitting, doing laundry, carrying baby, taking children to school</td>
<td>Fathers: driving cars or motorbikes, ploughing, going away to work, explaining things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professions: teacher, worker in cow farm, doctor, nurse</td>
<td>Professions: fishers far in the ocean, electrician, machine operator, soldier, navy, hero, pilot, astronaut, scientist, principal, captain, rescue worker, district president, king, mandarin, riding an elephant, fighting in battles, hunting, tailor…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images: soft-mannered, caring, good listener, crying, helping neighbours and other people</td>
<td>Images: intellectual, using machines, understanding technology, fixing things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Statistics from a group of researchers on schoolbooks of Vietnamese language grades 1 to 5 (2000).

On the other hand, boys are raised to believe that they are strong and active, and can get involved in mischief, including drinking, smoking or gambling, with only lenient criticism and punishment by their family and by public opinion. They learn to avoid ‘girly’ things such as sprucing themselves up, or doing housework, because these can affect their ‘boyhood’ or masculinity. Boys also learn in a direct or indirect way about their perceived greater physical strength and higher status than girls coming from the same socio-economic background.
Table 14. Gender Socialization among Children in Viet Nam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boys can be active, playful and mischievous...</th>
<th>but not girls:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Boys can shout, run and jump’</td>
<td>‘Girls must not see action movies’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Boys can fight each other’</td>
<td>‘Girls must not be mischievous’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Boys can climb trees and hang there’</td>
<td>‘Girls must not get dirty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Boys can play cards in public’</td>
<td>‘Girls must not race vehicles’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between boys and girls is:

‘Boys are strong and decisive’

‘Girls are emotional, not rational’

In terms of doing housework:

‘Boys should do heavy work such as lifting and technical work such as fixing electricity’

‘Boys should not do little work, housework’

‘Boys should not do laundry or sew clothes’

Girls must do housework

Some behaviours are discouraged for one sex but not the other:

‘Boys must not spruce themselves up’

‘Girls must not talk or laugh loudly’

‘Boys must not have long hair’

‘Girls must wear buttoned up shirts’

‘Boys must not wear makeup or earrings’

‘Girl must not fuss their hands or feet’

In playing:

‘Boys must not play with dolls’

‘Girls must not play football’

‘Boys must not dance’

‘Girls must not climb trees or fences’

For actions involving risks:

‘Boys can smoke’

‘Girls must not shower in the rain’

‘Boys can drink coffee and beer’

‘Girls must not stay overnight with friends’

In family:

‘Boys can hit his older sister’

‘Girls must sacrifice for brothers’

‘... and she must not hit him back’

‘Girls must not go to bed early’

Girls are different from boys because:

‘Girls do not have power to direct’

‘Girls have to ask for permission all the time’

Source: Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa (2000: 42-44)
The impacts of these ‘learnt behaviours’ can be very negative on the society and especially on women and girls. As boys, and later as men, many feel less responsible for taking care of their family and for curtailing their vices. Some do not dare to help their wives with housework as they fear being made fun of, and some do not even realize the burden that their wives have to bear. Many ‘naturally’ assume their higher status and power over their female counterparts, including their wife, all female family members, or females with the same socio-economic background, which is partly the root cause of physical, emotional and sexual harassment and assaults against women and girls.

The issue of *son preference* is still heavy in Viet Nam, especially in rural areas, despite government efforts to eradicate the imperative to produce at least a boy to ‘carry on the family name’. The slogan ‘Boy or girl, two are enough’ has been frequently used to promote the government’s ‘two children’ family planning policy. While the people may generally support the government in this policy, many still have not overcome the Confucian norms seeing girls as ‘worthless’ that are commented on as follows (also see Box 12):

‘Viet Nam is still under the impact of ‘feudal’ thinking, with some backward customs, among which, the thinking of ‘looking up to males and looking down on females’ is still very heavy: there is a need to have son(s) to carry the family name. This thinking probably attaches to each and every Vietnamese, not only among old people and those with low levels of education, but also among young people and those with education. In both urban and rural areas, this thinking is still not yet totally removed. There might have been progress in perception, but there has not been much change in real life. When a young couple has a son as their first child, not only their family and relatives but also their friends and colleagues are happy for them. Many men having a daughter as their first child or having two ‘ducklings’ (daughters) are put down, and they have to sit in ‘lower tables’ or in ‘women’s tables’ when there are at parties. Friends offer toasts to them not to congratulate them but to share their condolences. Many families have conflicts and break up only because of this thinking.’ (Dinh Văn Vang 1995: 284-5)
Box 10. Cultural Persistence of Son Preference: A “Grading System” for Women Based on the Sexes of Their Children

The intertwining of traditional gender relations and the impact of Confucianism has led to a current informal ‘grading system’ for women depending on the sexes of their children. While the tradition makes no discrimination against either sex and insists that ‘Having deep fields and breeding buffaloes is not as good as having a daughter as a first child’ (Rừng sấu trâu nái không bằng con gái đầu lòng), Confucian practices are ‘One son counts, ten daughters are worthless’ (Nam nam viết hưu, thập nữ viết vô). With the family planning policy of each family having no more than two children, the ideal situation is often stated as having a daughter then a son. The ‘grading system’, which is meant as a joke has its truth, giving women with a daughter and then a son the maximum points of ten. Having a son then a daughter would be considered second-best, usually nine points. Having two sons would be considered next best, with eight points. Finally, having two daughters is seen as the worst (only five or even zero points). This ‘grading system’ puts a lot pressure on women who have not had a son. Women who have a daughter as their first child are especially under pressure, because their ‘grades’ would be either the highest or lowest, depending on the sex of their next child.

The issue of single women has recently received more attention from Vietnamese researchers. In Viet Nam, families of women having a child born out-of-wedlock are those in which the mother had a child with a man who is not living in the same house, and who is not officially married to the woman. This is especially common in the North where women participate in the government system and have knowledge about the Marriage and Family law that allows women who are not able to find a husband to have a child out-of-wedlock. There are also cases where the women who are not informed about the law do have one or more children with one or more men. These cases are more common in the Centre and South.

There has been more research on single women in the North than in the Centre and South, but overall, according to Lê Thi (1999: 23), the situation of families without a husband (thiếu) or where the husband is absent (vắng) has still not received much attention as a research topic.

The demographic imbalance resulted from male mortality due to prolonged wars, male overseas migration, and uneven population distribution, has been considered the main cause of the ‘single women’ phenomenon in Viet Nam. The Vietnamese 1979 census data
show that the male/female ratio for five-year interval cohorts born between 1915 and 1954 was .78 - .90 (Luong 2003: 3). Data from the 1994 Inter-Censal Demographic Survey also reveal the imbalance (see Table 15). Although data on recent years show that the imbalance has been reduced, the issue is still common especially among poor women, factory workers in textile, footwear and seafood processing, and rural women living in areas where many men leave to find work in cities.

Table 15. Male/female ratio by age group, 15-49 (Number of males per 100 female)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-49</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>89.2</td>
<td>91.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>97.8</td>
<td>89.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td>92.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Research in HCMC by Nguyễn Minh Hào (1998) also shows that the issue of single women wanting to marry is significant and urgent. Unlike young unmarried women who do not receive sufficient sex education and become unexpectedly pregnant, there are many single women who purposely became pregnant in order to have a child out-of-wedlock. At that time (1998), the population ratio for women and men was 52.3% and 47.7%. In a survey of 100 hamlets, 42% of total single women (18 years or older) were over 30. They were considered to have a very low chance of getting married, and many were likely to have a child out-of-wedlock.

The survey also shows that the ‘risk’ of not finding a husband was very high among female industrial workers. In most studies, the most common reason given was that they had to work 8-10 hours a day, plus two hours transportation time. They thus were too tired and did not have time to go to public places to meet with men. However, the author asserted that besides the imbalance sex cohorts, other reasons for not being able to find a husband were ‘being past marriageable age’ (qua lúa lở thì), ‘God created me unattractive’ (tố lố bất xấu), ‘not being economically advantageous’ (i.e., being poor), being disabled, or other family reasons. Therefore, it seems that the reason about ‘being
tired and having no time’ for some is only a ‘surface’ reason, one that single women are more willing to admit, while other reasons such as age, appearance, and wealth might be more important but less talked about. For example, in terms of wealth, it is found that the majority of single women are poor, and that wealthier women are unlikely to be single despite their long working hours (usually in high profit sectors).

‘Single women’ is a common phenomenon in many countries. However, whereas it is more of a personal choice in developed countries, in Viet Nam it is nearly always involuntary. These women are willing to get married, but a shortage of men prevents this, due to prolonged wars, overseas immigration, exported labour, and uneven population distribution. The Vietnamese value systems still place very high importance on having children, and usually a son is preferred. Unlike in the West where single women are considered a ‘normal phenomenon’, single women in Viet Nam still face social ostracism (despite the new Law on Marriage and Family that recognizes and legitimizes children born out-of-wedlock).

The old feudal law imposed heavy punishments on unmarried women who became pregnant — such as ‘shaving nape and marking it with lime’ (gọt gậy bôi vôi) or ‘floating them on a raft down the river’ (thả bè trôi sông) — and single women today still have to deal with some degree of shame associated with their situation. In most cases, this emotional and psychological ill-being continues for the rest of their lives. Although statistics on their economic situation are not readily available, some research findings (such as Lê Thi 1996, Nguyễn Minh Hòa 1998) have shown that they are typically among the most economically disadvantaged. There has not yet been policy to identify these women for financial support, while their families in most cases are unable to help as they too are poor. Friends or co-workers sometimes help them, but in general they receive more blame than assistance, as ‘they have to pay the price for the sin they committed’.

Even more strikingly, results from interviewing single women show that some of poor single women would prefer to suffer from even more poverty as long as they could have a husband (ActionAid 1996). Probably the desire to have children has induced many who believe in their right to have a child to ‘take the risk to face the society’s slight’ (liểu mình với xã hội) (Lê Thi 1996).
Fear of being socially ostracized and of causing pain and shame for parents, and the feeling of worthlessness associated with not being chosen by men and not fulfilling ‘God’s mission’ to have children, are in fact the major concerns in life for many of them. In addition, although this affects only a small percentage of the female population of a certain age group, its effect can be devastating not only for this cohort but also can have significant implications for their married counterparts, some of whom had to ‘settle for’ unsuitable, abusive, or already married partners, and also for future generations of female children observing the unequal gender relations who might be induced to accept this fate.

Another problem is worth noting here which can greatly affect women’s well-being is the trafficking of Vietnamese women and girls to neighbouring countries. However, a percentage of these women leaving their country do so voluntarily due to their desire to get married while they have not found a partner in their homeland (see Box 11).

**Box 11. The Unfortunate Connection Between Women’s Trafficking and Their Not Being Able to Find a Local Husband**

Trafficking of women and girls to neighbouring countries is a pressing issue in Viet Nam. Many women and young girls are being kidnapped or lured to Cambodia and forced to work as prostitutes, and to China and forced to marry men who could not find a wife due to China’s one-child policy. The issue is found to be related to the fact that many Vietnamese women moved out of their homeland because they hope to find a husband they could not find in their country. The following are excerpts from interviews with two women from Kim Xuyên (Hải Hưng province) who resorted to moving to find a husband.

_Ms. Nguyễn Thị D.:_ In 1992, I went to China because I was tired of being old without a husband. In my village, people at my age were already married. I could not be with the younger men in the village. When my neighbour K. suggested I go to China, I agreed immediately. This woman was already 42 years old and did not have a husband. We heard that there were many available men in China and very few women, so I wanted to go to find a husband. I was too lonely and sad so had to go...

_Ms. Kh_: I joined the volunteer youth program _thanh niên xung phong_ in 1968 when I was only 16 and did not think about personal matters. In 1976, when I finished my contribution _nghiên vụ_, I was already 24 years old. In my village, girls of 18 or 19 years had already got married. There was no man of my age still unmarried. I felt pity for myself and got bored with being alone. In 1989, I moved to Quảng Ninh because it was a coal mining area and had many men working there. I hoped to find a husband, but the pimps fooled me into crossing the border (into China) and sold me to a 60-year-old man. I accepted this fate, and lived with him for six years and had two children, until 1995 when I missed my homeland and escaped with one of my children. _Source: Lê Thị Quy (2000: 83, 142)._
In discussing these problems, Nguyễn Thị Oanh (1998: 62) raised the question ‘*Why is the issue of single women still tragic in our country?’ and then analyzed it as follows:

First, the most common reason is, in a society which is under-developed and retains a feudal perception of ‘looking down on women’, women are still disadvantaged: many do not go to school, do not have occupations, and thus have to be economically dependent. Not having a family therefore leaves a terrible emptiness in their life. Secondly, there is the biased perception against women that builds up pressure from public opinion, considering them as being ‘on the shelf’ (é âm), ‘old maids’ (gái già), etc., or not being able to give birth to a child as indicating God’s punishment. This pressure weighs heavily on women, through their family, because sometimes their parents’ worries and fear of losing face are more burdensome than their own feelings. Finally, the society’s pitiful regard can make single women feel even more ‘self-pity’, and cause them to worry more about their plight. This pity exists because of the way girls are raised, where they accept the view that the ultimate goal for them is to get a husband (tạm chồng). Families rarely think about helping their children to understand that contributing to society is also worthwhile, an alternate way of life, and a source of joy for many women.

There are also different opinions about the government’s ‘solution to the problem’ of single women, in passing the 1986 Law on Marriage and Family, allowing single women to have a child out-of-wedlock. On the one hand, the law is considered a humane policy that protects women’s right to have children; on the other hand there are those who think it does not go far enough.

The new Law has given single women the opportunity to build their own families even without a husband. Most women do have the need to have a family (or just to have one child) because the traditional society still places high value on ‘giving birth’, and women still have to rely on children for economic provision at old age. In the past, all women were expected to observe the values placed on ‘virginity’, ‘fidelity’ and ‘giving birth’, and unmarried women who lost virginity or unexpectedly became pregnant, or married women widowed at a young age, were not traditionally considered acceptable to marry (or remarry) or have children. The new Law eliminated these ‘unfavourable aspersions’ for women and given them the right to have a child while not being married. In the past, children born out-of-wedlock were not treated the same way as legal children: they did
not have birth certificates and assistance; their mothers did not have maternity leaves benefits and sometimes were forced to disclose information about the father; and evidently social ostracizing. With the new Law, these mothers and children enjoy the same rights and benefits like others.

Normally, when a war comes to an end, it is the time when women and men return to care for their families and have children. In Viet Nam the war was over in 1975, and it was eleven years later that the government introduced the new Law, which could indicate that it took major efforts to make such significant changes in policy and social norms regarding women’s values. Nguyễn Minh Hòa (1998) observed that ‘Due to the pressure from the reality of society, and especially from the women themselves, lawmakers had to change their viewpoint [on the issue]... This was real progress and proves the humanism exists in our society.’ However, Lê Thị (1996) remarked that ‘The implementation and modification of the Law on women having a child out-of-wedlock are not to cope with the reality of society that needs to be changed, but rather it is an adaptation to ensure legitimate human rights.’

Nevertheless, looking at the Law in practice, there still exist some issues still needing to be resolved. Within the law itself, according to Lê Thị (1998), ‘the Law on Marriage and Family does not allow polygamy. Therefore, when a man has a child with a second woman, he cannot marry her. This is the reason that he denies responsibilities with the woman and the child, in terms of both love as husband and father, and financial support.’ In reality, most men with whom single women ‘seek a child’ (xin con) are already married, so it is unlikely that many children born out-of-wedlock will be recognized by their fathers, or that their mothers will receive on-going financial support.

In most cases, women do not disclose the father’s identity to anyone, and neither does the man tell his wife about it. There are two opposite opinions about why men do this: one considers it immoral because the man cheats on his wife and does not support the child, and the other considers it a ‘kind act’ (việc thiện) because it is in the single woman’s best interest, which is to get pregnant and willing to raise the child by herself. There have been voices from married women objecting to this practice, as Nguyễn Minh Hòa (1996) comments: ‘It will take very long (i.e., be unlikely) for Vietnamese women to accept for
their husband could do such a thing which, in another perspective, could be considered ‘humane’ (nhan đạo).

Although the men involved are often not ‘identified’, it is clear that the practice is quite common, and the single women with a child can be sometimes blamed for ‘seeking to destroy other people’s family happiness.’ Many Vietnamese still insist on formal marriage with one husband and one wife, and on women’s virginity and fidelity. But, given the fact that this practice is commonplace, there needs to be a social movement to address the issue of the imbalance in gender cohorts and can adapt those cultural norms that are harmful to single women.

Nguyễn Thị Oanh (1998) offers some critical comments: All the concern is for the women’s needs of being taken care of, having someone to console and not to be lonely, especially in old age. However, this perspective violates children’s rights, that is, when a child is born or adopted, the best interests of the child should come first. Children should not be seen as a means simply to satisfy adult needs, not even those of their parents. When children are considered mainly as property or working labour, child abuse and human rights violations often occur. Adequate social insurance provisions should be the responsibility of the whole society. Although this does not mean that the State must provide all the assistance, it can direct social and mass organizations to undertake or promote mutual assistance. The population growth rate issue also needs to be considered.

Although adoption seems to be a better solution, the cultural norm still prefers biological children to adopted ones. Therefore, the current government solution may in fact be optimal, but a policy on economic support for these women is still needed. In addition, raising awareness in society to remove discrimination against these single mothers would seem to be even more obvious and important:

‘In the feudal society of the past, Hồ Xuân Hương, a talented and courageous woman, voiced her advocacy for the destiny of many women who were ‘pregnant without a husband, that’s cool and unique!’ (không chồng mà chúng mọi người), throwing out the moral standards of being virtuous (chính chơn), pure, of remaining a widow and of worshipping one’s husband’s memory (thử tiết thơ chồng) according to feudal prescription. Then why, in the last decade of the 20th century, do these single women still have to suffer from strict judgement and brutal discrimination?’ (Nguyễn Thanh Tâm 1991: 117)
5.5 Women’s legal protection issues under dôi moi

This section raises the following three issues: (1) land ownership, (2) domestic violence, and (3) sexual harassment against girls and women. Legal protection for women has been strengthened but it is still necessary to look further into the cultural factors that put women in vulnerable positions and that thus require protection from the legal system.

1. Land ownership. In the context of the development of the rural household economy, there is a need to pay attention to gender aspects of specific policies so as to allow both women and men the same rights and responsibilities in terms of work and benefits. Specific policies are needed stating that all family members have land ownership rights, not just the head of household. (It often occurs in rural areas that a male head of households decided on his own to sell land, forcing wives and children to move to cities to make a living). The law and social policies need to be further reinforced to protect the social and economic rights of women and their children after divorce. In reality there are cases where women, after many decades of hard work, are pushed out of the house with only their bare hands due to ‘illegal tricks’ of their husband and in-laws which are ratified due to gender-biased perceptions of government officials and neighbours (Lê Thị Quy 1996).

The main reasons for which women often have more restricted access to land than men have been identified as: (1) land policy after doi moi was more concerned with land ownership and land use between the household and the State, rather than the relationship between individual members within a household in terms of access and control of land use; and (2) the changing role of the farming household, resulting from the switch from cooperatives to household economy, has strengthened the authority of the head of household, culturally specified to be the husband, through the issuance of land certificates, thus making other family members, and especially the wife, more dependent and vulnerable to losing access to land use and ownership in case of divorce (Trần Thị Văn Anh 1999: 113).
2. Domestic violence

According to Lê Thị Quy (1996), the five main causes of domestic violence in Viet Nam are often identified as: (1) **economic**: Recent research has revealed that economic hardship is one major cause of domestic violence (Lê Thị 1998b, World Bank 1999). Poor, low-income, families with many children, or families experiencing economic loss or bankruptcy are where extreme violence most often occurs; (2) **perception**: This is caused by the feudal ‘looking up to men, looking down on women’. Many men think they have absolute power in the family, including the right to hit wives and children. Another source of violence is conflict with in-laws (World Bank 1999), when many men take their family’s side and beat their wife. Women are often physically and verbally abused by their in-laws; (3) **social**: The recent erosion of traditional moral values, and the increase in antisocial behaviours in Viet Nam are important causes of the rise in domestic violence. Violence stemming from men’s dissatisfaction in love and sex, excessive drinking, gambling, taking drugs, having extra-marital affairs, or being jealous, etc. are all on the increase. As social evils increase, so does domestic violence, and women suffer the worst consequences; (4) **health**: There are cases where domestic violence occurs because the abusers have mental problems, who feel irritated or frustrated, and pour their anger on family members; in such cases, poverty and lack of health care are often contributing factors; and (5) **women at fault**: In reality, there are women who are lazy, do not manage the household well or spend money irresponsibly. Some violate moral norms, behave improperly toward their family or other people. Others have extra-marital affairs or insult their husbands or in-laws. Although this does not justify physical violence, many Vietnamese also have an instinctive reflex in considering women mainly responsible for domestic problems.

It has been documented that domestic violence has been significantly reduced since **đời mới** mainly attributed to reduced economic hardship (Lê Thị Quy 1996, World Bank 1999). However, the issue is still a major concern affecting women’s well-being, especially when their culturally inferior status is identified as the main cause. Data from the Statistics Department of HCMC People’s Court shows that in 1995, about 83% of divorce cases were due to mistreatment and abuse by husbands. World Bank data show
how prevalent domestic violence against women still is in terms of verbal, physical and sexual abuse (see Table 16).

**Table 16. Frequency of Domestic Abuse by Self-Ranked Income Levels**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Assessed Income Ranking</th>
<th>Verbal Abuse</th>
<th>Beating</th>
<th>Forced Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worse off</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better off</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: World Bank (1999).*

Women’s inferior status, rooted in their economic dependence on men, and that can place women in abusive living situations, can be expected to be overcome to some degree when women become more financially capable and independent. Table 17 thus shows that domestic violence is lowest when both husband and wife are income earners. However, the highest incidence occurs in families where the woman is the main income earner. This is especially true for poor households where the husbands do not contribute much but still abuse wives (and children) who may have little choice but to accept the situation. Incidence of domestic violence is lower in families with male breadwinners than in those with female breadwinners, but higher than in those where both partners are working.

**Table 17. Percentage of Types of Domestic Violence by Main Income Earner in Family**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The main income earner is:</th>
<th>Wife n=67</th>
<th>Husband n=224</th>
<th>Both n=310</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husband neglects wife</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband uses strong words</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband yells at wife</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband prohibits wife</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband uses forced sex</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband beats wife</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: World Bank (1999).*

3. **Sexual harassment against women and girls**

The concept of sexual harassment as a social problem is still relatively new in Viet Nam, and it will probably take some time for the people to get their minds around the concept.
However, no matter how unfamiliar the issue may be, it should be a legal responsibility to protect women and girls. Educating the people and training law enforcement agencies on the issue are both critical in providing women and girls with their right to a harassment-free environment. It is also necessary to prevent criminal acts of physical and sexual assault that can escalate from prior habits of sexual harassment. The issue in Viet Nam is discussed in one of the few papers on sexual harassment, as follows:

**Box 12. Sexual Harassment against Young Girls**

When reaching around age 10-12, girls started to be teased by boys at home and at school. It is common that boys use first person as ‘ anh’ and call the girls ‘em’ (which is considered inappropriate for same-age males or females, and is similar to ‘babe’ in North America), or to touch their shoulders or hair. When seeing an attractive girl, some boys chase after her, and if being refused, they may curse or threaten her. Even worse, some boys go into the girls’ washroom at school and joke around so that girls cannot use it...

This form of sexual harassment can easily lead to sexual assault. Statistics show that in 1994 in HCMC, there were 107 reported cases of rape, of which 43 cases involved victims under 13 years old, 82 cases with victims age 17-30, and 10 cases involving those over 17. As the number of victims of sexual assault increases, so do the number of child prostitutes. Girls who were frequently harassed often suffer from psychological pain for many years in their life. Those who get involved in prostitution are at high risk of physical abuse and sexual transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS.

Causes of this problem might include the following:

- There is no specific law regarding sexual harassment to girls and women.
- The society has not paid attention to sexual harassment and has underestimated its consequences.
- Schools do not have proper moral, gender, and sex education to students.
- Pornographic pictures, books and films are not under strict regulation for minors.
- The increasing number of drug addicts can also lead to sexual harassment, assault and abuse.
- There is a lack of wholesome recreational facilities such as clubs, libraries, parks, etc.
- Beauty contests that lack positive or legitimate purposes can also encourage girls to degrade themselves.


This chapter has covered selected issues regarding women’s well-being in the context of *đời mới*. In the following chapter, there will be a fuller discussion of institutional organizations in Viet Nam as they affect women’s well-being.
CHAPTER SIX.

CONTEMPORARY INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATIONS
AS THEY AFFECT WOMEN IN VIET NAM

This chapter addresses the roles of institutional organizations in representing women’s interests and protecting their well-being. Section 6.1 gives a brief description of institutional organizations with functions related to gender and women’s issues, including national and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and research institutions. Section 6.2 then considers the situation of gender training and research in Viet Nam, and section 6.3 draws out some implications regarding institutional efforts to improve women’s well-being.

6.1 Institutional Organizations with Functions Related to Gender and Women’s Issues

This section describes the two most important national women’s organizations in Viet Nam, the Women’s Union and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women, and then reviews the array of research and academic institutions with functions of teaching and studying gender, family and women’s issues, and of the various with gender and women’s interests. While the WU and NCFAW are under government direction, intended mainly to implement policies and programs related to women, as well as support research and academic institutions to teach, train and research on gender and women’s issues, NGOs can be more autonomous but still have to be registered and operate under sponsorship and oversight of a governmental organization.

1. National Organizations: the Viet Nam Women’s Union and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women

The main function of the Women’s Union (WU) is to carry out the government’s programs related to women. Established in 1930, it helped mobilize women during the wars against the French and the Americans, and its functions now include administering social welfare programs and projects of national and international development agencies. With its highly tiered decision-making structure, the WU is comprised of a network of women from national to grass-root levels, with four main administrative levels (central,
provincial, district and commune). The WU is headed by a Presidium with 15 members with 4,000 full-time cadres to administer operations of the central level, and is comprised of about 12,000 commune-level Unions. In 1999, there were an estimated eleven million members in the whole country, predominantly rural women between the ages of 30 and 50 (UNDP 1999). Every five years, delegates from all parts of the country attend a National Women’s Congress. Since 1988, its role and status has been expanded by a decree stating that all levels of government must consult with the WU on issues relating to women and children.

In the context of poverty reduction, the WU is usually in charge of women’s programs and projects established by local initiatives, as well as government-sponsored savings groups, women’s credit programs from the Bank for the Poor, mother and child health and family planning programs, and women’s credit and handicraft projects funded by international organizations. Fahey (1998: 226) suggested, however, that the WU has recently been ‘coopted by international organizations for the administration of aid’ and thus has lost much of its lobbying role.

Box 13. Objectives of the Women’s Unions for the 1997-2002 Period

➢ To encourage all strata of women to tap their full potentials;
➢ To support women in improving their living standards and status at home and in society, in building prosperous families with equality, progressiveness, happiness, good education and nutrition for children; and
➢ To further strengthen the Union’s institutional structures for effective performances and provision of services for the benefit of women.

Source: UNDP (1999)

The National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW) was formed in 1985 as a response to the International Decade for Women and the Nairobi Women’s Conference. It was the official government body representing Viet Nam at the Beijing Conference (the WU was the main NGO representative). Since 1994, provinces and ministries have established parallel Committees. NCFAW’s mandate now is to ensure the implementation of the National Platform of Action. However, concerns have been raised about Committee members’ multiple duties, variations in skill and their ability to successfully implement the Platform of Action (ibid: 16-7).
Box 14. The Main Activities of NCFAW

- Disseminating information on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- Developing global and national strategies for the advancement of women;
- Supporting government’s efforts to issue guidelines on implementing the Plan of Action on Women;
- Advising on policies related to women and monitoring their implementation;
- Strengthening the machinery for the advancement of women at all levels;
- Conducting research on women’s issues; and
- Developing and maintaining an international relations network.

Source: UNDP (1999)

2. Research and Academic Institutions

The Centre for Research on Family and Women’s Studies, under the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities has been particularly active in their national and international research programs on gender and women since 1990. Research topics have been very diverse, ranging from ‘women’s roles in household market economy’ to ‘women, men, poverty and land’ to ‘women’s entrepreneurship’. In HCMC, the Centre for Research on Family and Women’s Studies of HCMC under the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities of HCMC has also been active.

The Colleges of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ha Noi and in HCMC have teaching and research programs on gender and women. Especially, the Département of Women’s Studies, Open University of HCMC, have had a strong bachelor program.

3. Non-governmental and Other Organizations

There are a few non-governmental organizations that are active in gender research activities, and notably the Centre for Gender, Environment and Sustainable Development Studies. Other organizations include a Committee for the Advancement of Women within the Youth Union, a Female Farmers in Development Organization within the Farmers’ Association, a Women’s Division within the General Confederation of Labour, and governmental and NGO research centres on women’s and female labour issues (Trần Thị Quế 1999: 111).
6.2 The Situation of Gender Training and Research in Viet Nam

In general, the overall situation for research and promoting an understanding of gender issues in Viet Nam has been considerably improved since doi mơi. However, it is generally recognized that Viet Nam still has a huge gap in knowledge and research methodology in the development of sciences, especially social sciences and humanities. After many years of isolation and strict government control of social sciences and humanities (World Bank 1996), the system has not yet produced a body of research that adequately documents and analyzes gender relations and women’s position over historical periods. Instead, women’s issues have become highly politicized in the service of achieving national independence and in consolidating the party’s position during peaceful periods. The relative lack of understanding on gender relations also includes the lack of attention paid to (1) the co-existence of the Vietnamese indigenous traditions, and the influence of Confucianism, and (2) the gap between policy and practice regarding gender equality.

The aspect of regional diversity of gender issues in Viet Nam also has generally been overlooked. While the differences in historical experience, in socio-economic conditions and in culture are considerable (in the three regions Northern, Central and Southern Viet Nam), current gender research plays down other important cross-cutting divisions such as regional differences and class (Fahey 1998: 226). The interweaving of Confucianism and Marxism also deserves more careful analysis. In addition, an important question needing more systematic examination is whether the ‘high priority’ claimed for women’s issues in Viet Nam is a ‘paternalistic gift bestowed by the government’ rather than genuine gender awareness and support for women’s own self-development (Nguyễn Thị Oanh 1996: 15).

The following section will discuss the situation of gender training and research in Viet Nam, specifically recognizing: (1) that gender research is still very new in Viet Nam and thus has many weaknesses; (2) that gender training for Women’s Union cadres has had significant positive impacts in raising awareness and building capacity, but that certain limitations still remain; (3) that progress in gender training at post-secondary levels has recently improved and seems promising, but still needs to be expanded both in terms of quality and quantity; and (4) that gender education at primary and secondary levels in particular needs more systematic support and strategic organization.
1. Gender research in Viet Nam

Research on gender issues has been given wide recognition and has significantly improved since đổi mới. Since 1990, according to Đỗ Thị Bình (1999: 36), through exchange with international scholars, researchers and organizations with an interest in gender equity, and through information received from workshops within the country and abroad, the gender and development approach has been widely adopted among Vietnamese gender specialists and integrated in gender training and research programs in many parts of Viet Nam. Trần Thị Vân Anh (1999: 64-5) also corroborates this assessment, as follows:

'[After] more than ten years, we have considerably developed a team of researchers, including eight research and training institutions on women and gender, and many research groups within universities and research institutions. Those carrying out research on women and gender include not only women but also men, and not only researchers but also cadres from various fields such as agriculture, environment, economics... Together with the enhancement of the research team is the rapid develop of research topics [which include women's employment, livelihoods and income; maternal health and family planning; women's education and training; and women and family].'

Lê Thị Quy (1999: 106-7) has also commended the initial success of efforts to introduce and promote gender studies in Viet Nam, as follows:

'Gender studies have provided a comprehensive perspective on the complex and sensitive issue of the biological and social relations between women and men. It has pointed out the inequities and the unjust perceptions and behaviors regarding these relations. In Viet Nam, thanks to gender research, specialists have been able to measure the progress as well as the shortcomings of the women's movement, and thus provide relevant information and solutions to improve the situation. These contributions in turn have enriched gender theories. Together with other activities, research has brought gender issues in Viet Nam closer to those in the region and in the world in a broader aspect.'

The author referred in particular to the effectiveness of the interdisciplinary approach in gender research:

'During the past years, using an interdisciplinary research approach, gender studies have initiated many research projects of various scopes and dimensions. For example, a historical approach has clearly shown gender discrimination in the traditional society, a true reflection of a region under Confucian influence, in which the tradition of social order of 'looking up to men, looking down on women' in strict relations in the family, kinship, in the community and the nation, which severely
Since gender research is relatively new to Viet Nam, however, there remain many shortcomings that have to be addressed and overcome. Nguyễn Linh Khieú (1999: 82-3) commented on the weaknesses of gender research in Viet Nam as arising from: (a) researchers in women’s studies come from different branches of sciences, and have different levels of professional expertise, mostly not very high; (b) gender is a new branch of study, with no prior base for theoretical systems and research tools; international exchange was also very limited in the 1980’s, in terms of social institutions and researchers’ professional and foreign language skills; (c) the initial studies were established in a very economically difficult time for the country; and (d) in general, the ‘looking up to men, looking down on women’ thinking is still very prevalent in society, and especially among the intellectual class, which is a big obstacle for female researchers in building up studies, and which might not be officially stated, but there can be no doubts that it clearly exists.

Men’s participation in gender research has been particularly encouraged, but there have also been concerns, such as that ‘some cadres, especially men, carried out gender research not because of their expertise or passion but rather some other motives, which lead to their perspectives being biased and their research findings being inaccurate’, or that ‘some male trainers even took advantage of having the floor to propagate patriarchal thinking’ (Lê Thị Quy 1999: 109-10).

2. Gender training in women’s organizations

Since the introduction of đổi mới policy, gender training activities have been stepped up, mostly initiated by foreign organizations. The success of this gender training has been widely acknowledged, considering that Viet Nam was seriously behind in terms of the international women’s movements, gender theories and experience. Many foreign-funded projects have focused on gender training to build and improve capacities of people who work in women’s organizations and administer women’s programs and projects. Two main types of training have respectively involved sending trainees abroad or in-country training, with the latter reaching higher numbers of participants at much lower costs.
One of the most important aspects of gender training is to raise gender knowledge and awareness among those who work on women-related issues, leaders at all levels, and the general public. Regarding the role of the WU in gender training, it has been said that:

‘The Women’s Union has determined that it should be one of the key organizations conducting gender training in order to fully provide gender knowledge, perspective and approach to government leaders at all levels and in related branches, policy makers and project planners. This is to enable them to have a gender perspective in designing strategy for the development of the country. Only then will the objective of equity and development for women be realized. There have been conflicting opinions about gender equality in Viet Nam: some say that we have achieved gender equality, and that women already enjoy equality in the society; but others say that it is necessary to clarify certain perceptions regarding social equity in general, and in particular the equality for women in the family and in society.

The Women’s Union acknowledges that there are still many obstacles regarding raising gender awareness. Among these, the biggest obstacle is the social perception regarding the issue of relations between women and men which has been rooted through many generations, and which sees women’s roles only in homemaking, taking care of husband and children, and considers women as having lower status than men. There are problems that cannot be solved by government policies or legal mechanisms, but rather require changes in social perceptions and gender awareness. In addition, gender issues have still not been accurately understood by women themselves, which often makes them lose their capacity in efforts to achieve equality for themselves.’ (Pham Ngoc Anh 1999: 330-1)

Gender training for WU cadres has often been recognized as successful in providing basic understanding on relevant and emerging gender issues, as well as gender tools to use in their work. The positive impacts also include higher levels of confidence among female cadres and greater gender awareness among male cadres and State employees. Box 15 provides an excerpt from a female cadre’s expression of opinion regarding her progress after attending the training workshops.

Box 15. Positive Results from Local Gender Training

Ms. H.T., Office Administrator of Women’s Union of Hà Tĩnh province remarked on the results of local gender training: ‘I used to think that gender meant women. Now, after three training workshops, I have understood differently, as written in materials. I used to understand that gender was only addressed in the women’s movement and organizations. Now I understand that gender exists in all areas of activities in society and in the family. I used to think that gender was not important, and now I think that it really is, because it encourages the sharing of work between the two sexes, not causing burdens on any sex…’
Various levels of government have also been undergoing changes in terms of better treatment of women: more consideration for women to take holidays, and more women being promoted to important positions. There used to be only two women in the provincial government, but now there are eight...

Violence against women has also been reduced. In rural areas, wife beating has become less common... In my opinion, gender training has brought about very encouraging initial results...’

Source: Lê Thị Vinh Thi(1999: 121-2)

There remain several problematic issues, however, including that most trainers and trainees have been women. ‘If only women talk about women’s disadvantages, sometimes it can become less objective... [i]f men are trained on gender, they will realize that gender inequality comes from stereotypes and perceptions, then changing the inequality will be easier and the gender inequality gap will be bridged sooner’... In reality, gender training workshops were normally organized by the WU, the NCFAW, or Women’s Group in the Union. When leaders of organizations (mostly men) received invitation letters, they tended to appoint female employees to participate because they assumed ‘gender’ meant ‘women’. (Also see Box 16)

Photo 3. Training on Gender, Credit, and Environmental Issues for Local Women, Cần Thơ Province, 1997
Box 16. The Need for Higher Participation of Male Trainees in Gender Training

One of the most frequently cited weaknesses of gender training in Viet Nam at all levels is the low participation of male trainees. The causes could be traced both to the organizers who did not pay adequate attention to male participation, or to the men themselves who were unable or lacked motivation to participate. Among many reasons that call for higher male participation, the following relate to the issue of gender inequality in rural families:

'The requirement for having a sufficient number of male participants in gender training classes also stems from the reality of gender inequality in the family. Previous surveys on gender equality in rural families show that gender discrimination in the family still exists in many forms, which are sometimes very subtle and difficult to recognize. Especially, there are some negative phenomena in the family, such as wife beating and sexual abuse of girls by male relatives. However, realities show that not all discriminating behaviour or violent actions by men against women and girls are conducted with full understanding of the law. There are many violent actions in the family by men against women which simply come from the lack of understanding of gender relations and of the law.'

Source: Nguyễn Thị Khoa (1999: 314)

Training workshops for local women sometimes caused misunderstandings for local men. Some said that gender training workshops (usually organized by the WU) have disturbed their peaceful family life without giving positive advice on improving gender relations (Lữ Tuyết Mai 1999: 304). In addition, some trainers tended to impose their own perspectives, leading to situations where trainees have to unwillingly accept their views, or where the sessions became extreme in heavily confronting and criticizing men (Nguyễn Thị Phúc 1999: 327).

It has also been said that teaching materials were not always consistent, with considerable confusion in concepts and terminologies, especially with translated terms (Vương Thị Hạnh 1999: 294). Phan Ngọc Anh (1999: 340) referred to the need to avoid the ‘abuse of incomprehensible terminologies’ (lạm dụng những thuật ngữ khó hiểu). At local levels, teaching materials were inadequate, with lack of references and poor translation, and case materials were usually difficult to apply to the Vietnamese context (Trần Thu Thủy 1999: 344). At higher levels, most materials came from foreign sources, again with lack of illustrations relevant to Viet Nam. Gender training for WU cadres has usually been aimed
only at raising awareness and providing tools for gender analysis, with limited application to social planning and policy formulation (Nguyen Thi Phuc 1999: 328).

Box 17. Assessment of a Gender Project Implemented by NCFAW

Project VIE/96/011 ‘Improving Capacity to Implement the National Action Plan’, funded by UNDP and Holland during 1997-1999, had the general objective of helping to bring gender issues into public policy and the decision-making process in Viet Nam. Its main intentions were to strengthen capacities of government organizations and NCFAW at the national and municipal/provincial levels; to improve gender teaching and research for instructors; to train gender and leadership skills for female cadres; and to increase information to raise gender awareness and promote gender equality among the general public. The training framework included gender awareness raising, gender analysis, gender planning, empowerment and participation.

The difficulties associated with gender training in this project were identified by NCFAW as:

1. There were not enough materials prepared by Vietnamese researchers. Most Vietnamese materials were publications by CWFS, with a certain degree of theory and practice, but still did not meet the requirement of training. There were many materials in English, but only a few were translated into Vietnamese, with no systematic references and no adjustments to make them suitable to the Viet Nam context.

2. Gender has not been considered an independent subject by any teaching institution, but rather was merely integrated, for only a few hours, into other school subjects. Gender has not been taken seriously in various school levels.

3. Gender training was organized in the form of discussion workshops of 3-4 days, and training sessions of 4-6 days, with most trainees being females, sometimes as high as 90-100%.

4. The number of male trainers was in all cases very low.

Source: Tran Thu Thuy (1999: 341-5)

3. Gender teaching and training in post-secondary programs

Gender training in post-secondary programs was begun in Viet Nam in the early 1990s. In 1992, the Department of Women’s Studies at the Open University in HCMC introduced a bachelors program of gender and women’s studies. Since 1996, MOET has officially recognized this program, and graduates have been given a B.A. in Sociology (Thai Thi Ngoc Du 1999). Gender teaching at the university level is often combined with sociology or psychology, such as in the Colleges in Social Sciences and Humanities in Ha Noi and HCMC. The Department of Sociology within the Division of Journalism and Propaganda, HCMC National Institute, has had a gender teaching program since 1997.
In general, gender teaching in post-secondary institutions has made significant progress. However, limitations remain, such as lack of a qualified team of teachers and trainers, few relevant materials, and sometimes confusion from various approaches regarding gender theories. Considering that gender teaching is still very new in Viet Nam and has already advanced considerably, it seems likely that further progress will be made.

4. Gender education in primary and secondary schools

Gender education at primary and secondary levels is of the utmost important if Viet Nam is to raise gender awareness throughout society and through rural as well as urban regions. However, the curriculum program on women’s issues in primary, secondary and post-secondary educational institutions in Viet Nam at present mainly consists of: (1) literature on women, which puts high emphasis on women’s roles in the wars, and their virtues as ‘heroines, dauntless, loyal and resourceful’; and (2) political lessons of models of women cadres who have significantly contributed to the revolution and to the party. Furthermore, gender teaching has not always received enthusiastic support at local level, and there is a shortage of qualified teachers who could carry out the task. It was said that:

'[Regarding] the training, imparting and disseminating gender knowledge, these are big tasks that need to be put into the educational system systematically. However, until now gender teaching in secondary schools and universities has not been systematic, or even has not been put at all into the official educational system...

In order to have effective training on gender studies, it is necessary first to have capable teachers and trainers, and to have organizations to disseminate information on gender studies. Unfortunately, the staff is so thinly spread, and, where training and teaching were given, it was casual casual, patched up, and has not been systematic or continuous...

The problem becomes more difficult and entangled when it has not been socialized nor has high legal significance...

In short, gender training in the current situation involves only the imparting of certain basic knowledge related to gender studies, and not yet the real teaching and training of a science which is still very new [to Viet Nam].’ (Thanh Nhiêm 1999: 153-4)

This section has discussed the issues of gender teaching and research in Viet Nam. In the following section, the institutional implications will be examined.
6.3 Implications of Institutional Efforts to Improve Women’s Well-being

1. From theories to research and practice: theoretical, cultural and legal issues

Gender theories have been increasing accessible to Vietnamese scholars and researchers since they have been exposed to Western academics and development practitioners at the beginning of đổi mới. Confusion remains widespread however regarding the theories, partly due to insufficient social sciences and humanities background among Vietnamese academics, their lack of access to English materials, and potential conflicts between the theories and Viet Nam’s current political, socio-economic, and cultural context, all of which have yet to be resolved.

Confusion over gender terminology, which is often used without sufficient explanations regarding the main concepts and the contexts in which they are to be applied, often makes matters worse. Mai Huy Bích (1999: 58-9) addressed issues in transposing and applying gender theories in Viet Nam as follows:

‘The concept of and theories on patriarchy are still less well known in Viet Nam. Many [Western] feminist authors [had] various perspectives and approaches in their interpretation of gender differences, inequity and oppression, [but] these are still very unfamiliar to many Vietnamese researchers to the extent that they do not exist.

The compartmentalization and fragmentation in the reception of gender theories is not uncommon. Therefore, the application of gender theories has been quite limited. There has been much research... still focused only on women, leaving out men, an important partner in gender relations... Moreover, during a long period, we identified the foremost power that oppressed women as being only the invaders (French colonialists and American imperialists) and the feudal classes. Since the invaders have gone, the main women oppressor was recognized as ‘vestiges of feudal thinking’ (‘tân đô hệ tư tưởng phong kiến’), or ‘the custom of looking up to men, looking down on women’ (‘tập quan trọng nam khinh nữ’). In general, we have not identified men as a ruling and oppressing class. In short, gender has been confused with nationality and class, and in this respect, men were absent from gender research. There has also not been research on many pressing issues, such as Confucian patriarchy, men’s responses to the improvement in women’s positions today, and the differences in life experience among women of different classes, ethnic groups, age, education, and occupation.’

Gender terminology needs to be not only clearly defined but also made culturally appropriate. As illustrated in Box 18 on the cultural considerations of gender concepts
and theories, this implies that it will take time and sustained efforts from international organizations and Vietnamese academics to introduce gender terminology and for them to gain acceptance for their concepts and perceptions in Viet Nam, and also to avoid terms and opinions that potentially can disturb fundamental and valued components of gender and social relations.

Box 18. 'Women's Empowerment': Finding a Suitable Vietnamese Translation

One of the main objectives in applying a gender approach to development programs and projects is precisely to promote women's empowerment. The term 'empowerment' has been translated to Vietnamese as nằng quyền (power enhancing), tạo quyền (power creating), or trao quyền (power transferring). This is understandable because 'power' is 'quyền' in Vietnamese. However, these Vietnamese terms seem to be culturally inappropriate and are likely to cause awkward feelings, especially in the context of gender relations.

In fact, the concept of 'women's empowerment' has existed in Viet Nam for a long time, at least during the course of national defence against the United States, and nation building after 1975, with the slogan as nằng cao vai trò phụ nữ (enhancing women's roles). This phrase seems to capture the meaning of 'women's empowerment' in a way that is suitable to Vietnamese recent history and people's perception, and, above all, it is compatible to traditional gender relations and their indigenous evolution and adaptation. Since 'quyền' (power) carries a strong meaning, its use might be potentially disturbing, especially in the tradition of harmony when it comes to gender relations. It should also be noted that the common Vietnamese translation of 'feminism' as nữ quyền ('women's power') has created hesitation and reluctance to use this term and its direct translation among certain gender researchers due to its cultural sensitivity.

Source: Author's notes

Legal aspects of gender equality are also important in terms of translating research results into policy and in turn into practice. It is necessary to identify and tackle the root causes for gender discrimination that persist even until today in the Vietnamese society, despite the socialist ideology of equity, and a constitution that 'ensures' women equal rights in political, economic, social, cultural, and family life.

The process of transition from gender theories to research to policy making, and the question of how to assess results in practice, encompasses many theoretical, cultural and legal issues that are intertwined. These issues will need to be more directly addressed and resolved if effective policy implementation is to improve women's well-being.
2. Integrating cultural factors in designing women’s programs and projects

In reality, women’s programs and projects are likely to achieve minimal or superficial results when cultural factors are not integrated as an important integral component. It is not only an efficiency issue, but also an ethical matter to respect local aspirations while working towards changing social practices that can be harmful for women. For instance, focusing on the means by which the unequal relations between women and men can be altered can have significant implications for policy making regarding access and control over many types of community and household resources (Gurstein 1998: 126).

Another example that illustrates the importance of integrating cultural factors in women’s programs relates to their ‘triple role’: production, reproduction, and community responsibility. While community participation does not provide such tangible returns as income, it can be seen as beneficial for women since they build up social capital that can be used in the future. From a traditional Vietnamese cultural perspective, participation in community activities, especially in helping other members, creates a sense of ‘cultivating virtues and accumulating good deeds’ (tu nhân tích đức) which it is generally believed their children can inherit. Community participation, therefore, has a ‘good deeds’ return (as distinct from monetary or in kind rewards) that constitute a major cultural transaction in the emotional life of the people.

Cultural aspects of female education are especially essential in removing the ‘invisible’ obstacles to women’s educational achievement and in ensuring structural gender inequalities to be challenged following women’s economic independence.

3. The need for culturally-effective advocacy of social and gender equity and promotion of women’s well-being

Taking into account all the problematic issues regarding the political, cultural and legal aspects of promoting gender equality, sophisticated advocacy appears to be necessary to support the existing mechanisms to achieve better gender relations. Advocacy will need to overcome the weaknesses within the State discourses in socialist Viet Nam, as well as other cultural and legal practices that can contribute to systematic and persistent discrimination against women, and for it to promote the positive outcomes.
Advocacy also needs to consider that women may 'create themselves and their lives within the constraints of history and traditions and within the parameters of thinking and action that are set by current moral and political conditions' (Gammeltoft 2001: 277). For instance, in coping with their work overload, many other responsibilities, social and family inequality, and sometimes systematic abuse, which can negatively affect their mental and physical health, '[b]y emphasizing their physical rather than social suffering, women stay within the acceptable norms for female behaviour — being heroic, loyal, enduring, self-sacrificing — while also carving out more space for manoeuvring within the demands of their every lives.' (ibid) Advocacy will then have to look beyond the seemingly harmonious, satisfactory way of life in the family and in society to identify how the 'notions of womanhood are social and historical constructs which articulate and intertwine with core cultural images of nation and family' (ibid), and how they are being transformed.

Raising awareness throughout the whole society, and especially for children, is crucially important because the existing society contains many persistent forms of gender stereotypes and gender discrimination, in various aspects of life, and affecting almost all socio-economic groups. Research on gender socialization among children often shows that girls should be gentle, submissive, and responsible for housework, while boys can be mischievous, active, hot-tempered, and receive a less punishment for their mistakes than girls (Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa 2000). Much of the recent increased availability of self-help literature continues to spread the cultural norms that women are responsible for family happiness in the Confucian way. In addition, advertising from multinational corporations often contributes to the reproduction of gender stereotypes in all parts of the country where mass media is accessible (Luong 2003: 219).

Advocacy also needs to intervene in institutional processes where gender discrimination can continue to trap women in a disadvantageous position. Grass-root reconciliation can provide a good example of the burden of gender biases in institutional and cultural settings. This form of reconciliation has been a major tool in intervening and resolving conflicts without involving higher levels of jurisdiction. Family conflicts, especially between husband and wife, are resolved in a considerable proportion by reconciliation
The author, however, then listed several popular songs and proverbs to be used in reconciliation which illustrate gender stereotypes and inequality that clearly should be avoided. For example, by referring to ‘xâu chồng hờ ai’ (if husband looks bad, who should also be ashamed?), or ‘chồng giận thì vợ bỏ lời’ (when husband is angry, wife should lower her voice), these reinforce the main responsibility of women in maintaining family harmony, which has caused many women to suffer in silence, and also to endure domestic violence. It also reinforces the values of ‘virginity’ and ‘fidelity’ among women by referring to ‘Trai thời trung hiếu làm đầu. Gái thời tiết hành làm câu sửa mình’ (Men’s priorities are loyalty to king and duty to parents. Women discipline themselves by virginity and fidelity.) Son preference can be further endorsed by reference to ‘Con gái là con người ta. Con đâu mới thật mẹ cha mua về.’ (Daughters are others’ children. Only daughters-in-law are true children bought to bring home.) (Ibid: 30)

In summary, Viet Nam has established promising conditions for gender development thanks to an institutional framework that represents women and that is dedicated to protect women’s interests, backed up by a socialist ideology of gender equity, and to reduce the impacts of Confucianism, and that has given Vietnamese women greater informal rights than their counterparts in China (Woodside 1971: 98). However, persistent unequal gender relations still negatively affect women’s well-being, and pose a challenge to institutional efforts in policy making, in teaching, training and researching, in advocacy, and in raising awareness to changing women’s and men’s roles and status in the family and in society.
CHAPTER SEVEN.

A MICRO STUDY OF TÂN TẠO COMMUNE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Since the introduction of đổi mới, Việt Nam has started to experience rapid development so that the roles women are beginning to change as the country becomes more urbanized and industrialized. This is yet another element of the mix of factors that affect women’s well-being. This study of Tân Tạo commune illustrates the complexity of women’s development in such a situation.

In this chapter, I will start with basic introduction in section 7.1, including the underlying reasons for selecting the Tân Tạo commune for this study, my initial observation and interactions with commune leaders and the people, and the approach in data collection and analysis which I saw best suited for the study. With background information on the commune, section 7.2 provides a general picture of the socio-economic situation of the people and their everyday life. Sections 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5, respectively, presents a description intertwined with the analysis, using the theoretical framework covering three areas: education and employment, social and family relations, and legal protection.

7.1 Basic introduction

a) Site selection. Tân Tạo commune was chosen for this micro study because it has been in the process of urbanization since đổi mới policy was introduced in 1986 and thus can be used to observe the socio-economic changes resulting from the renovation at a local level. It was chosen because it is a commune in the rural-urban fringe experiencing rapid urbanization, with a decline in agriculture and increase in industry, influx of migrants, and many social and economic changes. In many ways, it represents the future patterns of the development of the Vietnamese society.

This commune can be considered representative in the sense that it has a history of revolution during the wars with France and the United States, has undergone the cooperative period after 1975 with its great economic difficulties, and since the introduction of đổi mới has begun to modernize, to have private enterprises and to improve their living standards, and especially to undergo transformation from a rural to a city commune. By analyzing changes in gender relations, we can observe the dynamics in social and cultural
changes, as well several new challenges and opportunities faced by women and men resulting from đổi mới policy, and from the process of urbanization. Therefore, research findings in this commune could be used, to some extent, to analyze understand the impacts of đổi mới policy and of urbanization in the development process in Viet Nam.

At the same time, belonging to Ho Chi Minh City in the South, Tân Tảo also has unique features compared to other communes in the Northern and Central regions in many aspects, such as the impacts of the Viet Nam war, the depth of experience with socialism, the pace of economic development and political leadership, and as well as components of the local cultures, including the dynamics of gender relations. Tân Tảo experienced the United States-supported capitalism in the South while still being a revolutionary base for the Northern incursions. This led to some legacy of war destruction in the commune, especially regarding the number of widows and war invalids. Socialism and the agricultural co-operative framework were introduced in the South after the communist victory in 1975 (while the North had been operating with socialism and co-operatives during the war), although in reality the implanting of the co-operative system was not successful in the South. But overall, during this period (1975 to pre-đổi mới), the South was still experiencing less economic difficulties than other regions, partly due to its better quality land for growing rice and other crops, and the remittances received from overseas (since many Southerners left after 1975 and sent back goods and funds to their family and relatives.)

Many aspects of local culture are also unique in Tân Tảo compared to the North and Centre. The South has less Confucian influence compared to the North, and its influence especially differs from the Centre where Confucianism had been rooted in an extreme form during the Nguyen dynasty. Therefore, although the South has had less experience with socialism which has led to significant improvement to gender equality in the North, the diluted Confucian influence had also resulted in the lower prevalence of ‘looking down on women’, and had allowed other local traditional customs to evolve pertaining to women’s role in society.

Specifically, compared to the North, the South placed relatively less importance on men’s education and thus less prestige associated with being scholars as being imposed by
Confucianism which considers ‘nhã sỹ, nhi nông’ (scholars first, peasants second). The attitude opposing Confucianism among Southern people rather tends to see ‘nhã nông, nhi sỹ’ (peasants first, scholars second), and women here have less desire to marry scholars by saying ‘ai cõi chô lây học trò’ (do not marry studious men). In the aspect of putting down the value of men’s education, some Northern people tend to see the Southerners in general as ‘not having much education’. This is rather an extreme opinion, but it reveals the differences in their perceptions on men’s education, which has significant implications on family relations in terms of gender division of labour and financial arrangements, and especially the position of women and men in the family and in society.

Located in the South, Tân Tảo commune is also under less influence of other aspects of Confucianism compared to the North, such as the less insistence on the de jure role of men as ‘family heads’ (which has more socio-cultural meaning than ‘household heads’ which has a more institutional meaning) and higher emphasis on equal husband and wife relationship rather than Confucian perception of ‘phu xưởng, phu tùy’ (husband orders, wife submits). This in turn has crucial implications for women’s ownership rights (especially land and house property), women’s access to resources such as credit, and other issues related to intra-household gender relations (see chapters 3 and 4 for more details).

b) Initial observation

The road was becoming less and less crowded when I moved away from the city centre to approach Tân Tảo commune. On the back of a motorcycle, I observed many small food stores, coffee shops and sign of ‘land for sale’ (bán đất). My first stop at the commune was usually at the People’s Committee building, where I needed to greet several commune leaders and meet with the commune’s President of Women’s Union, who often took me to meet the people. The commune leaders, mostly in their 40s and 50s, seemed to be knowledgeable, polite, and most of all to my impression, was their dedication to their work and to the people, and their political acuteness. They had young assistants who were also very enthusiastic, helpful and efficient. Except for the Women’s Union, most of the commune leaders I met were male. Perhaps the only female leader I met was the
Vice-President of the People’s Committee, who was also, in my opinion, among them all, the most knowledgeable and respectable person. The Women’s Union President was also very helpful and informative to me, and I also learn that she was also very caring for the benefits of the women in the commune, in addition to being a very hard-working and dedicated mother and wife.

Overall, the atmosphere at the People’s Committee offices was formal, and initially it seemed to be male-dominated. However, the more time I spent there, the more I observed that women also played a very important role in most activities and in most matters. They were often the ‘executor’ of plans and activities (người thua hành), but in other times, they acted as the decision-makers, and the men usually respected their views and opinions.

Outside the building, life was always busy, especially in the market in the morning. Most of the traders were women; they were very fast and efficient. The few men there were not any slower; they were as animated and productive as the women. Most porters were men: some of them were husbands of the traders who helped their wives transporting goods to the market in the morning and back home in late afternoon, while some others worked as general helpers.

Deeper conversations would include issues such as their lack of access to credits to expand their income-generating activities, or their husband’s irregular flow of income and difficulty in finding stable work, putting their children in school, preventing social evils (prostitution, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS), and so on. Older women acknowledged a significant improvement in their living standard in the last ten years or so, and they often related to the ‘cooperative’ period as their most difficult time. Many young local women regretted not having grade 9 education so they could take jobs in textile and footwear factories, as their migrant counterparts did. Young men were concerned about getting a ‘suitable’ job (i.e. mechanic-related and/or higher pay than average of what women earned). A number of households still had agricultural land, and women undertook most of agricultural work while combining with incense making. Stories of those who sold their land and spent all the proceeds were often inflated with their problem make worse due to the miserable situation these families were now in.
In discussing issues on the changing gender relations in the commune, no matter how careful and discrete I tried to be in brainstorming and leading them to the issues, there was always the confusion, and sometimes even suspicion, at the beginning, like ‘There’s a proverb saying, that in harmony, husband and wife can dry out the Eastern Sea. That’s all you need to know about our gender relations.’ However, with my persistence, the efforts often paid off later on, when both the women and men presented more interesting insights on the issues. In the end, in my findings, often to my unexpected anticipation, I usually found that in this commune, there were so much dynamics in cultural aspects of gender relations. There are also many positive aspects of their gender relations which produce family harmony, equity and stability and preserve family values, which tend to be overlooked due to the lack of an in-depth analysis of the relations. This is also an acknowledgement that many other aspects of gender relations are negative and need to be gradually changed, such as the gender stereotypes which cause conflicts and pressure to both sexes, and these negative influences often lead to higher sacrifices and lower benefits for women.

Photo 4. Tân Tạo Commune: Women Combining Income-Earning Work with Child Rearing and Household Responsibilities
Collecting data and information and analyzing and interpreting them were a challenge for me, especially at the beginning. Data and information received from commune leaders were useful but often incomplete, and could be inaccurate and unreliable. The survey on the commune by CSSH of 300 households (April-May 2000) were especially useful and could be used as supporting evidence. Using my training in both qualitative and quantitative research, I had taken into account all other related factors in conducting my fieldwork (such as the fact that I did not need a translator and that I could use my fieldwork skills acquired previously), and also considered the issues of time constraint and an optimal balance between qualitative and quantitative data. All this led me to the decision on the most appropriate approach to take in data collection and analysis as follows.

c) Approach in data collection and analysis

The sample selected included people in different groups, classified by their sex, age and residency status, so as to cover different perspectives on the issues discussed (see Table 1). It turned out quite well that in each group, people also were quite diverse in terms of their occupations, family economic situation, the extent to which they received assistance from the government, and other socio-economic background influences.

In collecting qualitative data, interviews and discussions within the sample were conducted from the range between half an hour to three hours, until the issues appeared to reach a saturation point, i.e. it would be repetitive if the interview continued (for more details, please refer to the conceptual framework on page 25 and a questionnaire in Appendix 2). Data were gathered by writing notes from the field and by audio tapes. Then, to make sense of data, it was crucial to identify patterns, make comparisons, and look for relationships among factors. Data were analyzed within the context of the commune, then scaled up by including further national data and previous research findings in other parts of the country in order to make generalization for the case of Viet Nam.
7.2 Commune background information

a) Commune history. According to Nguyễn Văn Tiếp³, Tân Tạo was established nearly three centuries ago, and was located in the North-West of Bình Chánh district. The commune consisted of seven hamlets during the French period. In 1976, when Ho Chí Minh City was established, the commune was re-arranged into four hamlets. At this time, the commune headquarter is located about 15 kilometre from HCMC center.

Tân Tạo is a low-lying area with salty acid land, located in the transition between hills and low-lying fields, sloping from North-East to South-West. Before 1975, the people were accustomed to having only one rice cropping season per year. Since then, the commune has built a system of dikes in all hamlets, and all farmers can now have two crops a year.

The two most important roads used by people in the commune are national highway No. 1 (4.2 km of which runs through the commune), connecting HCMC with provinces in the west, and 5 km of provincial road No. 9, connecting Đức Hòa (Long An province) with Phú Lâm (District 6, HCMC). The main means of transportation are trucks, buses, lambretta-motorcycle cabs (xe lam), handcarts (xe ba gác), cyclos, motorcycles, and bicycles. In addition, the commune has a system of rivers which provide a convenient means of transportation, especially for bulky commodities such as rice.

Tân Tạo has a well-established history of participating in the revolutionary mobilization against the French and the United States. There were many communist bases such as Vườn Lớn, Vườn Thอม - Bà Vũ, which were used as secret hideouts for cadres and soldiers. According to the ‘Statistics on Local Situation’ from the commune's Department of Mobilization, as of November 1996, the commune had about 25% households with family member(s) participating in the revolution, 13% with martyrs (hộ liệt sỹ), 4% with war invalids (hộ thương binh), 4% with other recognized contributions to

³ Specifically, he wrote: 'Gia Đình thành thống chí (Trịnh Hoài Đức) in 1818 listed Tân Tạo village (thôn), as belonging to Long Hưng canton (tổng), Tân Long district (huyện), Tân Bình quarter (phủ), Phien An division (trấn), Gia Định city (thành). According to land registration of Nam Kỳ lục tỉnh (Six Southern Provinces), Tân Tạo village was located in the same area as Tân Tạo commune today. In 1871, the French established Chợ Lớn (Big Market/China Town), which was changed to Chợ Lớn province in 1889. Tân Tạo commune belonged to Long Hưng Thường canton (tổng), Trung Quân district (quận), Chợ Lớn province (tỉnh), and in 1944 belonged to Gò Đen district instead of Trung Quân district.'
the revolution (họ có công với cách mạng), and with about 2% being war veterans and 1% Heroic Mothers (Bà Mẹ Anh Hùng). This household classification has been used in Viet Nam to identify ‘policy households’ (họ chính sách) and to reward their contributions by providing them with special forms of government assistance.

MAP OF HO CHI MINH CITY:
CITY CENTRE AND URBAN AND RURAL DISTRICTS

Note: Binh Chanh district (yellow area on the left), to which Tan Tao commune belongs, is located on the left of the city centre. See next page for more a larger map

Source: Dang Quang Thinh and Thai Van Thuan, 2000 (Young Publisher)
Before 1975, under the old Saigon regime, most land belonged to landlords, with most local people working as labourers for these landlords. When the war ended in 1975, many landlords left the country, and the government encouraged remaining landowners to give up their land and redistributed to the landless. In 1977, land was officially collectivized and cooperatives were established, and by 1978, a cooperative system was effectively in place. However, it encountered increasing resistance or non-collaboration, and general enthusiasm for it diminished even further due to its inefficiencies and lack of worker incentives. Cooperative members were remunerated according to their working hours, not output levels, and thus no incentives were created for members to work diligently for the collective. Some of the current leaders in the commune emphasized that there was also widespread mismanagement on the part of commune leaders at that time (key informant interviews with the Land Department).

In 1981, the ‘100’ Output Contracts system (khoán sản phẩm) was introduced. Under this system, plots of land were assigned to each household, control over crop selection and production was partially decentralized, and surplus output was allowed to be sold freely in the market. Agricultural production in the commune started to rise abruptly. In 1983, land was redistributed with 1,300m² per head assigned to most households. There were some households without land due to various reasons, such as having non-agricultural occupations, or being late in returning to the commune from somewhere else. Then, in 1985, cooperatives started to be dissolved. The ‘10’ Contracts system was introduced in 1988, under which farmers were given further incentives to work independently, and land was allocated to them for at least 15 years. Since 1992, credit for agricultural production has been available for a pilot project area, and later access to credit was extended to farming households throughout the commune. These loans came from both the government and from people’s saving funds (key informant interviews with the Land Department).

Since the introduction of the doi moi policy in 1986, there has been considerable changes in many aspects of the socio-economic situation of the commune. The following is a description of these changes in terms of demography, migration and land changes.
b) Demography, migration, and land changes in Tân Tao commune in the process of urbanization

1. Demography. The process of urbanization has had a significant impact on the demography of the commune. Besides natural population growth, migration has substantially increased the population density. The establishment of two industrial zones in the commune (Pouchen in 1993 and Tân Tao in 1997) has attracted many migrant workers from both the Central and the South-Western regions. City residents such as government employees and workers who had money to invest also came here to ‘buy’ land to build houses. Migrants mainly live near the Bà Hom market where many factories are located and where transportation and general activities are relatively convenient (hamlets 1, 3 and 4). Hamlet 2 is an exception, as it is mainly inhabited by long-term local residents, migrants and residents living in mixed communities. Local residents have built houses on their idle land, or as garden plots to rent to migrant workers, while city people have also ‘bought’ land to build houses for their own use as ‘second’ to their city homes. From 1993 to 2000, the commune’s population has more than doubled (see Table 18 which includes the migrant population but might not include a number of unregistered migrants according to local officials, see also Appendix 2 for this category.)

**Box 19. ‘Selling’, or ‘Transferring’ Land**

Selling land is officially not possible, while transferring titles to land use is now permitted. Under the current government law, all properties belong to the State, including land. Households with agricultural land have been given land certificates (sổ dã) which give them land-use rights for a certain period of time. Since people do not own the land by law, they are not allowed to sell or to buy it. However, they can legally transfer (chuyển nhượng) their land use rights for money, gold or other goods. Land titles in the land certificates would be transferred to the new persons who now have the land-use rights.

In reality, many people still use the terms ‘buy’ and ‘sell’ instead of ‘transfer’. Advertising boards often announce ‘land for sale’ (bán đất) instead of ‘land for transfer’. The agreement works similarly to any purchase transaction, while the term ‘transfer’ only appears in the official paper. All official land documents should refer to these transactions as ‘transferring land-use rights’.

*Source: Author’s Notes.*
Table 18. Tân Tảo Commune: Population, number of households and population density over the years (including migrants)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>No. of households</th>
<th>People/km²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>11,177</td>
<td>1,843</td>
<td>647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>11,569</td>
<td>1,887</td>
<td>648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>14,992</td>
<td>2,429</td>
<td>868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>20,746</td>
<td>3,400</td>
<td>1,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>22,989</td>
<td>3,606</td>
<td>1,333</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Police department of Tân Tảo commune (unpublished)

While the natural population growth rate from 1993 to 2000 was only around 1.2% (KT1 category), ‘long-term’ temporary residents (KT2 and KT3) increased from 3.1% to 16.2% of the total inhabitants, and ‘short-term’ temporary residents (KT4) increased considerably to account for 28%, so that temporary residents accounted for 44.2% of the total population in 2000 (see Table 19). These changes have inevitably resulted in many changes in various aspects of life of the commune (see Appendix 2 for a full explanation of residence status categories).

Table 19. Tân Tảo Commune: Population Structure According to Type of Household Registration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>KT1</td>
<td>KT2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>10,829</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>11,087</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>11,881</td>
<td>1453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>12,778</td>
<td>2,777</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: From Police department of Tân Tảo commune (unpublished)

The majority of people are Kinh (99%), with very few Chinese and Khmer (about 1%). This makes the commune very homogenous in terms of ethnicity and cultural practices. There has been limited research on ethnic minorities in this commune, and this study only focuses on Vietnamese ethnic. In terms of religion, the majority (99.6%) worship ancestors, and very few others follow Buddhism, Catholicism and Hòa Hảo as of 1996, according to Bản số liệu phân ấn thống tình hình dân làng as compiled by Ban dân văn (Department of Mobilization).
As of 2000, women accounted for almost 52% of the population. In the working age group (15-60), there were more women than men (36.8% vs. 31.9%, or 54% of this cohort, see Table 20), and this can be explained by the number of female migrants coming to work in local factories, and female migrants who were working there on a short-term basis before returning to their permanent homes. There were also more women than men in the older group (over age 60), mainly due to a higher ratio of men being killed during the war. The higher percentage of boys than girls (in the under 15 cohort group) could have been caused by the larger ratio of male children accompanying migrant workers, or even by the practice of son preference among local people. It is significant that a high 68.7% of the population is in the working age bracket.

**Table 20. Tân Tạo Commune: Age and Sex Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;15 years</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-60</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;60 years</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>725</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CSSH Survey (2000).*

2. **Migration.** The increasing number of migrants to Tân Tạo commune has mainly resulted from the expansion of economic activities in the commune. While migrants are accustomed to facing greater difficulties in adjusting and in finding work, the movement of people is now more accepted and less regulated, and migrants in the prime working years can usually find employment. Migrants in Tân Tạo commune are of two main types: (a) seasonal or permanent migrants from other provinces finding work, and (b) those from Ho Chi Minh City or other provinces buying land and building houses. The number of people originating from the commune now account for just over half of the total population (54%). It was also claimed by officials that there was a considerable number of migrants who did not register, estimated by the People's Committee at about 30% of total migrants. Besides positive changes brought to the commune by migration, there have also been negative effects which the local government has to deal with, such as unemployment and administrative difficulties. This shows that the current government policies on population and labour migration have not been fully effective and need to be further strengthened or revised.
Table 21. Tân Tao Commune: Population According to Birthplace and Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Tân Tao itself</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From urban HCMC</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From suburban HCMC</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From other rural areas</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From foreign countries</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>619</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CSSH Survey (2000)

In general, according to commune leaders, very little social tension between local residents and migrants was reported. Interviews and focus group discussions with the sample also confirm this fact. Most people try to work hard and also look after among one another. Many local people, especially women, even admire young migrants who have come to work in factories or in service businesses, because they have education (grade 9 and above), are hard working, thrifty and save money to send home to their family, and generally do not get involved in social evils.

The only complaint often noted by locals concerned prostitutes who worked in ‘cuddling’ coffee or beer shops (cà phê ơm, bia ơm), whom they said were not locals but from somewhere else (often not known to the people in the commune), and who worsened the social evils problem in the commune. However, it is remarkable to hear that most local people and migrants have sympathy for these women.

Some local people have also helped migrants when they first arrived in the commune. Usually, those living in the same neighbourhood would help one another. Support often includes job referral, housing rental assistance, providing local information, and sometimes credit. A middle-age female migrant from Long An province remarked:

‘When I first came here, I didn’t know anyone. I had a lot of difficulties, because I didn’t know the way here (là nước là cái). I could sell only two kilos of sticky rice a day, making only 7-8,000, just enough to cover my rent. Then Anh Ba (a male neighbour) helped me by bringing factory workers to come buy my rice, so now I have many more customers. He showed me so that I know the way around here now (quen nước quen cái). He even loaned me money so that I also can sell duck soup in the afternoon. Now I make 25-30,000 dong a day. Anh Ba is indeed a very good and generous person.’
Table 22 also shows that most of migration occurred after 1990, when the process of urbanization really accelerated in the commune. The rate of female migrants has also been much higher than the rate for men (40% compared with 28%), partly due to the number of female factory jobs available. Overall, there have been more female migrants than males in all three periods (before 1995, 1975-1989, and from 1990 to now). However, this does not necessarily signify that women’s mobility is higher than men’s, but could be attributable to the general demographic cohort imbalance in the country as a whole and in this particular region after the war.

Table 22. Tân Tao Commune: Time of Migration According to Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Migration</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1975</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976-1989</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-now</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


3. Agricultural land in the process to become industrial and residential land

One of the main changes in the commune is the decreasing area of agricultural land. Of the total area of 1,770 ha, 65% is still agricultural. Since 1998, about 125 ha of agricultural land has been used for resettling residents, and about 485 ha to establish industrial zones (Pouchen, Tân Tao, open (mô rồng). Farmers whose land was appropriated for government use received monetary compensation. There have also been many instances of transferring agricultural land to new private owners. In either case, land ‘sellers’ often received a large lump sum of money, which most use to build houses and/or to buy motorbikes or bicycles. A few with business skills and connections invest their money into businesses, many of which have become successful, while other have failed and lost their capital, and some have spent it all on consumer goods. However, most of land ‘sellers’ have been struggling to maintain their assets, as they lack prior experience in doing business in an urban setting.
Table 23. Tân Tao Commune: Changes in Land Area Over the Years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural land</td>
<td>1254.5</td>
<td>1212</td>
<td>729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specially used land</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential land</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial land</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unused land</td>
<td>85.5</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,691</td>
<td>1,727</td>
<td>1,727</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Major changes in the overall commune economy also lead to changes in households’ occupational status. Before urbanization occurred in the commune, most households were classified as in ‘purely agricultural’ (thuần nông), which comprises those involved only in agricultural or agricultural-related economic activities, such as planting, animal husbandry, and providing agricultural services. Until 1995, the other two groups of ‘semi-agricultural’ (bàn nông) and ‘non-agricultural’ (phi nông nghiệp) already accounted for around one-third of total households. The group of ‘semi-agriculture’ includes those households having non-agricultural economic activities (in addition to their agricultural work) such as forestry and aquaculture, small production, construction and transportation, and market trade and services. In 1997, the number of households in semi- and non-agricultural groups increased to represent about half of total households, while by 2000, it had reached 96.9%, leaving only 3.1% as ‘pure agriculture’ households, a truly dramatic transformation (see Table 24).

Table 24. Tân Tao Commune: Household Groups According to Occupation (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>65.5</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-agricultural</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>19.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-agricultural</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Data in Table 24 show that between 1995 and 1997 (the beginning of a period of rapid change), the number of ‘purely agricultural’ households fell by 13%, while those in the other two groups increased by 10-12%. Table 7.13 also shows that the number of
households in ‘agriculture and aquaculture’, ‘agriculture and small production’, and 
‘agriculture and construction and transportation’ increased by 10-11% in the same period. 
The number of households in ‘agriculture and market trade and services’ almost doubled 
(from 120 to 232), while the number of ‘market trade and services’ households more than 
doubled (from 162 to 370).

If we take into account the fact that most people in market trade and services are women, 
this occupational change has been more favourable to women, whereas there was also an 
increase (but not as large) in occupations for men such as small production, construction 
and transportation. While some men also participated in market trade and services, when 
this occupation appeared to be most profitable in the transition process, the majority of 
traders remained women, since traditional norms assigned women the gender stereotype 
of trading (the lowest rank), and markets are traditionally considered as work places more 
suitable for women. Some men, who put profit ahead of the consequences of going 
against traditional norms, would enter trading, while other men were more concerned 
about such norms and did not feel comfortable working in a market environment where 
women predominate, and felt they thus try to seek ‘higher rank’ occupations considered 
‘more suitable’ for men.

Table 25 Tân Tạo Commune: Number of Households According to Occupation 
between 1995 and 1997

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of household occupation</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>1997</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agriculture</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture (planting, animal husbandry, agricultural services)</td>
<td>1044</td>
<td>920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Half-agriculture</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and forestry</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and aquaculture</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and small production</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and construction and transportation</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and services and market trade</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-agriculture</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services and market trade</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>1,594</td>
<td>1,829</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sections 7.3, 7.4 and 7.5 below will explore the topics of education and livelihood security, social and family relations, and legal protection, in the context of Tân Tạo commune in the process of urbanization.

### 7.3 Education and livelihood security

#### 1. Impacts of đổi mới policy on living standards of the people

In my overall field research in Tân Tạo commune, the most certain response I always heard was that there had been a significant improvement in the living standards of the people ‘during the last ten years’.\(^4\) Women were especially emotional when referring to the economic difficulties ten years ago, and especially during the co-operative period. In a personal interview that was very representative, an older woman said:

‘It was very difficult during that time, especially for women. They had to work hard in the field (chăn làm Tây bàn). Everyday, when we heard the bell (kêng), we got up and went to work for the cooperative. If we worked more, we got more (lâm nhiều, ăn nhiều), if we worked less, we got less. But in general, we never got enough for our families. All the women had to do something else to support their families, such as planting vegetables, raising chickens, or petty trading. They tried not to neglect their children for trying too hard to bring rice home, and many had difficulties in looking after their children (con cái nghèo nhọc).’

Most people talked about their present improved situation as ‘having enough food and daily necessity to survive’, but considered their families to still not be ‘well-off’, such as ‘còn ngày hai bữa’ (having two rice meals a day), ‘đồng vào đồng ra’ (money coming in and out regularly), and typically ‘khá thì không khá’ (not being well-off). In terms of agricultural income, it was often said that this income was gradually reduced to the break-even level, that is, ‘lúa cũ đổi lúa mới’ (exchanging previous paddy for new paddy, i.e. harvesting the same amount of paddy without any gain.)

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\(^4\) According to Pham Xuân Nam (2001: 142-52), the concept of ‘poverty/hunger’ (‘nghéo đổi’) in Viet Nam can be perceived as follows: hunger (đói) occurs when a section of the population do not have enough food to satisfy nutritional needs, or those who have enough food but experience unexpected difficulties such as natural disasters; and relative poverty (nghéo tương đổi) refers to the situation of those having a level of living standards which is below the average of their local community.
Among those with non-agricultural businesses requiring an operating cash flow, they often said that they did not have large levels of debt but did not have extra cash on hand either.

**Box 20. Women’s Focus Group Discussion on the Improvements in Living Standards**

The following is an excerpt from a discussion with a group of eight women who were mostly farmers, incense makers and housewives, regarding the improvement in their living standards.

Women 2: ‘Our lives are getting much better these days. We used to have to eat chao (runny, thin rice pudding, which needs less rice and more water to cook), but now we all can afford to eat com (steamed rice). In general, most families have good housing. For those with bad housing, the commune helped to build houses for some.’

Women 1: ‘Poverty today is very different from a few years ago, when we didn’t have enough food to eat and enough clothes to wear. Now even poor people can have those basic needs. This is a big improvement.’

Women 3: ‘Since the introduction of the HEPR program by the government, our lives are getting better. If there was no such program, we could be very miserable. Also, women today practice family planning, thus they don’t have as many children and can devote more time to working to making income. For example, they work during the day, and when they come home in the evening, they can still have time to make incense. Having fewer children also means less financial burden, for example less tuition fees.’

Women 5: ‘We used to cook using wood or any kind of tree branches we could find. It took a long time and a lot of work to collect and cook with those. Or we could buy electricity at a very high price from those who could connect to the line. But now we can afford gas and electricity at reasonable prices. This cuts down the time needed to cook.’

Women 6: ‘These young women [pointing to younger women in the group] have better lives than we had previously. In our time, life was so hard. I remember when we joined the co-operative, we didn’t have enough to eat. We didn’t earn enough points to get enough rice. Our children were so hungry, and sometimes we were too tired to work.’

Women 1: ‘Things are better now, and our families are happier. Drinking water [i.e., having nothing to eat] could make husband and wife fight a lot! Neighbours also fought with each other. We now live in a more harmonious relationship.’

*Source: Author’s Notes - Women’s Focus Group, April 2000*

In regard to the issue of living standards, the perception of poverty was often discussed. The Head of the hamlet said in a men’s focus group:

‘My perception of poverty is as follows: I come from a revolutionary family. I myself began to participate in the revolution since the Viet Minh period [against the French]. At
that time, for many years, like many other people, I did not have any land, or any asset to start with to earn income, but I still lived happily with my neighbours. Now there is no more war, and people are definitely not as poor as before. If we could survive during the war, then we can definitely survive now. In case the hamlet has any economic difficulty, we report it to the commune, and the commune will take care of it. Plus, it is difficult to really know who is poor and who is not, because how can you really measure poverty, and not many people would tell you everything about their situation anyway.'

Many women, however, had very clear perception on the poverty issue. To some of them, poverty is often a generational characteristic. In this regard, they accepted their (and other people’s) poverty as their fate, with the most common explanations being seen to be: having poor parents, being farmers, or having many children. On the other hand, being well-off was often associated with certain ‘luck’ factors, such as receiving overseas remittances, marrying to a wealthy husband or wife, or having business connections. A local woman outlined her life history in regard to the situation of families of her parents’ siblings:

‘My father’s family was from this commune. They were rich and had a lot of land. He had three older siblings. His oldest brother had 6 children. They all live in this commune and are well-off, significantly above the average for other households. Two of them have family members overseas, two have children married to Taiwanese men, and two have businesses formed by their spouses. His next sister had two children, now living in Chợ Lớn (China Town) and they are poor. His other brother had six children, of whom three sons died in the war, and three daughters are now married and have land and brick houses (two of them are well-off). My father is the youngest child. He had six children. I am the oldest child. My siblings are poor farmers.

My mother’s family is much poorer. She has three younger siblings. Her next sister had ten children. The other two brothers have six children. They all live in the same hamlet in a commune in Cần Thơ province. They do agricultural work and are very poor.’

On the question of living standards and poverty, many people, especially women, frequently related poverty to the issues of local young men’s unemployment, lack of proper education and training, and their involvement in social evils. The Head of Women’s Union of the commune expressed this opinion in a key informant interview, and then reconfirmed it in a men-women focus group:
'We have to admit that there are still many people in the commune who are still poor. But overall, we can say that we are doing much, much better than about ten years ago. I have to emphasize this, especially the fact that we are no longer hungry and now have enough to eat, if we try to work hard. Some of us might not be able to afford a motorbike or to have a nice house, but we do have enough to lead a good life without too much hardship.

To achieve this big improvement, we have to thank our leaders at the commune and higher levels for helping us in building schools, repairing roads, and all the other investments in infrastructure, which in turn facilitate our life tremendously. People, especially women, can find more ways to earn income to take care of their families.

However, from a women's perspective, we see that one of the causes of poverty is when children, mostly sons, are involved in social evils. In these families, when the boys do not go to school and cannot get a job due to lack of proper education and training, and thus spend their time hanging out with bad friends, they are often involved in gambling, drugs or other illegal activities. This affects negatively not only the family’s finances, but also social order. The truth is, it is always the women – their mothers – who suffer the most in terms of having to look after the economic and emotional loss due to the presence of social evils in their families.'

The lack of credit was also often cited as the main reason leading women and their families into poverty. It is common that poor women do not have sufficient collateral to borrow from the government, or who had borrowed previously but could not pay back and thus were not allowed more loans. They then often resort to borrow from private lenders at high interest rate, which leads them to have to use much of their earning to pay interest, thus often falling into higher debt. A woman respondent offered her perspective on the causes of poverty as follows, relating the lack of credit to issues of education and employment:

'I think poverty is a vicious circle. I see many poor women who cannot obtain any credit, either from the State or from private lenders, because they do not have any collateral, and thus no one wants to lend them money because people don't think they can pay back. Because of poverty, their children do not go to school, they do not have any education to be able to work in factories, and thus spend their time with bad friends, and this is the easiest way to get involved in drugs and other social evils. I suppose even without any education, they can work as labourers and earn just enough to support themselves. But
many of them rather spend time with their friends than work, because they don’t want to
do manual work for low pay, so their mothers have to look after them. A family with too
few people working and many dependents is certainly poor, and poverty continues to pass
on to the next generation."

Figure 2. Tần Tảo Commune: A Respondent’s Drawing on the Cause-and-Effect of
Poverty, Lack of Education, and Social Evils

Notes: 1. Poverty \(\Leftrightarrow\) Social evils  
2. No livelihoods  
3. No production means  
4. Lack of knowledge and education

The above excerpt reveals that women, especially mothers, often have to bear the
negative impacts of economic development and urbanization, and of general poverty in
the commune. Their children, mostly sons, lack sufficient education and proper work
skills to earn income, and fall into social evils. Although this is a loss for the whole
family, the women shoulder the heaviest burden, not only in terms of financial support
for their children, but also the emotional pain which is often said as harder than the
economic loss.
However, the issue of men's unemployment seemed to be limited only to a sub-group of local young men. Local older men and migrant men are more likely to be economically active and to contribute significantly to family income. A perspective from a woman who was the Head of the Hamlet 2 on this issue is as follows:

'I think that only the generation of local young men are having major problems in terms of finding work and protecting themselves from social evils. The older generation, i.e. middle-age men, who have wives and children, work hard to take care of their families. Most of them work as construction workers, motorbike taxi drivers, farmers, or labourers. Perhaps the young generation has been taken care of by their parents so well that they do not care much about themselves. Most of the young men who have stable work are migrants: if you look into the rented houses, you'll find many of them from the North or the Central provinces. The jobs created in the commune have mostly gone to them, not local young men. I hope that, in the future, when they become more mature, they will change, get proper training, and get suitable jobs and not fall into poverty.'

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, it was often more difficult to get men talking about poverty, specifically in terms of admitting it exists and is a problem for them, and to have them discuss the different dimensions and the various causes of poverty. Their perspective on the causes of poverty was often to emphasize the lack of State support in terms of training and employment opportunities for men. In a men's focus group discussion, the following opinion was expressed and widely approved by the group:

'Sometimes, I have sympathy for the new generation of young men. We used to live in a rural setting, and do any kind of work to earn enough for our families. But now, when the commune has been urbanized, there are many new types of expenses which didn't exist before. Young men don't want to do farm work or hired work; it is heavy work and not profitable. They don't have enough education to get a stable job; their parents were too poor to keep them in school, or they didn't think that their children would need education some day. Who knows, but in rural areas we didn't see education as that important. Now, there are no training programs for them either. That's what they need from the government. Otherwise, they just spend their days hanging out with bad friends, wasting their times and sooner or later will fall into poverty.'
In a women-men focus group about local young men’s unemployment, a man offered the following explanation:

‘It is not that men are not able to do the jobs that women are doing. First of all, some of them don’t have enough education. And even if they have the required education, not many companies would want to hire them, because they don’t listen to orders and tend to get into mischief (quêty).’

For some other people, the causes of poverty were very diverse, or sometimes it is a combination of many factors. A middle-age local woman talked about the reasons for her being poor:

‘I think I am poor because the children of my father’s oldest brother did not give us the land that I believe my grandparents intended for me to inherit, or at least if not they should have helped me out by giving us some land so that I could build a house to live in. My husband and I are now too old to work. He is often sick so we have to spend a lot of money on medicine. My youngest son is having difficulty finding work. He only has grade 4 because we were too poor at that time to keep him in school. Most people need grade 9 to get a job in the industrial zone. I don’t think there is much I can do now. I am too old. I can only count on my children for my future.’

For migrant women and men who left their home elsewhere to undertake paid work in the commune, their perception of the causes of poverty is often more diverse than that of local people. Many are young women, often with at least grade 9 education, working in textile and footwear factories, with others working as service providers or petty traders. They are often from much poorer regions, with few income-earning opportunities. The establishment of factories in Tân Tảo, and the many other private, small production units or service sector businesses, along with the increasing demand for goods and services in a populated area, have created work opportunities not only for some local people but also for many migrants, especially those with lower-secondary education and those supported by a network of relatives and friends (which represents their personal social capital.) Higher availability of paid work resulting from urbanization has also had tremendous impacts in helping eradicate poverty for many local people as well as for the migrants now living in the commune.
An excerpt from the life history of a 23-year-old woman who was working in a footwear factory in Tân Tạo commune illustrates this transformation:

'I am from Nam Định province. My family is very poor back there, since we can only do farm work and barely produce enough rice to survive. We do not have enough land, not to mention that the quality of land is bad. There is not much other non-agricultural work available. I have a few friends who told me that with my grade 10 education, I could get a stable job in the South, so I saved enough money to get here with a friend in 1998. We stayed at her relative’s house, and later on I got a job in a footwear factory (and so did she).

I hoped to earn enough money and to move back home to open a shop and build a new house. But I can also stay here if I get married here. Compared to my friends back home, I am much better-off and have a brighter future.'

Another excerpt from the life history of a 20-year-old man who was working in a small production unit in the commune:

'My home is in Thừa Thiên Huế province. My parents have seven children, and I am the fifth child. My mother does petty trading, and my father drives a rickshaw, but he is getting too old now. My oldest brother is married with four children, and he is a labourer, since he does not have much education. My three older sisters also have very little education, since my family was very poor back then. They are now married and have young children, and of course they are poor, since they and their husbands are also labourers with unstable income. I was fortunate to be kept in school until grade 11. My parents wanted to keep my younger sister and brother in school too, but my sister dropped out at grade 8 and my brother at grade 10. I and my brother took training in construction, but life was still difficult at home, our work was unstable and the pay was low, so we decided to move South in early 1999.

Through an acquaintance of my parents, I was introduced to the owner of a small production unit making plastic household products. I guess the owner liked me because I am hard working and able to pay attention to details. He trained me for about a month and then hired me to work for him until now. My brother isn’t so lucky, but he can still find construction work, although not all the time, and make more money than back home.

Of course, life back home has also been improved than 10-15 years ago, but my parents and siblings still have to struggle a lot for their livelihoods. They also rely on my remittances, so I have to save as much as I can. I think as long as there are opportunities
to earn income, back home or here, we can escape from poverty, since we are hard working.'

Older women with less education often work in the informal sector, such as selling food, petty trading or domestic helpers. The following is an excerpt from a life history of a 40-year-old woman from a Southern province:

'I am from Tân Phú commune, Đức Hào district, Long An province. At home, my husband is looking after the farm work. When it is time, I go back to do seeding and ploughing. Then we hire some people to do fertilizing and to trim the crop. I leave my husband to take care of selling the rice. We have 6 cong of land, but farm work often just is breakeven or makes a loss, because rice price is so low, and all the money we get from selling rice has to be put back into buying inputs. Doing hired work for other people, I earn only 10-15,000 dong a day, which is still not enough to take care of my family, especially when there are contributing to life-cycle ceremonies (dám tiệc, such as weddings, funerals or death anniversaries among relatives or in the neighbourhood). His two brothers are martyrs, and his parents receive 'martyr assistance' (luong liệt sĩ) from the government. My husband cannot do much because of his disability, but he receives 'war invalid assistance' (luong thuong binh), which is basically enough for his needs. He also sews clothes at home, but clients often don’t pay, so he doesn’t want to sew. But overall, we need more money because there are many things to spend on, such as contributions to the ceremonies.

I make 17-18,000 dong from selling sticky rice in the morning, and also the same amount from selling suck soup in the afternoon. Everyday, I make about 30,000, and after paying rent, I have about 20,000. This is much better than back home, where I could earn only 10-15,000 doing hired work, which is heavier and not regular work. I send money home every month to take care of my parents-in-law. Sometimes, I buy meat and send to them.'

Addressing the causes of poverty, she draws from her own experience as follows:

'In my opinion, the cause of poverty is failure in income-earning activities. There were some years when all plans failed and resulted in losses. For example, rice price was 2,000 dong/kg, but when we harvested and sold, it dropped to only 900 dong. Duck price was 15,000 dong/kg, but when we sold, it was only 8,000 dong. It was the same when we sold pigs. When we incurred a loss, we could not pay back the loan we borrowed from the government, so we had to borrow from private lenders to pay the debt. Loans from
private lenders are always at high interest, and the money we earn could barely pay the interest. So we remain poor and in debt. We also lost our positive, enthusiastic attitude, and often live in worry and disappointment.

Migrants in general have a more ‘polarized’ perception of poverty, since they are able to compare the living standards between their homeland and the city where they migrate. They value hard work, and this probably leads to a perception and acceptance of more equal roles between women and men compared to local people, despite stronger gender stereotypes and inequalities that generally exist in rural areas.

2. Impacts of urbanization on women’s and men’s employment

The process of structural change has created many more income-earning opportunities for both women and men in the formal and informal sectors. The dynamics of women and men trying to adapt to and take advantage of the new employment market and other potential income-making opportunities needs to be analyzed not only from economic but also in terms of socio-cultural aspects. In this section, the following issues will be discussed: (a) the current situation of women’s and men’s work from the view of cultural expectations, (b) the dynamics of changing occupations, including the extent to which female workers being laid off in the State sector are being absorbed into the new labour market, and (c) the issue of local young men’s unemployment.

(a) Current situation of women’s and men’s work from the view of cultural expectations

In individual interviews and focus group discussions with both women and men, there was a consensus that men are generally considered by society (and also by themselves) to be most suitable for mechanical work in small production units, or as motorbike taxi drivers due to their strength, driving experience, mobility (not having to do domestic work), and probably their lesser exposure to social harassment (although this last reason was only implied indirectly a few times through personal interview with both women and men.) There was also a consensus that men expect and are expected to earn higher income than women, since they are still considered to be the main breadwinners of their families. On the other hand, women, especially married women, are expected to choose work which they can combine with their domestic responsibilities. Such work generally
involves home-based or market-based activities, with flexible scheduling, longer working hours but lower income per hour worked. Many younger women, however, especially those unmarried, or married without children, are often able to and prefer to seek jobs outside home, such as working in factories or in the government sector (from individual interviews and focus group discussions).

The survey by CSSH in Tân Tạo commune also reveal that men predominate in occupations such as small-scale production workers, State employees and retirees, labourers and motorbike taxi drivers, and women working out-numbered men as factory workers, petty traders, home-makers, and incense makers. This reveals that, with changes in income-generating opportunities resulting from the process of urbanization, women and men were still, to some degree, constrained by social and cultural norms in determining which occupations are ‘more suitable’ for women and for men (see Table 26).

Table 26. Tân Tạo commune: Main Occupations According to Sex (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main occupation</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty trader</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small production worker</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>11.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary student</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary student</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-maker</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business owner</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State employee</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retiree</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incense maker</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal raiser</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonsai grower</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorbike taxidriver</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CSSH Survey (2000).*
There was a higher rate of men as State employees and retirees, which could signify
gender discrimination in State hiring. There were also many male labourers partly
because men are more likely to give up agricultural work (leaving it for their wife to do)
to earn wages outside home. However, many men still remained farmers, thus the ratio of
male farmers was higher than that of female farmers. It should also be noted that the
majority of agricultural work was actually carried out by women when account is taken
of hours worked and which sex was responsible for what stage in completing the
agricultural cycle (results from seasonal activities calendar and interviews).

Women predominate in factory jobs mostly because many were migrants attracted by
hiring policies showing preference for women, especially in textile and footwear
factories. In focus group discussions, it was often stated that factory owners preferred
women for their dexterity and willingness to do repetitive work for long hours, and that
women themselves saw this type of job as one of their best options due to its regular
income (despite the perceived occupational hazards that can affect their health in
accidents and in the future work-related disabilities, e.g. from work-place pollution). The
preference for factory work was especially true for migrant women, since there were very
few income-earning opportunities back in their homeland, and they did not have access to
land or credit in their new location.

More importantly, men were not taking these jobs because, even if local men had the
required qualifications (grade 9), they would not accept the same low wage as women,
and generally could find higher-paying work in construction, motorbike taxi driving, etc.
(even though income from these types of work might not be stable). Another reason for
men not working in textile factories, which was often given by the people being
interviewed, was that ‘sewing clothes is women’s work’ (may vá là viêc cùa đan bà).

Women also dominated in trading, which also was associated with low prestige, in spite
of high potential profits that can be made; in home-making, where women were
‘naturally’ considered suitable; and in incense making which involves light work but long
hours, and that enable women work at home and take care of their families.
The above summary of findings on occupational distribution by gender also carries a cultural implication that, in the process of switching from a rural to urban economic environment, men expect and are expected to have higher-paying, prestigious jobs, even when they lack the professional skills and/or other special characteristics required for these jobs, such as habits of self-discipline or willingness to work long hours. Women, on the other hand, have been culturally conditioned to accept any job they could get, as they were not considered main breadwinners. It seems likely, therefore, that women would be more willing to undertake paid work for low income to immediately support their families, while men would try to gain more training to be able to qualify and obtain more ‘culturally suitable’ jobs (with professional skills and higher pay), but, in the meantime, they have to settle for low-paying jobs as labourers or taxi drivers, or, when forced to an extreme, go against cultural norms and accept ‘women’s jobs’ or remain unemployed (as the unemployment rate among men was also significantly higher. See Table 26.)

Photo 5. Tân Tảo Commune: Incense Making, a Common Home-Based Work for Women and Young Girls
The different geographical areas and places of work between women and men also reflect the different cultural expectations of the sexes in terms of their productive and reproductive roles in the family and in society. In interviews and focus group discussions within the survey sample, it was often said that, while men have total mobility in their search for work, women need to choose work which is flexible and home-based, or near home, so that they can still look after their children and do housework. Young, unmarried women have more mobility, and can seek work in factories or take other jobs outside home. However, when these women marry and start having children, they often change jobs to be home-based, especially when they form nuclear families, while some others are able to continue their outside jobs and rely on their parents (mostly mothers) and other relatives (mostly females) to take care of their children and for other housework. The following is an excerpt from a personal interview with a newly wed woman:

'I am 25 years old. I have grade 9 education, and used to work in a textile factory. My husband is an electrical technician. I got married two years ago, and came to live with my parents-in-law. Before that, I and my husband both worked outside home, and there was no problem at all. Then I found it became very difficult to work outside home and also take care of my household duties, even though there are other relatives in the house who could help. Therefore, I decided to work at home as a hairdresser. Now I can arrange my time to work and to do my housework. Especially now when we are planning to have our first child, I need to be home-based.'

Another reason for women to take home-based or market-based work once they get married and have children is its higher income prospects needed to cover the additional family expenses for the family. In research by Trần Thị Kim Xuyến (2001) on Tân Tao commune, a woman said:

'Factory workers earn only 5-600,000 dong a month, while I can earn more than a million dong doing petty trade in the market. If I work in a factory, my income is not enough for my children and my family. It would be enough if I only take care of myself, but now I have a family, I need to earn two or three times as much as a worker's wage.'

The survey by CSSH on women's and men's geographical areas and places of work also confirms the finding that women usually have less mobility in choice of occupations. About 60% of the workforce work within the commune, of whom about two-thirds are
women (see Table 27). Most of these women work at home or in nearby markets as incense makers, as service providers, or as market traders. Those who have no fixed place of work (including construction and general help labourers who have to move to where the work is) accounted for 11.2%, of whom 10.8% are male.

Table 27. Tân Tao Commune: Geographical Areas of Work According to Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of work</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the commune</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the district</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other rural district in HCMC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other urban district in HCMC</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at one place</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other provinces</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Photo 6. Tân Tao Commune: Men Involved in Construction Work
CSSH data on men’s and women’s incomes, combining main and side work also show that many have managed to acquire two or more sources of income to contribute to their families. Women work more in the informal sectors which tend to generate flows of unstable income, and they thus tend to be more active than men in seeking and maintaining multiple work tasks. Another reason for women being more active in several lines of activity could be that they are generally the designated person who has taken responsibility for taking care of household finances, and who is thus more under pressure to meet the recurring daily expenses than men (see Table 28).

Table 28. Tân Tao Commune: Place of Work According to Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of work</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At home</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business outside home</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the street</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In market without booth</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In market with booth</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family land</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No regular place</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other places</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(b) The dynamics of changing occupations

The switch to a multi-sector economy has resulted in changes in the choice of their employment sectors for working people. There are now more people working in family businesses (46.4%), in which more women find their main livelihoods than men (54.3% compared to 37.3%) since they (especially married women with children) have to find ways to combine their income-earning work with domestic responsibilities. Labourers accounted for 21.2% of the total workforce, with a higher proportion for men (26.7% compared to 16.4% for women), and this again shows that men have greater mobility in seeking work farther away from home. There are also a higher proportion of women relative to men working in enterprises with foreign investments (mostly textile and footwear factories). It was often said in focus group discussions that this could be due to
employers preferring to hire women (especially 25 years or younger), and also that social norms consider textile-related work is considered more ‘suitable’ to women.

However, there are more men than women working in private enterprises, often small production units that involve mechanical skills. There is also a higher ratio of male State management employees (10.8% compared to 4.2%), but about equal representation of male and female cadres in party and mass organizations, which reflects women’s higher participation and acceptance in political and community activities. The higher ratio of male State management employees could be attributable partly to the higher educational requirements, and this is reflected higher salaries and brighter future prospects for career advancement, while participation in party or mass organizations is more routine work, does not require as high a level of education, and pays lower salaries (see Table 29).

**Table 29. Tân Tao Commune: Employment Sectors According to Sex (percentage)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State management employees</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party and mass organizations</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign enterprises</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private enterprises</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small household production</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enterprises with foreign investments</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourers</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work for family</td>
<td>54.3</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>46.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: CSSH Survey (2000).*

The number of times that women and men change their occupations also helps reveal the level of dynamic and adaptability of the sexes in face of the rapidly changing socio-economic situation. The survey by CSSH on how often women and men change occupations at various times from before 1986 to 1992 shows that before đổi mới (1986), while men were more likely to change occupation than women, after 1992, there were generally higher rates of women changing occupations. Overall, since 1992, there has been a much higher rate of occupational turnover for both men and women (42%, compared to 25%, 1987-92 and 32%, before 1986). Considering that most of the economic changes in the commune occurred after 1992, the higher rate of occupational
turnover for women than men during this period signifies that women are more willing
and more receptive to adapt themselves to new occupational opportunities to earn more
income for their families, despite their domestic responsibilities and other social
constraints which tie them to the domestic sphere. It is also psychologically easier for
women to change occupations, as it has often been said in women’s focus group
discussions that women often opt for work with skills that can be easily and quickly
obtained by on-the-job training, while men tend to choose jobs with more complicated
skills, often requiring formal pre-training, such as mechanics (see Table 30).

Table 30. Tân Tao Commune: Number of Times of Changing Occupations by Sex
over the Years (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Once</th>
<th></th>
<th>Twice</th>
<th></th>
<th>Three times</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1986</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987-1992</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td></td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 1992</td>
<td>43.7</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Regarding occupational mobility, the issue of State female workers being laid off and
having to find new type of employment did not seem to be a concern among people in the
commune as being an economic hardship for these women. Many women interviewed
simply said that those women would easily find something else to do, especially with the
‘connections’ they already had. The following is an excerpt from a life history of a
woman who used to work in a State commercial organization:

‘I was a State employee, working in a commercial organization. Then I had to take an
early retirement in the mid-1980, along with many other women and men when many
State companies were dissolved. At that time, there were many women in the
neighbourhood making incense, so I switched to this work. I also had enough money,
good health and strong credentials in this commune to be able to open a coffee shop, but
my son did not want me to work. He said that he could take care of me and that I didn’t
have to do anything. [Question: How about other women being laid off?] If they were
younger than me, they would find something else to do. Before, when they worked for
the State, their salary was not much anyway. Of course, they also received other benefits,
but since the commune was urbanized, there have been many other good opportunities for
women. So I think most of them would do better, not worse.’
Since there was only one woman in this category in the sample, the conclusion on the economic well-being of State female employees being laid off could be idiosyncratic and thus biased. However, considering the new economic opportunities being created and the possible social capital these women had built during their State jobs, it could be expected that they would likely be relatively successful in finding other work in the formal or informal sector. This tentative conclusion, however, should be limited to the case of Tân Tao commune, and should not necessarily generalize to other parts of the country, especially rural areas, where suitable alternative employment would often be less available or accessible.

(c) Unemployment among local young men

From men’s and women’s focus group discussions in Tân Tao commune, it was clear many local young men were not happy with the current pay averaging 600,000 dong/month. The reasons for this attitude varies among men, depending on each person’s perceptions, but in general, the main reasons could be linked to the current socio-economic situation and their own family financial situation, but some explanations were also rooted in social norms regarding gender differentials. The current rate of pay was normally considered suitable for unskilled labourers, migrant workers and women, while, with the rapid changes in the economy since doi moi, many men had been able to find higher-paying jobs, making other men also try to look for better jobs, or at least to wait until such opportunities arise. Men who think that their family can still survive with their family’s income often opt to invest their time and efforts looking for better jobs. Especially, in the case of families who have received a large amount of money from selling land (sometimes 50-100 million dong), feel that they can live off this money for some time and thus refuse to accept low-paying jobs.

Another reason for men to refuse jobs at current pay levels (although cited less frequently and in a more discrete way especially by men), is the social perception which expects that men should earn more than women, and that certain types of work are considered suitable only for women. Within these perceptions, the higher rate of pay a man can earn, the more distinct his job is from ‘women’s jobs’, and the more ‘technical’ the work involved, the better he would fit ‘successfully’ into the social norms. However, work which can be
easily found or created, such as making incense, trading in the market, working in textile and footwear factories, working in coffee shops and restaurants are considered ‘women’s work’. The better jobs men want to find also often require a certain level of education, some technical training, and employment assistance from the State, which not all men are ready for, and for which the local government currently cannot give the necessary support. Therefore, (as many men often said in their interviews) they felt that their occupational options were limited, both in general and in comparison with women.

A major concern of the community, therefore, is high unemployment among young men. It appears to be more difficult for men to adapt to the changing situation by adapting their gender roles. Men traditionally have earned more than women, and are accustomed to being considered the main breadwinner of the family. But in face of limited job opportunities for men and low wages, some of male job seekers start to lose their economic role, unless they are willing to take low-paying jobs and/or jobs that are considered ‘women’s jobs’. The extent to which each man is willing to take these jobs depends on his own perception and his particular family situation. This reflects men’s struggle, sometimes silently, to deal with the social stigma associated with men’s images and roles in the family and in society.

The common problem of unemployment among local young men is often a worry for many families, especially mothers. The following excerpt from a life history of a woman shows that, unlike before in rural areas where girls were often seen as a liability and a worry for parents (e.g. of losing their virginity), it is the boys in urban areas now that cause concern for the parents:

‘My husband and I are farmers. I raise animals and help my husband with farming work. He farms and also does motorbike taxi driving when he has free time. We earn just enough for our spending, and our family is considered not poor. I have four grown-up children. My oldest child (and only son) also drives motorbike taxi like his father. The second child is an accountant and also pursuing university continuing education, and the third child is receiving training in sewing. My youngest daughter stays home to help me. Speaking of my children’s jobs and their future, I have to say that I don’t worry at all about my three girls. They will do well. But I worry a lot about my son. I have only one son, but sometimes I can’t eat or sleep (ăn ngủ không được) just because of him. I worry
that because he works outside home as a motorbike taxi driver, I don’t know if he would spend time hanging out with friends in coffee shops, and what else he could be involved in. I feel guilty that he does not have enough education to get a good job. We were too poor when he grew up, so I couldn’t afford to keep him in school. Having a low education, the only option for him is to accept heavy, manual work at low pay, which makes him discontented (bại mân). His situation now is 'lở thây, lở thô' (neither skilled nor unskilled.) I see other mothers with sons at the same age who have the same kind of worry.'

Another perspective, even though reflecting a not very common situation, also provides insights on men’s employment with lack of support from the government:

'I have two young sons, age 25 and 22. My family was too poor when they grew up, so they both dropped out at grade 3. They joined the armed forces (often called 'nghĩa vụ quân sự' = 'army responsibility'), and were told that after being discharged, they would be given a suitable job. Now that they are back, no one wants to hire them because they only have grade 2 education. They have to work in construction now, with low, unstable pay and heavy work, so they feel discontented (bại mân). I was hoping that the government would support them in their jobs, and now I don’t know what to do to help them.'

The implications for women of young men’s struggle to find 'satisfactory' jobs were often mentioned in individual interviews and focus group discussions when the issue of poverty was brought up. In general, most women are willing to do any work to support their family, and in a situation where the husband or son is not bringing home sufficient or any income, the woman has to strive harder to feed the family. Many women also expressed sympathy for other unfortunate women whose husband and/or adult sons were unemployed for a long time, gradually became very discouraged, and had fallen into social evils. (See section 7.4)
Box 21. Social and Cultural Factors Behind Young Men’s Unemployment

Man 1: Men like us did not get jobs in the factories.

Interviewer: Could you please explain why?

Man 1: They don’t hire men, they hire only women...

Man 2: There are very few mechanical jobs for men to do in these factories...

Man 3: Women are more suitable for these jobs. They are more patient, more careful; they have dexterous hands and are hard working. They are willing to accept the current wage (about 600,000 dong/month). Men don’t like this low pay; they have to earn more...

Interviewer: Could you say a little more why men are not so suitable for these jobs?

Man 2: Men are breadwinners so they have to earn more than that. For those who have a lot of money from government compensation for land or ‘selling’ land, they are even less willing to work for that low pay. They could use the money to start a business...

Man 4: Some men do not want to work hard. They are used to getting up at 9 o’clock in the morning, so how can they get to work at 6 or 7?

Man 5: And after they get up, they spend an hour to drink coffee [filtered coffee which takes some time for each drop down make a full cup] and then have breakfast...

Man 6: I have to say that some men cannot take these jobs because they are addicted to cigarettes. They cannot stand working several hours without smoking. But no factory would allow them to go outside to smoke during working hours... And, the money they could earn from these jobs is just enough to spend on cigarettes.

Interviewer: So who are financially supporting unemployed men?

Man 7: Sometimes it is their parents. Their family may have a lot of money from ‘selling’ land, so they can use this money...

Interviewer: But then when the money is gone?

Man 7: Yes, there are cases like this. When the money is gone, they are very poor, because they don’t even have any land now to farm. They have nothing.

Man 8: They were so used to not planning ahead. They were farmers who just ate all what they grew without thinking about tomorrow...

Man 2: Some men also rely on their wives. It is easy for women to do petty trade or incense making to make money...

Interviewer: What do you think about men’s future in terms of employment and earning a living?

Man 5: I think that men who don’t want to do anything will be very poor.

Man 1: I think that local young men should get training. They are not doing anything now because they have no skills.

Man 4: Some of them don’t have anything to do, and this is a trap into social evils...

Source: Author’s Notes - Men’s Focus Group Discussion.
Traditional gender norms and biases still have incredible capacity to survive, sometimes being further reinforced by changing realities. Contradictions can exist that are unfavourable to women and also sometimes to men. The continual changes in people’s perceptions regarding women’s and men’s work in the process of urbanization often have significant impacts on gender relations in terms of the tensions caused by the contradictions between traditional norms and new socio-economic challenges, and the difficulty each person might have in adapting to the new environment. Social movements can hopefully undermine gender stereotypes and eliminate unnecessary pressures on both women and men in achieving greater gender equality.

Photo 7. Men’s Focus Group Discussion

3. Education

The main discussion in this section is based on the qualitative analysis of people’s perceptions on female children’s education, which can be a major determinant in their decision and effort to ensure proper education for their female children. While it is often believed that economic difficulties are the main reason for girls to drop out from school, there are other implicit social and cultural factors, such as the perceived lack of return to
investment in girls’ education due to social expectation that women should first be responsible for domestic affairs and childrearing, and that they leave home when they marry thus reducing the potential ‘payoff’ to their parents.

Data on the issue of education provided by commune leaders were relatively minimal. Key informant interviews with commune leaders provided some basic information on education in the commune, that there were two schools recently built, and various but small scholarships being provided from individual overseas Vietnamese for highly achieving students from poor families.

The issue of female children’s education could involve not only economic considerations, but also cultural dimensions. From a small survey within the sample, the result shows that women place somewhat more importance on girls’ education than men (Table 31). This could be partly explained by the fact that women, with low educational attainment, have experienced difficulties in their own lives that they see to be exacerbated by ‘limited educational credentials’, not just economically but also socially and culturally, and they thus want their daughters to have a better education to ensure a better life. Migrants especially place higher importance on girls’ education than long-term residents. Some said it was because of their grade 9 education that they were able to get a job in factories, while other young women residents could not. They expressed a desire for their children to excel in school, because they said that being ‘new-comers’, they must invest more in their children’s education to ensure a good life for them, and to compensate for the relative lack of ‘contacts’ or other advantages enjoyed by local residents.

Table 31. Tân Tao Commune: Adults’ Opinions on the Importance of Girls’ Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female Residents</th>
<th>Female Migrants</th>
<th>Male Residents</th>
<th>Male Migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>16 (67%)</td>
<td>11 (91%)</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
<td>6 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little important</td>
<td>6 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (9%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Survey.
Survey data by CSSH (using 5 as ‘maximum importance’, see Table 32) also show that women place slightly more importance on education of all their children than men. However, overall education was not ranked as having as much importance as other factors in affecting women’s relative economic status, including such considerations as having a stable job or getting married (not so much in the choice of marriage partner, but mainly the cost of planning a wedding and the financial support for the young family). This would seem to indicate that, for both male and female children, educational attainment still does not appear ‘crucial’ for their future ‘success’ (in its range of possible meanings), and therefore parents do not strongly insist on keeping their children in school. This attitude could be related to their current economic situation, which has not allowed them to sacrifice family resources for their children’s education. On the other hand, it may reflect their experience that educational opportunities may not increase a school-leaver’s chances of finding a higher-paying job, and this would seem to be especially true in reality for most women in Viet Nam.

Table 32. Tân Tao Commune: Perception on the Importance of Ensuring Children’s Education versus Other Issues, According to Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting and keeping children in school as long as possible</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting and keeping children in school until finishing upper-secondary education</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting and keeping children in school until finishing university education</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other issues</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping children to find a profession</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having children to find a prestigious profession</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping children to acquire a house</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping children in getting married</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping children to participate productively in the social network</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).*

A survey within the sample was carried out on whether the respondents agree that, regardless of their educational level, women will have to stay home to do housework and look after the children, and do work which is unrelated to their studies, often low-paying
and simple (Table 33.) The majority of women and men, residents and migrants, disagreed with the statement (about 60% of local women and men, and 50% of male migrants). Many of them referred to female factory workers being able to get jobs thanks to their grade 9 education, and especially professional women such as teachers, nurses, and State employees. Some migrant women could not answer the question as they said it depended on whether the girls could go find work in city centers. 50% of migrant men agreed with the statement, as they said that it still applied to many girls in rural areas.

Table 33. Tân Tao Commune: Girls’ Education and Domestic Responsibilities

Do you agree with statement that ‘No matter how high girls study, they will end up doing simple, low-paying work and staying home to do housework and take care of children’?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11 (34%)</td>
<td>4 (25%)</td>
<td>6 (38%)</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>25 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 (59%)</td>
<td>9 (56%)</td>
<td>10 (62%)</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>42 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>3 (19%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s Survey.

To explore whether girl’s education is actually economically beneficial, i.e. helps them earn higher income, it is necessary to analyze the relationship between educational level and income of women and of men. A survey by CSSH shows that, while educational attainment was an important factor for married men in determining their income, it was not so significant for married women. Figure 3 shows that men’s income rose substantially if they had a college or university education (from less to 1,000,000 dong for illiterates to more than 3,000,000 dong). However, women’s income stayed within the range of about 600,000 dong to 1,000,000 dong, regardless of their educational level.

This is one factor that helps explain why men’s investment in education has a higher priority in most family decision-making, while investment in education for women is not seen as promising such good returns. It can also explain in part why women have to shoulder such heavy household responsibilities, which can limit them from pursuing high-paying jobs, even when they have relatively high levels of education. These jobs
also normally require working outside the home which women often cannot accept because they need to be home-based and thus must accept other lower-paying work.

**Figure 3. Tân Tảo Commune: Income by Sex According to Educational Level**

![Graph showing income from main jobs of husbands and wives by educational level for husbands and wives.]

*Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).*

In group discussions with women regarding the importance of children's education, in addition to general statements that parents should keep their children in school as long as possible to secure their future benefits, another opinion was also offered by a few participants that, if they had to choose between a son and a daughter to stay in school due to economic difficulties, it would be the daughter who would 'voluntarily' quit or be taken out. The reason provided was that a son's education would likely be a more profitable and predictable ('safer') investment than might be expected from a daughter. A woman in the focus group said:

'We all know it is good for girls to have an education. If they get to grade 9, they can work in factories, which is still better than having no occupation. But today, working in a factory does not make very good money. Market traders can make a lot more. I rarely see any woman making good money because she has good education. So we have to think about it.'

Other opinions were expressed, such as the following:

'Our generation did not have much education but girls today can. In my opinion, girls should study as much as they can. But then they might have to think about looking for a
‘deserving’ husband (i.e. a man with even higher education), because I could not imagine a family in which a wife has a ‘better head’ than her husband.’

In group discussions with female children, there was also a similar general statement that girls wanted to go to school, but often had to stay home to help their families. Some older children, however, were able to articulate other relevant aspects of their situation regarding education, such as:

‘When not many girls around go to school, I have to be concerned about what’s good and what’s bad for staying in school. Of course, if I study hard, I was told I would have a good profession, but also I won’t have as much time as other girls to learn about taking care of the house which is an important thing for every girl.’ (A 16-year-old girl)

or:

‘I think that boys don’t like girls that are too smart … I think it is easier for girls with low education to get married.’ (A 15-year-old girl)

There were also other interesting views regarding the importance of girls’ education. In a personal interview with a 40-year-old migrant woman, in response to the question whether to take a son or a daughter out of school due to economic difficulty, she said:

‘If I had a son and a daughter, and had to take one out of school because of poverty, I would take out the son. He has physical strength, so he can use his labour to work to take care of himself. The girl is weaker, so she needs as much education as possible in order to get a stable job for her to be able to take care of her family and for me too not having to worry about her.’

People’s perception on the importance of girls’ education is a complex issue, and clearly is affected not only by economic factors but also by cultural factors, which could be more important but are often hidden or not spoken about. It appears that, facing the changes in socio-economic conditions, in which education can lead to more employment opportunities with higher income, parents now have higher incentives to keep their daughters in school. However, other factors such as gender discrimination in the workplace, and women’s overloaded tasks in child rearing and household responsibilities, can also negatively affect parents’ decision on whether to invest in a girl’s education, as they anticipate the possible lower outcome. For those women who have education, these factors can affect them not only in terms of lower income compared to men with the same
level of education, but also making them less likely to have opportunities to work in the areas of their specialization and their choice of alternative careers, or other prospects to pursue higher education.

4. Feminization of poverty

It is useful to briefly mention how poverty is measured in Viet Nam. The Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs has used poverty lines that assume monthly income equivalent to rice consumption per person for one month to satisfy basic needs. In 1993, the poverty lines for ‘hungry households’ were at 13 kg in urban and 8 kg in rural areas, and the lines for ‘poor households’ were 20 kg and 15 kg respectively. In 1996, the lines were 13 kg for ‘hungry households’, and 25 kg in urban, 20 kg in lowland and 15 kg in mountainous areas for ‘poor households’.

The General Statistical Office, in carrying out the VLSS 1992-93 and VLSS 1997-98, has used poverty lines based on the cost of purchasing a food basket which provides 2,100 calories/person/day for one year. The World Bank has used the same poverty lines but with more food items in the basket.

The process of structural change has appeared to benefit women to a greater degree than men, in terms of generating income opportunities. Young women predominate in factory employment, in market trading, and in incense making, while the rate of unemployment among men was higher than women. A woman said in her life history:

‘I think it is equally difficult for women and men to escape from poverty. But these days it is easier for women to find work. Women can do anything from petty trade to working in restaurants and in factories. Women can do mechanical work now. And it is more difficult for men because they can only do certain things.’

However, a closer analysis reveals that women tend to occupy jobs in the informal sector with lower pay, longer working hours, and less stable prospects. Regarding gender as a factor in determining personal and family income level, the survey by CSSH shows that women in the commune spent slightly more time than men on their main occupation (10.48 versus 10.14 hours/day). However, their average income from this main occupation was only 77% that of men (723,805 versus 939,346 dong/month, see Table 34).
Table 34. Tân Tao Commune: Time Spent for and Income from Main Occupation According to Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time spent per day on main occupation (hours)</th>
<th>Monthly income from main occupation (dong)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>723,805</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>10.4834</td>
<td>723,805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Std. Deviation</strong></td>
<td><strong>743,005</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.8414</td>
<td>743,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>939,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.1436</td>
<td>939,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>1,271,837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.5217</td>
<td>1,271,837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>827,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.3239</td>
<td>827,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Std. Deviation</td>
<td>1,035,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.6877</td>
<td>1,035,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>867</td>
<td>768</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

The survey from CSSH on income of male- and female-headed households reveals some additional interesting facts. While income per capita of all households averaged 528,912 dong/month, that of male-headed households was 579,535 dong/month, and for female-headed households it was 481,693 dong/month. (Average income per capita in Ho Chi Minh City in 1996 was estimated at 591,580 dong/month (Tổng cục Thống kê (General Statistical Office) 1999). Figure 4 shows that in the lowest income group (quintile I), the rate of female-headed households was considerably higher than those of male-headed. There was only a small difference in incidence of both types of household regarding quintiles II, III and IV (with a higher rate of male-headed households in quintiles II and IV, and of female-headed in the highest income quintile).

Therefore, we can say that, since average income per capita of male-headed households was 23% higher than that of female-headed, male-headed households were on average better-off than female-headed. However, another interesting issue is the apparent trend toward income polarization among female-headed households and also among male-headed households. Although no data were available, there clearly exists income polarization among female-headed households, in which certain households in quintile V had very high incomes, usually those with a husband and/or a high ratio of working members over dependent members. On the other hand, many households without a husband (especially single women), and/or those with low ratios of working members
over dependent members, usually had very low income. Similar statements can be made in regard to male-headed households.

**Figure 4. Tân Tảo Commune: Income of Male- and Female-Headed Households**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Range</th>
<th>Male-headed Households</th>
<th>Female-headed Households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;600</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-600</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-300</td>
<td>(28.1%)</td>
<td>(21.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-150</td>
<td>(46.5%)</td>
<td>(21.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

Other factors that affect income and living standards include age, employment sector, location of work, household income group, and household occupation group (see Appendix 1).

From a non-economic perspective, poverty among women often goes with certain social conditions which exacerbate the depth of poverty. It is ‘poverty with a story’. The story could involve having a drug-addicted son, domestic violence, being emotionally abused by the in-laws, having a husband involved in social evils, or single women (with or without a child born out of wedlock) being ostracized by the society, or simply, and very commonly, being worn out both physically and emotionally by overloaded work without having much help from husband (see life histories and personal interviews in sections on social evils, domestic violence, single women, etc.) These contexts of poverty are strongly related to gender inequity, which put women in inferior positions in the family and make them suffer the most of the consequences of poverty.

It is worthwhile noting that, poverty itself might not be the prime cause of women’s ill-being; there were families in the commune with low income, who had to struggle hard to
earn basic subsistence, but who appeared to be doing fine. It is often the social and family circumstances that adversely affect their well-being, or make them feel the more negative impacts of poverty. For example, families with domestic violence or social evils often suffer more of an emotional pain than economic loss. Or, as mentioned in the section on single women, some said that they would rather have a husband at the expense of a higher degree of poverty, even though they were already poor, only so as not to be seen as ‘worthless’ by the society.

Therefore, cultural aspects of poverty deserve attention perhaps even more than economic factors, in the process of human development. The concept of ‘feminization of poverty’ then needs to be examined also through a social and cultural lens. As long as gender discrimination, stereotypes and inequities still exist, and put women in relatively disadvantaged positions, they still have to suffer the most of the damaging and degrading impacts of poverty.

5. Credit support for women

Various credit programs in the commune have proved extremely helpful to households in need. Most women and men said in their interviews that they could borrow if they possessed the right collateral, and that this has helped their families to get through difficult times, due to the lack of their own financial resources for investment in productive inputs and/or business operations. A man said in a women-men focus group discussion:

‘I farm, and my wife makes incense. I also drive motorbike taxi during the idle seasons to earn additional income. During crop seasons, I borrow from the commune to buy seeds, fertilizers, and other necessary things, then I pay back after the harvest. My wife also borrows from the commune to buy materials for her incense making and pays it back after she sells the incense. Each time, we borrow about 3-4 million dong. The loans we borrow are at low interest, so we can afford to pay them back.’

Similarly, a woman said in a women’s focus group discussion:

‘My family are farmers, and we also have a bread making business. I have three small children, age 15, 12 and 8. Our financial situation is relatively stable. We borrow money frequently from the commune to do our farm work and for the business. We don’t have any outstanding debt, but we don’t have much money with us either.’
The availability of credit through mass organizations, normally the Farmers’ Association for male borrowers and the WU for female borrowers, has substantially improved the living standards of most households. This can be considered a success of the *gender and development* approach incorporated in government programs to help improve poor women’s lives and prospects through the WU. Opening up income-earning opportunities for women through credit helps strengthen their economic role in the family and eases the burden of everyday financial needs to take care of family members, which is traditionally a woman’s responsibility. The improvement in women’s well-being through credit not only meets their short-term *practical need*, but also long-term *strategic need* in the sense that their position in the family and in society are being enhanced through their increasing economic power, resulting in a reduction in domestic violence, and improved gender relations in general.

However, reaching poor women who lack ‘appropriate collateral’ is a major obstacle and poses a challenge. These women not only had less favourable conditions to produce a credible production plan, but also are under more stress in their struggle to meet everyday family expenses. Their repayment rate was thus considerably lower than women in average-income households. The commune’s WU President had the following comment on the problems of providing credit to poor women:

‘We do have HEPR loans for poor women. The difficulty is, some poor women borrowed and then could not repay, affecting the reputation of the whole poor women group. Most of these women do petty trading, so they need only about a few hundred thousand *dong* at a time, but even so, many of them could not repay this small amount. This shows that the way they used the money was not economically efficient, therefore the commune cannot continue to loan to them.’

The dilemma in the lack of access to credit for poor women was a frequent subject in focus group discussions of both women and men. A woman in the average-income group said:

‘I know a lot about the poor women who cannot borrow money either from the government (*vay nhà nước*) or from private lenders (*vay tư nhân*). I know that many of them don’t have collateral to borrow from the government, and so when they turn to private lenders, it isn’t any better because lenders have to consider whether they can pay
back (coi mậu mở cho vay). The irony is that, lenders would lend to people like me who can pay back, but we don’t need to borrow from them, while they wouldn’t lend these poor women who need to borrow, because they can’t pay back. Because of lack of credit, these women thus remain poor, and the cycle repeats itself. In my opinion, if the government can afford to help these women, they need to give them a chance to pay back in several small instalments (trả góp), or in case they are in difficult situations and cannot pay back, the government should consider forgiving the debt (cho lùn). Otherwise, I can’t think of any other way for these women to be helped.’

Obtaining credit to improve family income is one of the dimensions of đổi mới policy through which most of households have been able to benefit. However, for the very poor households, especially very poor women, the enabling environment might not be supportive enough for them to participate in the opportunities created or share in the benefits. This is where international and government programs and projects need to consider ways to ensure the inclusion of poor women in the development process as being one of the most disadvantaged groups.

6. Gender division of labour

The economic roles of women and men in the family have been changed significantly since the start of urbanization in Tân Tao. In interviews and focus group discussions, it was often emphasized that women and men could now earn more income for their family, and in general, that women had more opportunities than men to make income, because ‘women’s work is always available and flexible, any woman can do it, such as making incense or petty trading’, and because ‘women are willing to do any kind of work to bring home money for their families.’

However, despite women’s increasing economic contribution to the family, men were still considered by both female and male respondents as the main income earner of the family. ‘Women only earn coins and change (tiền cả, tiền lẻ), and men have to make most of the money for the family.’ Interestingly, many women and even men, however, still agreed that the ‘coins and change’ that women earned was absolutely essential for day-to-day family spending and survival.
The survey by CSSH confirms the above general statement. On average, in ‘full-couple households’, husbands generally contribute more than wives to the family budget (51.4% compared with 32.1%). Even in full-couple female-headed households, husbands still tend to contribute at a higher level (49.3% compared with 40.0%) (see Figure 5). This is true even in the context in which women assume most or all of household responsibilities, often so as to release men to focus on working or looking for better work.

Figure 5. Tân Tảo Commune: Economic Contribution Levels of Members of Full-Couple Households, classified by sex of the household heads

![Economic contribution levels of members in full-couple households by sex of the head of household]

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

Women in poor ‘full-couple households’, however, tend to contribute a higher proportion of combined household income than in better-off households. Figure 6 shows that in the lowest income group (under 250,000 dong/person/month), women contribute the highest share across the five quintiles (36.8%) while their husbands contribute the lowest share (45.0%). This would seem to indicate that when husbands are not able to earn sufficient income, their wives usually have to take initiative in working harder or in a wider range of activities to bring home more income. It is common in poor households that the women have to shoulder much of financial responsibilities, as seen in the following excerpt from a local woman’s life history:
My husband is now 57 years old. He works in the market, carrying things in a three-wheel cyclo. He makes about 15,000 dong/day, but some days he doesn’t make any money at all. He is now too old for this work and often has back pain. He is also having lung problems. I am staying home to take care of my fourth daughter’s child, because she and her husband both work in a factory. They pay me 300,000 dong/month. I am happy because at least I have a stable source of income. But we are still very poor. Expenses for my husband’s medicine and his rickshaw repair are high. In 1990 when he started to have lung problems, I had to borrow 5 million dong and paid 1.2 million dong/month for interest. I also had to pay 10 million dong to build this house. The government assigned me this land temporarily.

Figure 6. Tân Tao Commune: Contribution Levels of Members in Full-Couple Households Classified by Income Groups

Source: Survey by CSSH, 2000.

In most low-income households, the husband and wife often both have unstable work, such as hired labourers with seasonal work, which both can depend on changing market conditions. It is a common phenomenon for men to work for four months and then stop for a few months, while women generally try to work year-round, even at lower pay. The roles and contributions of other family members, such as children and grandparents, in contributing to combined household income, are also very significant, on average accounting for 16.7%.
While women increasingly took on a *productive role* in order to adapt to new socio-economic conditions, and seemed to maintain their *reproductive role*, their other domestic responsibilities did not appear to be shared more evenly by men. Although the availability of new household appliances and new services have helped reduce women’s workload at home to some degree, their having to undertake different ‘sideline’ income-generating work has often added to their long working hours. Considering women’s household responsibilities and the time on income-earning work, women generally continue to work much longer hours than men.

It is interesting that most married women interviewed acknowledged their husbands’ help with domestic work. Most of them said: ‘*After work, he comes home and helps me with things around the house*’. However, when discussing the details of who would do what, it appeared that women still took on most or all of these responsibilities. ‘*He’ll help me if I get too tired, or if I have too much to do on that day*.’ In fact, for some women interviewed, the underlying assumption when women and men said that ‘men also share housework’ was that women still had to assume household responsibilities as long as they could manage, and that men only offered help in ‘emergency’ situations. This means of men’s role in domestic affairs is a ‘relief’ effort rather than the actual share of responsibilities between the sexes, and thus it means that women still carry the most household responsibilities which require almost all of their time and efforts, and this is likely to have impact not only on their non-domestic interests but also on their physical and mental health.

Although it was agreed that, to certain extent, a percentage of men are aware of their wives’ overloaded work from their productive and reproductive roles, and thus share domestic responsibilities, a common observation in Tân Tảo commune in particular, and in other parts of Viet Nam in general, is that most women still have to struggle to fulfill both their paid work and housework. For households without a husband, women had to work even harder while remaining among the poorest members of society.
7.4 Social and family relations

1. Improved women’s status in family and in the society

Over the years, gender relations have changed significantly in Viet Nam in general and in Tân Tao commune in particular, and mostly in a positive direction especially for women. The influence of Confucianism has been gradually reduced, and older women are especially able to comment on this change in gender relations, as an excerpt from a life history of an older woman indicates:

‘I moved to this commune from the North in 1975 after the war ended. People were very poor at that time. Women were especially living with much hardship, as they had to manage to take care of their children and other family members. Speaking of women’s economic conditions, I think that they have made significant improvements in their lives since the mid-1980s. Their lives have also been much improved in terms of emotional (tinh thần) well-being and their status in the family and in society. In the feudal periods, women were considered ‘baby-making’ machines. They had to move to their husbands’ houses, where they didn’t have anyone other than their in-laws, thus they had to accept everything, and many men took advantage of this to abuse their wives. Since 1975, women were helped by the State to understand their rights under the law. But the economic conditions were very bad at that time. Besides working in the cooperative, they had to grow vegetable, raise chickens and pigs, and so on, to make additional income for their families.

The heaviest responsibility is still to look after the children and to cook, clean and other things for the household. Many men often got drunk and beat their wives and children. But things have started to get better around 1985, after the cooperative was dissolved and women had more opportunities to earn income, especially incense making. With industrialization and modernization, our economic situation has been improved. We can afford to buy household necessities. Men drank less and many had stopped beating their wives. Gender relations have become more harmonious. But we still have to work hard for our families, especially our children.’

In a focus group discussion with local women, the older generation often talked about younger women as having a much better life, not only in terms of economic condition, but also their status in the family. One woman said:
‘Young women often don’t know how our lives were years ago. Their lives are too happy now compared to us when we were at their age. ‘Being daughter-in-laws’ (lâm đâu) alone could make our lives very hard. We had to please each and every one in the house. The most difficult ones were mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. Now young women don’t have to go through this anymore. Husband and wife can have their own place and their relationship is more equal, not ‘husband is king, wife is slave’ (chồng chúa vợ tôi) like it was before.’

However, there were a few cases when I could not meet the women for interviews with the reason being given that ‘her husband does not allow it.’ Although this should not be over-generalized, it can be seen that, in some cases, men are still the dominant decision-makers in the family.

The positive changes in gender relations do not seem to have been as achieved equally in rural areas as they have been in Tân Tao commune. Interviews with migrants coming from rural areas reveal that, although the indigenous aspects of gender equality still exist, the influence of Confucianism is much stronger than in urban areas. An excerpt from a life history of a 40-year-old seasonal migrant woman from Long An thus reports:

‘Speaking of my ‘being a daughter-in-law’ (lâm đâu), my parents-in-law are very difficult, because they are like ‘old people’ [i.e. being strict, feudal, Confucian types]. I always have to lower my voice, get permission each time I am leaving or coming home (đi thưa về trình), must take care of all housework perfectly, and so on. I cannot defend myself, because they would say that I am stubborn. Sometimes, I get upset about his parents, but I have to accept the situation, because I love my husband and my child. My husband does not say anything when his parents scold me, because he is torn between parents and wife. He is miserable and so am I. He often says that his parents are old and would not live much longer, so I just need to try a little longer. I think I just have to accept my fate, because my parents married me to him.

When at home, I get up early in the morning, clean the house, feed the pigs, and then go to work in the field. My husband does not help much around the house. He only reads the paper and watches TV. I don’t want to ask him for help because his parents would not like that. After my parents passed away, my siblings asked me to leave my husband and come to live with them. They knew my situation, that I had to work hard because my husband is disabled and not happy because my parents-in-law are difficult. They are all
better-off. Sometimes, when they ran into me, they used to give me some money. All my clothes now were from them; I never bought any clothes for myself, because I spent all the money I had for my parents-in-law. But because I refused to leave my husband to come live with my siblings, they don’t talk to me anymore. Sometimes, when I see other women’s husbands can do a lot of things while mine can’t do much, I am so sad and feel the burden… (crying) I think that I will have to support my husband until he dies.

When I come here, I see that rural women are more restricted than those in the city. Back in a rural home, good girls must stay home to take care of all the housework, always lower their voice, treat their parents well, and work hard to prepare events [wedding, death anniversaries, etc.] They have to stay home all the time, because older people think that if they can go out, they will be trapped by other men’s nice words [i.e. losing virginity and reputation]. Therefore, they don’t know anything. But I can see that here, girls are more outgoing, more confident of themselves, because they can go here and there. [Question: How about rural boys?] Boys can go anywhere they want, because they have nothing for us to worry about.

It can be expected that, with more open exchange between urban and rural areas through migration, gender relations in rural areas will change gradually in a positive way. Raising awareness and overcoming gender stereotypes and gender discrimination is particularly important for social development, along with providing legal protection for women and girls.

2. Changing gender roles in family and in the society

(a) Perception on economic roles of women and men

In the context of đaổi mới, many women have now proved themselves to be capable of taking on new jobs, and of providing additional financial support their family, while some men have experienced greater difficulties in adapting to the new socio-economic and vocational environment. This has significantly changed people’s perceptions on who should be the contributory breadwinners in the family. Table 35 shows that more people now consider that both husband and wife should be regarded as ‘breadwinners’, although there are still some who see men as having to be the main breadwinner. A few see women as breadwinners, and these are especially women or girls who believe that women have more and better opportunities in the new economic environment. Men, especially male
residents, tend to insist on their role as and responsibility as the primary breadwinner, and migrants more often tend to consider both husband and wife to be potentially equal income earners. Children also believe it is natural and useful to have both parents working, although some still insist that the primary role is that of fathers.

Table 35. Tân Tao Commune: Perception on Women’s and Men’s Economic Role

*Who should be breadwinners in the family? Husband, wife, or both.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total (by row)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>3 (38%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
<td>17 (71%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>9 (75%)</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (by column)</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (100%)</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
<td>2 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author’s Survey.*

Research results from CSSH also confirm that as many as 98% of respondents agreed that ‘women need to contribute financially to their family’. In all men’s focus group discussions, the majority admitted that, in the context of the new market economy, women need to take paid work in addition to performing their traditional household responsibilities. This is one of the major reasons why many women choose to work as petty traders or incense makers, because this allows them flexible schedules and opportunities to work from home, and this fulfills their double roles in production and reproduction. Men and unmarried women often have more occupational mobility, and are more willing to have fixed and full-time working hours.

(b) Perception on domestic roles of women and men

In the changing socio-economic condition of Tân Tao commune, women’s economic roles have become increasingly important. As mentioned above, they are expected to contribute financially to the household. This has also been facilitated by the availability of new income-earning opportunities for women. While it is common now to expect women to participate in the labour force to make incomes for their families, women are
still expected to be mainly responsible for domestic work. Table 36 provides interesting data on people’s perception on the issue of household responsibilities. Women and men have basically the same view that, women and girls should be responsible for household work (about 75% of respondents), while others think it should be both (about 25%). Some people said that ‘Housework definitely belongs to women. They are good at it.’ Children also tend to see housework as naturally belonging to women and girls. There were two exceptional cases where the respondents believed that men/boys should assume household responsibilities. In the first case, a local girl said that since her mother could earn more money selling goods in the market than her father who only had unstable labour work, he should do housework so that her mother could make more money. In the second case, a migrant woman said that rural women could adapt to an urban setting better than men, therefore the men should stay home and do housework while the women go to work in cities to send home money for the family. She also said that this arrangement was also good because it would be easier for men than women to apply for credit back home because their names are on the ownership papers.

**Table 36. Tân Tao Commune: Household Responsibilities**

*Should women/girls and/or men/boys assume household responsibilities?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Residents</td>
<td>Migrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women/girls</td>
<td>5 (63%)</td>
<td>19 (79%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>8 (67%)</td>
<td>3 (75%)</td>
<td>10 (83%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (67%)</td>
<td>53 (74%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men/boys</td>
<td>1 (12%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 (8%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>2 (25%)</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>3 (25%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>2 (17%)</td>
<td>1 (50%)</td>
<td>2 (33%)</td>
<td>17 (23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Author's Survey.*

Migrants more often tend to share housework between women/girls and men/boys to a higher degree than residents (about 30% compared to 20% of locals). A young unmarried migrant woman who worked in a factory said: ‘Everyday I get up at 6:00, start working at 7:30, and go home around 7:00 or 8:00 at night, depending on how much work there is, sometimes after 10:00. I don’t have much time to do housework, so if I get married, my husband has to help me.’ A young migrant man who worked in a small production
unit said: ‘My wife also works outside home so we can have more money. I’d rather help her with housework than that she stay home. We need money to send home and to save for ourselves.’ Similarly, a middle-age migrant woman said that: ‘Back home, women have to do all the housework. But things are different here. Everybody has to work to make money. Husband and wife should discuss a plan so that they both can earn money, and the husband needs to help his wife with housework.’ This reveals that migrants tend to be more pragmatic since most of them are poorer and are thus more willing to adapt to the new situation. However, as many of them did not have their spouses living in the commune, their responses could be idealized and self-serving, which might not be the reality once their families start to live in an urban setting.

The survey by CSSH also shows that 38.7% of women and 33.6% of men agree that no other family members (husband, children, or relatives) could take over the wife’s special role in the family. At the same time, 32.6% of women and 27.6% of men considered women to be mostly or exclusively to be ‘responsibile for housework’. Interestingly, women also tended to agree to a lesser extent with the statement that both husband and wife should be responsible for housework. It was often explained that women were ‘raised to be hard-working’, to ‘assume all household responsibilities’, to ‘give rather than take’, and to ‘sacrifice for other family members’. And, even when men do tend to be more willing to assume certain responsibilities in sharing housework with their wife, their views on this are often that ‘we would help with housework if our wife is very tired or sick, already busy with their income-earning job (while we do not have any paid work)’, and that ‘as soon as we find work, our wife should manage to stay home’, and so arrangements would go back to the way they were.

With the increasing availability of electricity, gas and household appliances, women’s household workload for families above the poverty line has been significantly reduced. Women still have to do most or all housework, as well as take care of children. In general (as often stated by women and some men), men still do not share housework, whether they are breadwinners or not. Facing the fact when their husbands are no longer breadwinners, but still make the decisions in the family, women would find some ways to care for their families (which sometimes seem impossible to outsiders). As many women also take on work and other productive roles outside the home, they do not have as much
time to fully take care of their children. Relying on grandparents or relatives is the main strategy that women choose when this is an available option. With less work thanks to the availability of affordable household appliances and services such as ready-to-serve food, but taking on increasing income-earning activities, it is unclear whether their overall work burden relative to men increases or decreases, and would vary considerably by individual household.

Women's burden of household responsibilities in addition to demanding work schedule is often present in people's mind, especially younger women. A newly-wed young teacher with college education provided very interesting insights on the issues of gender roles:

'Sometimes, I can feel the inequality between women and men. For example, I have this music teacher who is very famous in her area of expertise. I have a friend who knows her family. She often told me that, in the family of this famous teacher, in addition to her busy schedule of teaching in schools, writing books, teaching in private classes to earn extra income, etc, she still has to fulfill her domestic responsibilities of grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, preparing events, keeping up good relationships with relatives and neighbours, and so on. Meanwhile, all her husband does everyday is taking a water bucket to the garden and slowly waters his plants. I have nothing against her husband; he is a quiet and respectable person. But sometimes I think that he could have helped her maybe with just some housework in order to lessen her burden a little.

When I talked about this to my friends, one male friend said that this is the way their family operates, and that it is alright as long as the family is stable. Another male friend said that even though the husband does not do much, his presence is essential for the family, and the wife needs him to be there. I don't really agree with these opinions. If the husband knows that his wife needs him for the family to be stable and complete, so he doesn't have to do anything, not even to earn income, then this is no different from blackmail. The way I see this family, and many others like it, is that there might be something else about this family that we don't know of, and that many men are still not willing to do housework because it is considered women's work by the whole society.

[Question: How about cases when it is the women who do not do much?] I think there must be cases like that too. But I only personally see cases where it is the men not contributing. Maybe my generation is different. I would like to see my husband be more active in both paid work and housework, not caring too much about the traditions which dictate whether it is men's or women's responsibility.'
Individual interviews with young women and men also reveal that the younger generation is more open and flexible about household responsibilities. A young man said: 'Today, both women and men need to work, so that the family’s finance can be better. If there is no one home during the day, children can be sent to daycare, and ready-to-serve food can be bought home.' Young women are also confident that their husbands are more willing to help with housework compared to the previous generation. 'They [men] know that we also have to go out to work to bring home money, so they try to help a little.'
3. Intra-household decision-making analysis

Decision-making in Vietnamese families seems to be as simple as the saying ‘Together, husband and wife can dry out the Eastern ocean’ (Thuận vợ, thuận chồng, tất biên Đồng cống can). Both women and men in the commune often referred this saying to affirm equal voices between husband and wife. For instance, on the issue of decision on credit, a man said in a women-men focus group discussion on in his family:

‘In my family, I am the main one responsible for farm work, and my wife makes incense. We often borrow from the commune. When I need to borrow for the next cropping season, I talk to my wife and then we decide on how much to borrow. Similarly, when she needs to borrow for her incense inputs, she talks to me and we decide together. Husband and wife always have to be in agreement. No one should decide alone.’

Many other women and men in the sample had similar statements. The survey on decision on credit by CSSH shows result consistent to these interview findings (Table 37). On average, about 52% of respondents agreed that both husband and wife should make a joint decision, while 32% said it should be the wife’s, and 14%, the husband’s. This result, however, could overstate women’s decision-making power in the family, due to the fact that women are traditionally considered to be most responsible for managing the family’s finances.

Table 37. Tân Tạo Commune: Decision-Making on Loan in Full-Couple Households According to the Sex of Household Head

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person deciding to borrow loans</th>
<th>Sex of household head</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.5 %</td>
<td>8.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29.0 %</td>
<td>50.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both husband &amp; wife</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53.6 %</td>
<td>41.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.9 %</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).*
Intra-household decision-making is one of the most complex issues in socio-economic research, especially regarding who has access and control over resources and the allocation of benefits. In Tân Tạo commune, the complex intertwining of traditional customs, in which women play a crucial role in the family, and Confucianism, which tends to give men absolute power in household decisions, can make a selective analysis appear subjective and unilateral, if this dualism is not taken into account. In this commune, what respondents said about decision-making power between husband and wife might often sound contradictory, confused and illogical, but this reflects an interplay of the dualistic ethic. Initially, both women and men would spontaneously say that it is the man who makes all the decisions, but further discussion can then reveal that, in practice, decision-making involves both husband and wife, or even that the woman can sometimes have a stronger influence, and it is not necessary that women should have a 'lower voice' (see Box 22). Women’s power over men in family decision-making is often referred to by using the saying ‘Husband’s orders are drowned by wife’s gong’ (Lệnh ông không hàng công bà).

**Box 22. Focus Group Discussions on Household Decision-Making**

Woman 2: It is normal that husbands make final decisions. They know more than us, because they learn to deal with important things, and they often go outside [the home or the commune] to meet people so they have broader experience. We never go anywhere far away, and we are only involved in activities around the house...

*Question: Do you all agree?*

Woman 4: Of course, men are the ones who make final decisions...

Woman 1: It is so obvious...

Woman 2: But they would discuss things with us, we talk and decide together what is the best thing to do.

Woman 6: Two heads are better than one. There are things I know but my husband doesn’t, and there are things my husband knows but I don’t, so we always discuss things then make decisions together...

Woman 3: Husband and wife are equally important, so of course we discuss and then make a decision together. It is not as if my husband doesn’t discuss with me and just go ahead to do what he wants...

*Question: But in reality, it is not always clear what is best. What if husband and wife think differently? In such cases, who would have the final decision?*

Woman 1: That wouldn’t happen. We know what is best. That’s why we need to discuss everything to show to each other what is best...

Woman 2: I think that if husband and wife are in disagreement, other family members can help them see
what is best...

Woman 5: I think I understand the question. I think in cases where the husband is strongly insisting on his idea which we women know is wrong, we have to make sure that he gives up his idea, because it is always the wife who has to suffer the consequences if anything goes wrong. Men can only do certain things in repairing the damages, so women have to bear all the rest.

Women 7: Of course, if you know that your husband has a history of making wrong decisions, you have to watch out and insist on your way being the one that is followed. No matter what happens, you are the one responsible for your children and also for your husband.

Women 2: Yes, we always try to make sure things go the right way, even if it goes against our husbands’ wishes.

The interview with the focus group of men shows similar results. Although men said that they should make ‘important decisions’ because they know more and have more experience, they also admit that there are many things in which their wife could make better decisions. (Then I told them the joke that some men are willing to let their wives make ‘important decisions’, but the men have to decide ‘what is important’.)

Source: Author’s Notes – Women’s and Men’s Focus Groups.

However, survey results by CSSH offer a different picture. It appeared that men would have slightly more power in general household matters. Figure 7 shows that, although husbands seem to have a slightly larger decision-making power in the family, there is always a high level of participation from wives. The only exception is when it comes to choices of occupation. Wives do not have much say in husbands’ choice of work, and neither would husbands have much say in the wives’ choice (but there would seem to be a somewhat higher women’s influence on men’s choice than vice versa).

For migrants, however, the intertwining of indigenous traditions of equal decision-making power between husband and wife and the Confucian arrangement of men assuming most of the power also exists. To a certain extent, the Confucian influence on gender differentials in decision-making power is higher in rural areas. A 40-year-old female migrant expressed the duality as follows (notice her initial statement about equality, and then her rational for men’s higher power):

Speaking of decision-making in a rural home, husband and wife have equal voice. This is the ‘rural way’. They discuss the issues and then decide together. Men decide big things, and women decide little things. For example, to prepare for an event, men decide how many tables, and then women decide how to prepare these tables. Or, women take care of little work in the field and raising livestock, and men look after the selling of rice,
buffaloes and pigs. Men make better decisions than women because they know more.

[Question: What if men make wrong decisions on important matters while women could have made better decisions?] You have to accept men’s decisions anyway, because you are a woman.

Figure 7. Tân Tảo Commune: Decision-Making Levels for Different Activities in Households

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

The intertwining of conflicting practices thus makes the assessment on gender decision-making in family very unclear. Although men’s identities as ‘breadwinners’ have been somewhat eroded, they are still considered to be the primary decision-makers in the family. In some cases, women have higher decision-making power because it is agreed that they are ‘more financially capable or responsible’, but in general, the overall process and effects are sufficiently unclear to obscure reaching a simple definitive conclusion. This is especially the case when the social and economic situations are changing so rapidly, as access to resources also changes in various ways, and it becomes unclear who ‘has control’ in the new situation. With the on-going changes in gender roles, when women work outside and become breadwinners, it does not inevitably lead to women’s empowerment, as it could more definitely be said has occurred in the Western evolutionary experience.
4. Persistent gender stereotypes and discrimination

Results from interviews and focus group discussion showed that gender stereotypes did not seem to have seriously affected gender equality in Tân Tạo commune. People often referred to the slogan ‘women and men are equal’ (nữ bình đẳng) to describe current gender practices in the commune. ‘Today, women and men, girls and boys, have the same rights and responsibilities. Discrimination between them no longer exists.’ This strong and positive attitude has also been attributed to the socialist agenda of raising awareness and promoting gender equality among the people.

Older and middle-age people acknowledged that women and men today were considered equal in terms of education, employment, and other social and economic advancements. ‘If you have talents and work hard, you will succeed, whether you are a woman or a man.’ Children also said that girls and boys were treated the same way in school. A young female student said:

‘I have narrowed down my career choices to two: working for the post office, or being a teacher. These two types of work are suitable for women. [Question: Do you foresee any differences in the way women and men are treated in your career choices?] No, in the two career choices I have chosen, there is no discrimination between women and men.’

However, further discussion and observation revealed that, in an invisible and unspoken form, gender stereotypes still play a considerable role in social practice. Women were often considered emotional, or to lack confidence, or to ‘see the trees, not the wood’, and thus are unable to make good decisions. Men, on the other hand, were considered rational, strong willed, capable of ‘seeing the whole picture’, and thus of making good decisions. Many women and men said that, therefore women were more suitable for easy jobs such as housework, incense making and petty trading, while men could go cope with more complex work. The dichotomy between domestic and public spheres was still very strong in people’s perception in Tan Tao commune.

However, among younger generation respondents, the dichotomy seemed to be weaker. It was often said in a compromising way that ‘women should do domestic work and a little of the work in society’, and that ‘men should do more work in the society.’
Interviews with primary and secondary students in Tân Tạo commune also yields perceptions about what is considered appropriate for boys and for girls, drawn from materials they have learned from schoolbooks. While many felt shy, embarrassed, or intimidated talking about this issue, others gave specific examples of how boys and girls are presented differently in their textbooks.

Box 23. Some Examples Given by Children in Tân Tạo Commune on Images of Females and Males Illustrated in Textbooks

T., girl, grade 5: ‘Men are always strong and they do heavy work. They are heroes. Girls can stay home and do easy things around the house. They take care of their family.’

V., girl, grade 9: ‘I see that women always think about their family, because men have other important things to do. All girls have to do is learn how to behave and help their family. Being a boy is easier; no one judges them.’

N., boy, grade 8: ‘I think that the images of ‘female’ and ‘male’ in textbooks are very different. Men and boys have more skills to do difficult things. Women and girls think more about their parents and children.’

Source: Author’s Notes

Another issue of gender stereotypes and discrimination relates to the social phenomenon of single women. In this commune, single women were typically women with less economic advantages, and less opportunities to meet future partners, such as female factory workers. In general, single women over 30 were considered unlikely to be able to find a partner. It was easier for other people to talk about this issue, while single women themselves would rather not discuss their situation. The social stigma associated with their status often made them withdraw from social activities, and especially from discussing issues related to their personal lives.

Although there were a few single women in the sample, I was not able to conduct full interviews with all of them. Only one woman was willing to answer the questions, while the others refused to be interviewed when the issue of their single status came up. My ethical concerns about the possibility of causing emotional discomfort or harm to them prevented me from going further when there were signs of them being uncomfortable in the interviews.
The woman who was willing to discuss her single status was a lower-secondary school teacher. She said:

‘After finishing high school, I went to teachers’ training college and became a teacher. Of course, I then would like to meet someone and get married. But I only meet people at work. Many of them are women. There were also men, but I didn’t find anyone. Years after years passed, and I am in my thirties now. People say that it is difficult for women over thirty to find someone. But perhaps I wasn’t meant to meet anyone. Perhaps this is my fate (số). [Question: How does your single status affect your work and your life?] Well, I don’t have much problem at work, because the students are always well-behaved and they are my joy. But sometimes I have heard that single teachers are often ‘difficult’ on their students because they are not happy, it hurts. At home, I am often busy with the work I take home, so I don’t have the time to feel sad or anything.’

Some older women offered diverse views on this subject. Some said that sometimes it was better not to have a husband if he was abusive and/or involved in social evils such as drinking and gambling. ‘If they have husbands like that, they just make their lives more miserable. So they are better off staying single.’ Others, however, said that having two to share things in life is still better. They also expressed their concern about female factory workers who had to work long hours and did not have much opportunity to meet men. ‘These women are likely to remain single, because they don’t have time to go out. I have seen those in similar situations who are now in their 30s, and that’s it, it is then too late.’

Despite a small number of well-to-do single urban women who remain single by choice, the majority of single women in the commune (as well as in other parts of the country) are in economically disadvantaged positions and are single by circumstances, not by choice. The social and psychological impacts of being ‘left on the shelf’ and unable to produce children to fulfill ‘God’s mission for women’ have been found to be distressful for them in previous research on single women (Lê Thi 1996, Nguyễn Minh Hòa 1998). In reality, these fears not only affected single women, but also married women who had hastily entered marriage or remained in abusive relationships due to their perceived lack of leverage in the ‘marriage market’. Therefore, the cultural expectations and gender stereotyping that ‘women must marry before a certain age’, and must have children, have strongly affected the well-being of many women, especially in demographic situations.
where there is a significantly lower percentage of marriage-bracket male population, due to higher male mortality in wars and higher male migration overseas, or in situations where women lack mobility and/or opportunities to interact with wider social groups.

4. Social evils

My efforts to collect data on social evils in the commune did not turn out as expected. Although the issue of social evils was often talked about in all discussions at both group and individual levels, the problem seemed not to be adequately addressed in commune reports. The number of incidents of social evils in these reports, mostly relating to drug abuse, prostitution and gambling, was often listed as 0 or 1. When I tried to discuss the issue with commune leaders, some acknowledged the problem but could not provide data, while others came up with responses like ‘The people in this commune are good. Those prostitutes and drug addicts are from somewhere else, so we cannot have data on them.’

The issue of social evils was often addressed in newspapers, but as regards to Tân Tao commune, I could only rely on my sample which is clearly not sufficient to analyze the problem in the whole commune, and from which I could only gather some data on drug abuse, alcohol abuse and gambling (while getting information on prostitution is much harder, although the problem is clearly widespread). Of the 72 people interviewed, I encountered two cases in which the mothers were devastated because their young sons were drug addicts, two other cases in which the interviewee’s family had someone involved in drugs (with lesser impact on the interviewees), and three cases where gambling was involved, of which one was a female gambler. In a personal interview, a woman addressed the issue of young men’s unemployment and involvement in social evils:

‘We have to say that, since the commune is urbanized, our lives are getting much better. But when you have one thing, you lose something else (duơc cái nay, mất cái khác). Many young men in this commune are in trouble, and we need to worry about their future. Everyday, they hang out in coffee shops, smoking cigarettes, fighting, gambling... Any gamble, from a soccer bet (bái đồ đá banh) to cock fighting (đại gà), playing cards (with a game call ‘tiền lên’), or dominos. They don’t want to work for a few hundred thousand dong a month, since it is not even enough to buy coffee and cigarettes. There are not many
good people around, while bad people are everywhere; therefore it is easy for these young men to be lured into social evils.'

Box 24. A Desperate Mother with a Drug-Addicted Young Son

In my list of households to visit for personal interviews, among the poor ones, I was directed by the Hamlet’s WU Head to a house of a 54-year-old woman. As soon as I entered the house, I could feel the sad, desperate atmosphere. I sat down with the woman, trying to cheer her up by offering nice comments on the furniture in the house. However, she might have known the reason for me being there to talk to her (about her addicted son, which I did not know in advance was the reason for her family being poor and torn apart).

She changed the subject of the conversation after five minutes, and started talking about her son. She said that he was a good student until he was in grade 10, and she was hoping that he would then have enough education to get a stable job. But then he started to steal things in the house to sell, gradually he stole almost everything, from the radio to the TV set. She learned that he became a drug addict, but tried to believe it wasn’t true or that he would give it up soon. Now that she knew she might have to lose her son in the drug problem, she was told he needed to be sent to a rehabilitation camp, but it costs money and she could not afford that amount of money. She was crying, and the Hamlet’s WU Head told me that we should come back some other time. I felt as if I’d brought up great pain to her.

Source: Author’s Notes

Prostitution was considered one of the most widespread social evils in the commune, from individual interviews and focus group discussions within the sample. However, within the scope of this research, I was not able either to collect quantitative data on the issue or to talk to any woman in this group individually about it. Prostitution is still considered a taboo topic in Vietnamese society, and thus prostitutes are often ‘invisible’: it is often unknown to the community where they are from, where they live, or any information about their families. Some people in the sample suggested that they ‘might’ know some women working in this area, but doubted that these women would agree to an interview. I decided not to pursue these interviews, as I had ethical concerns about it (since prostitution is still considered illegal in Viet Nam), and instead focussed on what people would say about it.

As mentioned above, most local people said that prostitutes were coming from other areas. They said that if local women engaged in prostitution, neighbours would know. Most had sympathy for these women, especially the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. One young girl said ‘It is poverty and their family situation that pushed them into this kind of
work. I wish that the commune could help them find another job.’ A middle-age migrant woman also said ‘It might be their miserable fate. No one wants to do this for a living.’ Only a few people would blame them for getting involved in this social evil. However, one older local woman said: ‘These girls don’t want to work hard. They just want to wear pretty clothes and colourful make-up. Sooner or later, HIV/AIDS is the price they’ve got to pay for what they are doing now.’ Some women were also concerned about men visiting prostitutes and infecting themselves and their wives.

The issue of married men visiting prostitutes in Viet Nam, although being condemned as violating the traditional ethics code concerning having sexual activities outside marriage, is nevertheless quite widely considered ‘normal’. There is a statement often heard that ‘Men might go to other women for their needs, but they always go back to their wife.’ A common joke about men visiting prostitutes is that, wives are compared to ‘rice’ (com), a regular daily food, and prostitutes are compared to ‘noodle soup’ (phở), a kind of food that people only eat on special occasions for a change in taste. In general, it appears that part of the reason for the widespread prostitution in this commune in particular (and in other populated areas in Viet Nam) is that the society does not impose or expect a strict ethic regarding men’s sexual behaviour; another reason is lax law enforcement.

Regarding the issue of alcohol abuse, many women in the sample said that their husband and/or adult sons drank on a regular basis. Sometimes, they said, this caused nuisances for the family and the neighbourhood, but to them, this was not usually a serious problem (except for cases such as those cited in Box 25). Interestingly, there seemed to be a consensus among men and even among some women in the sample that men are ‘entitled’ to drink and to get drunk because it helped relieve their stress and forget the life-difficulties they were facing, especially trying to earn money for their families. Other said they drank as a way to socialize with their friends, or to find prospective business partners, or to celebrate each time they earned good money or received a promotion.

From a cultural perspective, it has been said that since men are expected to be the main bread-winners, the decision-makers, the heads of families, and thus overall, the strategic thinkers, they need to drink to socialize and to relieve stress. In addition, it is often the norm that women eat last, and let their husband (and children) have the best food first,
along with alcohol for men and adult sons. Therefore, it seems like men drinking is socially and culturally acceptable or even expected, as in the saying ‘Nam vò tiêu như kỹ vò phong’ (A man who does not drink is like a flag without the wind). From this viewpoint, those who abuse alcohol to the extent that causes damages to their families (such as spending too much time and money on alcohol, precipitating family conflicts, physically and verbally abusing their wife and children, or getting themselves into disabling or fatal accidents) do not often receive the proper blame and punishment, but rather are allowed excuses (such as ‘having no other forms of entertainment’, ‘drinking to forget a hard life’, or blaming accidents on fate), while the women are expected remain sober, and to take care of the damages, so as to maintain their family’s everyday operation.

**Box 25. Drunk Driving and its Consequences**

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Tân Tảo commune, when I went to see the WU Head of a hamlet, I was politely directed to attend the funeral of a 28-year-old man who died while driving his motorbike under the influence of alcohol. His mother told me that he had just been promoted in his government job and was supposed to earn a much higher income. After the party to celebrate the promotion, he drove home and had the fatal accident. I was particularly impressed by the way she calmly socialized with other people and served them food and tea, and also discretely took care of the money given by guests for the family. She fit the very image of Vietnamese women as ‘internal masters’ of families in a conscientious, soft, and sometimes invisible, yet very effective way.

Another thing that caught my attention was, that the conversations among guests regarding the man’s death were mostly about the facts that he was about to make good money to take care of his parents, and that he died when he was too young, while there was not much emphasis on the destructive impact of excessive drinking and how to prevent it. This could be due to the consensus that men are ‘entitled’ to drink as a way to cope with their stress, although it is still clear to everybody that the law prohibits drunken driving.

*Source: Author’s Notes.*

The implications of men being ‘entitled’ and ‘expected’ to drink from a cultural viewpoint are two-fold: (a) while moderate drinking might be beneficial at the individual, family and social levels, the negative impacts of men’s alcohol abuse usually falls on women’s shoulders, and (b) the government’s efforts in curbing alcohol abuse need to address the cultural aspects of men’s drinking, to change the perceptions, and to impose
strict punishment on violations. Preventing alcohol abuse can help many women, especially in poor families, to better mobilize their resources, and reduce family conflicts and domestic violence, and can help improve the overall physical and mental health of the community, and cut down the numbers of accidents and fatalities.

7.5 Legal protection: Ownership rights, domestic violence and social harassment against females

1. Ownership rights. The issue of ownership rights was one of the most difficult to discuss with local people, even to raise the issue and especially to extract comments and opinions from the people on its implications. The most common responses were that, 'the man is the pillar (breadwinner) of the family, the head of the household, so his name is also on the family's land certificate, house ownership title, or and all other ownership papers'. There are also popular sayings ‘husband owns assets, and wife contributes labour’ (côa chồng cống vợ), and ‘husband and wife are in harmony’ (thuận vợ thuận chồng). Therefore, it was widely considered that ‘Husband and wife work together for the benefits of the family, so it doesn’t matter whose name in the paper.’

I often had to weigh the benefits of ‘educating’ the people on this issue with the ethical concern about the possibility of causing conflicts by raising it. The people seemed to still strongly believe in the harmony between husband and wife, and in community intervention as forms to protect women from being excluded from claiming a proper share of household assets, rather than having to resort to legal measures. ‘Husband and wife trust each other, so the wife doesn’t have to worry. There is also the whole community around them, so the husband won’t get away easily if he wants to take all the assets.’

However, a few people, especially women who had participated in the WU, had a clear and thorough understanding on the issue. A woman in a personal interview expressed this as follows:

'I used to participate in the Hamlet’s WU, so I know that there are many women who are not aware about their rights [and responsibilities] in terms of marriage and ownership. This results from their low educational level. First of all, many women don’t even have a marriage certificate, even though they have a husband with two or three children. This
puts them at a tremendous disadvantage when the family is about to break up, because their names do not appear on any paper. Of course, when things go smoothly in the family, no one would think about it, but what if things don’t go well? Second, because land certificates and other ownership papers are in their husbands’ names, when they go to court in a divorce case, it’s hard for women to get any share. The WU should educate them about their rights so as to protect their future, especially the future of their children.’

Ensuring women’s ownership rights is essential to protect them in case of family break-up, and also to enable them to have legal access to credit and other services. However, while people still rely on cultural practices to govern the issue, the introduction of legal measures (i.e. to add the wife’s name on the papers) needs to be carried out in such a way that still encourages and maintains the traditions of family harmony and of ethical community intervention, and, in practice, facilitate women in their access to services. There is no point to enforcing a ‘mechanical’ addition of women’s names to a piece of paper, if in reality, women are still denied access due to other cultural factors (e.g. a husband still has to agree on to loan application for the wife to receive it.)

2. Domestic violence. It is difficult to gain accurate data and information on sensitive issues such as domestic violence. It is almost impossible to collect quantitative data on the issue, and any qualitative data is very likely to be subject to personal bias. Older women, who tend to have more experience with domestic violence in their neighbourhoods, were often able to provide good insights on the issue. Most young, unmarried women also recognized that domestic violence was still a widespread problem and needed to be curbed. I had to be much more subtle when discussing this with men, and only discussed the issue with a few of them in personal interviews.

There is significant evidence that domestic violence has been decreasing due to the reduced levels of economic hardship in the commune. This was confirmed over and over in most personal interviews and focus group discussions involving various age and sex groups. A retired woman said:

‘After 1975, when we were in the cooperative period, our lives were very difficult. Women had to struggle to work in the fields and had to take care of their children. Some men, out of desperation, drank heavily and beat their wives. Many women went through much hardship and had to endure violence during these years. But things got better, especially since the cooperative was dissolved and women had more opportunities to earn income to take care of their families. Men also started to behave better. They drank less, went to work to make money and helped their wives with chores at home. Now things are definitely much better.’

But new social and economic pressures can create new tensions within families. The issue depends critically on the degree to which both the victim and the abuser internalize the cultural norms on the issue. It is still common in Viet Nam for many to believe that men have the right to ‘discipline’ their wives. The following article conveys a thoughtful insight that is pertinent to the situation in Tân Tao commune.
Box 26. Wife Beating: Why does It Still Exist?

Wife beating is an evil which has been addressed in newspapers for the last 19 years, and has been strongly addressed by the Women’s Union at all levels. However, this evil still exists, despite public opposition, especially in remote communes in six suburban districts [of HCMC]. In Tần Tảo commune, Bình Chánh district, we recorded that, on average, the commune Women’s Union had to intervene in three to four incidents each month...

*Whose fault?* The most common reason leading to husband beating wife is that the husband is an addict, or gets involved in bad things such as gambling, drinking, drugs, adultery, or jealousy... The case of Ms. Huỳnh Thị Trong, 36 years old, of Tần Tảo commune is that, every year before and after Lunar New Year, she was severely beaten by her husband just because she prevented him from selling household possessions to get money for card gambling (*đánh bài*). When we recently returned to the commune, we learned that her ‘beating season’ was now ‘open’ to the whole year, because her husband had stopped playing cards (only popular in the New Year) and moved to lottery gambling (*số đề*).

Of course, looking at cases of wife beating, we see that, on occasion, the wife may be ‘at fault’ to some degree, such as being aware that the man had serious problems but still marrying him; being economically or psychologically ‘dependent’; being overly jealous; and nagging excessively or unnecessarily.

*Private matter, or common responsibility?* First we have to make clear that wife beating causing injury violates Criminal Law... However, in addition to not raising people’s awareness of the law, local governments and mass organizations in many places still do not pay enough attention, or give too meagre or token punishment to men who beat their wives... [The article then cited three cases: the first one in which the ward police gave the man a fine of only 20,000 *đồng* (equivalent of CDN $2), the second in which the media intervened and suggested to local government that the man be put into a labour camp for six months, but this still does not happen; and a third case in which neighbours were too afraid to intervene, and the ward Women’s Union and police forced the man to sign a paper to promise not to beat his wife again, but he still does.]

*Is there a solution?* It is true that local governments have, on many occasions, intervened in wife beating cases. But in a majority of cases, the intervention has not been effective. Very few cases were prosecuted accordingly to the law. Therefore, we recommend that local government and police need to apply the law strictly to those who violate it... In addition, the Farmers’ Association, the Fatherland Front, the Youth Union and the Workers’ Union have a responsibility to raise awareness among their members of the issue and the legal penalties. The Women’s Union, particularly, needs not only to help women with advice on how to subtly persuade their husband to behave, but also to educate them about their rights under the law, that wife beating is a violation of the law, and that a wife has the right to bring her husband to justice if he violates this law.

*Source:* Lan Thanh, Báo Phụ nữ (Women’s Newspaper), April 28, 1994
The perspective of older women on domestic violence is often influenced by both Confucianism, which states that women need to submit to their husbands and that husbands should ‘discipline’ their wives, and by indigenous traditions of an ‘equal and harmonious relationship’ between husband and wife who should respect each other. With regard to these contrasting influences, they tend to focus on women as having an important role and responsibility to maintain family harmony. An older woman said:

‘Women have to follow the four [Confucius] virtues, including ‘ngôn’ (modest speaking). Men are known for their temper, so it is up to the women to maintain a good atmosphere in the family. The worst thing is when the husband is having a temper and the wife is also angry. She should wait until he is in a good mood to talk to him and show him right from wrong. Men should teach their wives to behave. Women should follow the four [Confucian] virtues. Then the family will be harmonious. Everything must be in agreement between husband and wife (thuần vợ thuần chồng).

I see that physical fighting, often when a husband beats his wife, tends to occur when the woman tries to talk back to her husband. This wouldn’t happen if the wife didn’t do this. Fighting also occurs when the family is in financial trouble because the woman uses grocery money to gamble, has to borrow money to buy food for the family, and thus falls into huge debt.’

In terms of solution to domestic violence, she said:

‘I think that the WU needs to raise awareness among women about their rights not to be physically assaulted. As well, the Farmers’ Association needs to raise awareness among their male members that wife beating is violating the law. I was active in the WU, and I always helped in this way in my neighbourhood. When I know of a husband beating his wife, I wait until later and tell the husband in a soft manner that what he did was wrong. [Question: Will he listen?] Of course. And I’ll try tell him not to do it again.’

Domestic violence is apparently an issue not only in Tân Tao commune, but also in most other parts of Viet Nam, as well as in most other countries. The socio-economic factors which can affect the seriousness of the issue are therefore important to consider, curbing the problem and allowing women to live in a violence-free environment.
Table 38. Tân Tao Commune: Perception on Domestic Violence

Do you think domestic violence is still a problem for some families in the commune and needs help from the government and mass organizations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
<td>Local</td>
<td>Migrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 (53%)</td>
<td>5 (36%)</td>
<td>5 (33%)</td>
<td>2 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12 (40%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
<td>8 (53%)</td>
<td>3 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30 (100%)</td>
<td>14 (100%)</td>
<td>15 (100%)</td>
<td>7 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's Survey.

3. Social and sexual harassment against females

The social phenomenon of sexual harassment against females also stems from the gender stereotypes which generally give men and boys superior positions compared to women and girls, and the sense of power over the opposite sex is thought to give men and boys 'the right' to harass females. The impacts of the harassment can be severe and life-lasting, but only recently has there been a few research on the issue in Viet Nam. The issue has been internalized by men and also by many women to the extent that the people see it as 'normal'. 'Girls and unmarried women should stay home and not go anywhere. If they go somewhere and boys harass them, of course it is their [girls'] fault. That's what boys do.'

Sexual harassment, in the forms of teasing, touching or preventing females from such activities as walking alone to school, is an everyday social practice resulting from the perception that women are inferior relative to men. It especially targets girls and unmarried women, considered by the society as the most vulnerable due to their age and sex: being physically 'weak', and lacking in experience, it is their responsibility to stay demure and domesticated protect their virginity and avoid this 'natural' harassment. When legal awareness and law enforcement are absent, sexual harassment escalates to more serious crimes such as physically and sexually assault against females.
The issue of sexual harassment deserves further research, as also does the involvement of law to protect women and girls. It can start from understanding the experience and the possible consequences this vulnerability has in many aspects of women’s lives. During a focus group discussion with young girls, I was able to gather their opinions on the issue as follows:

**Box 27. Children’s Perception on Social Harassment against Girls**

N., girl, age 15: If you are a girl, you have to think about where you go. I rarely go to strange places by myself. Boys there will tease me, and who knows what they might do. Definitely I do not go to a coffee shop by myself. You go there only when your boyfriend asks you to go with him. If you go there alone, some man will approach you, and you cannot protect yourself. My friends [girls] were touched on their hair, their breasts... I hate that... I don’t want to over-generalize for all boys (vô dàu cãi nâm) though. Educated boys are good, but there are many bad ones... My mother would blame me if boys do anything to me, and I think the neighbours would too... [Question: How do you think girls would feel about this?] I think they are embarrassed, scared, and maybe sad, and do not want to go anywhere.

A., girl, age 16: There are some groups of boys at my school who like to tease girls, especially those who wear the traditional dress (do dđi), because it shows your body a little. I think their parents try to teach them how to behave, but somehow they think that they can do anything to girls... [Question: Did anyone report this to teachers?] No, teachers don’t pay attention to this kind of thing [Question: Are there any other people you can report to?] I don’t think anyone would pay attention to this. The best way for girls to protect themselves is to try to avoid these boys...

P., boy, age 14: Sometimes, I and my friends [boys] tease girls, because it’s fun. We don’t touch them, just say things to make them embarrassed [Question: Do you think girls are upset and don’t like it?] Well, some of them like to be teased, I know. And if they don’t like it, they just forget it. I think it happens everywhere...

*Source: Author's Notes*

This chapter has provided research findings on the commune, and data analysis and interpretation of the various issues being raised. The analysis shows that older and younger women, resident and migrant females, and women of different economic and occupational backgrounds have different perceptions and have experienced different types and levels of changes in the new socio-economic environment. In general, the improvement in women’s well-being in Tân Tảo commune as a result of **đổi mới** policy can be said to be representative of the better situation for most women in Viet Nam:
better employment and livelihood opportunities and higher income, improved access to credit and other resources, reduced domestic violence, better gender and social relations, and stronger legal protection. However, as shown in the next chapter, although both women and men have made efforts in adapting to the new socio-economic situation, women's subordinate status has put them in more vulnerable positions in terms of having to bear higher sacrifices while receiving lower benefits than men.

In the next chapter, the issues will be further analyzed, particularly from a cultural perspective, to scale up to the case of Viet Nam. The dynamic changes in Tân Tao commune in the process of urbanization thus could be seen as being 'representative' or perhaps 'leading edge' for the situation of socio-economic changes in Viet Nam during the doi moi era.
CHAPTER EIGHT.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION:
THE CASE OF VIET NAM

In this chapter, the research results of the thesis will be summarized and the policy implications discussed. The main research findings are as follows:

(8.1) While the GAD approach with roots in socialist feminism calls for the challenge to and elimination of patriarchy and for a women's autonomous movement, the Vietnamese cultural and political context suggests that:

1. Due to the emphasis on social and gender harmony, it is more suitable to 'negotiate' with patriarchy than challenge it.

2. Due to the monopoly role of the State, it is necessary for Vietnamese women to 'bargain' with the State for their 'opportunity spaces' to form their own autonomous movement.

(8.2) Due to the dualistic nature of the Vietnamese culture, it is necessary to promote the positive aspects of social and gender relations, especially the embedded respect for women, gender equality and social cohesion, while recognizing and tackling the sources of women's exploitation and oppression.

(8.3) Modernization, socialist reforms and women's increasing economic power have not necessarily led to improved gender equity or to radically transformed gender relations, suggesting that the socio-cultural and historical construction of gender relations can be powerful. Therefore, government policies and women's programs and projects need to address not only the economic but also the socio-cultural factors that can affect gender relations and women's well-being.

(8.4) Although women's lives have been significantly improved since doi moi policy in 1986, the dynamics of gender relations at local levels suggest that due to their relatively subordinate status, women have not been equal participants in the development process as they often make higher sacrifice and receive less benefits.
(8.5) Women's overall well-being needs to be strategically improved with regard to the emphasis on non-material aspects and to the gradual transformation of the power structure between women and men.

In particular, the micro-study of Tân Tao commune reinforces these findings by showing how at the commune level, women are still struggling to improve their well-being. Even in a situation in which opportunities for increased employment for women are growing, this does not always lead to an improvement in gender equity, and traditional beliefs with respect to gender relations still persist. While there are signs of gender equality increasing (men helping more in domestic work in younger families), there is still a need to improve women’s situations. The next section expands this discussion.

8.1 The need to negotiate and overcome difficulties in applying GAD

The attempt to incorporate the gender and development approach in government policies and international assistance has been shown to have significantly improved women’s lives and to have helped foster better gender relations, not only in Tân Tao commune, but also in many other parts of the country. However, it is crucial to recognize that the application of GAD towards improving gender relations and women’s lives in Viet Nam has still met with certain difficulties which prevent from attaining the intended program and project objectives in terms of gender development. The three main difficulties identified below are related to the historical, cultural and political context of Viet Nam in the efforts to promote gender mainstreaming: (a) the chronological gap in the international women’s movement which Viet Nam incurred in the 70s and 80s due to the historical factor of war and international isolation, (b) the need to ‘negotiate with patriarchy’ rather than challenging it as prescribed in the socialist feminist approach within GAD theories, and cultural dualism in which the conflicting impacts of Confucian patriarchy and indigenous practices often intertwine and produce both positive and negative effects on women’s well-being, and (c) the political context of State-directed women’s organizations which makes women’s autonomous liberation movement more difficult to organize and gain legitimacy, along with other issues such as participation, power and ethics.
(a) Historical factors creating a chronological ‘gap’ in the implementation of GAD in Viet Nam

As shown in Chapter 3, during the 1970s and 1980s, Viet Nam was at war, followed by subsequent episodes of international isolation. As GAD emerged in the early 1980s, it was ready to be applied in Viet Nam since the country opened up in 1986. The planning of programs and projects included the incorporation of the GAD approach with the goal of attaining equitable and sustainable development, with women and men sharing decision-making power, focusing on the improvement of relations between women and men, identifying the problem as unequal gender relations that prevent women’s full participation, suggesting solutions to empower women and transforming unequal relations and structures, following strategies to meet practical needs determined by women and men to improve their condition, and at the same time to address their strategic gender needs.

However, gender experts in Viet Nam now recognize that until the year 2000, the country was still following the WID approach which mainly focuses on ‘women’s issues’ (rather than gender relations) and views women’s lack of participation as the main problem, with the solution often seen as the need to integrate women into existing structures by women-only programs and projects, or with add-on women’s components, aiming to increase women’s productivity, incomes, and their ability to manage the household. This means that Viet Nam will need time to ‘catch up’ with the progress in the international women’s movement from WID to GAD.

Experience from other countries has shown that a similar difficulty exists in carrying out the GAD approach, which focuses on gender instead of women per se. A development worker in Bangladesh was quoted by Kabeer as saying: ‘Do you think we are ready for gender in development in Bangladesh when we have not yet addressed the problems of women in development?’ In this respect, there were concerns over the possibility that the switch from women to gender might become counterproductive because the discussion could shift to women and men (i.e. gender), and then back to men, leading to the denial of women-specific disadvantage and the need to directly address them Baden and Goetz (1997: 39).
It can be expected, therefore, that, despite a concerted effort in integrating GAD approach into government and international programs and projects, the outcome has to date been limited to improving women’s income and living conditions, which are concerned only with practical needs, while the objectives of transforming unequal gender relations and empowering women might not have yet been addressed. Strategic gender needs of women and men will need to be emphasized so as to improve gender relations. At the same time, ensuring State support in social services to promote women’s emancipation, strengthen women’s legal rights, and gradually transform the existing unequal power relations between women and men in culturally sensitive ways, are of utmost importance. These long-term tasks can gradually support the successful implementation of GAD approach to reach its intended objectives.

(b) Cultural factors embedded in the non-confrontational and dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture

Since _đôi mơ_, international organizations have introduced the concept of ‘gender’, and have presented a new way of thinking about gender relations in Viet Nam, which reflect a new perception of the gender and development discourse. However, in the Vietnamese society, it is more suitable for women to negotiate or compromise with patriarchy. As the GAD approach calls for women to challenge the existing unequal power relations between women and men embedded in patriarchal systems, it might not appeal to either due to its adversarial approach and political activism. Throughout Vietnamese history, and continuing in contemporary discourses of changing gender relations, gender harmony always remains the highest priority despite conflicting beliefs and practices regarding unequal power relations between the sexes. Any approach aiming to achieve certain results at the expense of being potentially harmful to gender harmony is therefore likely to be ineffective.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, in a Women’s Union publication, it is asserted that ‘The equality Vietnamese are striving for is not from confronting men, but from their own progress in the broad social and cultural movements in the country.’ Thus, bargaining with patriarchy is more likely to be accepted than challenging it in the effort to change the prevailing power structures between women and men.
In addition, over the years throughout history, the contradictory beliefs and practices between Confucian patriarchy and indigenous traditions have intertwined and created a co-existence of opposite perceptions and norms regarding most issues in gender relations. The recognition and elimination of patriarchy is difficult, therefore, since its existence might have been transformed and attached to other indigenous, conflicting practices in Viet Nam. For example, the issue of son preference is often related to how Vietnamese people value their daughters. There are conflicting beliefs on this issue. Traditional, indigenous norms place equal values on boys and girls, and rather give importance to their ethics and duties as children, as in the saying:

Do not distinguish boy or girl
As long as they were born to be dutiful to parents.

(Gái mà chi, trai mà chi,
Sinh ra có nghĩa, có nghĩa là hơn.)

But, at the same time, Confucian beliefs placed more importance on boys than girls, as in the saying ‘One son counts, ten daughters are worthless’ (nhất nam vì việc hữu, thập nữ vì việc vô). Economically, girls could also be considered as a ‘lost investment’ because they are eventually expected to move to live with and contribute to their in-law’s family. Thus, daughters-in-law could be seen as more relevant to the future of a family than their own daughters:

Daughters are other people’s children
Daughters-in-law are truly children bought home.

(Con gái là con người ta
Con đầu mới thật mẹ cha mua về.)

Other common proverbs could further be seen to support contradictory philosophies within themselves. The saying ‘Having deep fields and breeding buffaloes is not as good as having a daughter as a first child’ (Rownik sâu trái ngại không bằng con gái đầu lòng) could show the value and importance of a first daughter, because she will work hard and play a crucial role for the family’s well-being in the future. It could also reveal the cultural expectation that the oldest daughter should sacrifice for the family and look after her parents in their old age. In reality, birth order could be a factor determining a woman’s life prospects: they often have to look after their siblings, especially brothers, even have to postpone marriage which might jeopardize their chance to get married when they get older. Research in a poor commune in Nghệ An province (Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Trinh 2001) also shows that oldest daughters tend to drop out earlier from school than their sisters.
The co-existence of conflicting beliefs and practices can thus make it difficult to identify and separate out the patriarchal or Confucian aspects of Vietnamese culture. It is thus especially complex to raise gender awareness issues since the Confucian-type discrimination and oppression could be invisible, while its impact can be very negative to women's well-being and to gender relations in general. Thus, the issues whether to challenge patriarchy or to bargain with it so as to be culturally compatible in this case, will need to be put in the evolving cultural context of Viet Nam, and will require clear and specific action agenda to overcome the negative aspects on women's well-being of the unequal power structure between the sexes.

(c) Political factors affecting the autonomous women's movement, and issues of participation, power and ethics

As GAD emphasizes the need for women to organize themselves for a stronger and more effective political voice, this poses a huge (even impossible) challenge to achieve in Viet Nam, with a one-party state system, and with women's organizations operating wholly under state rules and oversight direction. This is another factor buttressing the likely inapplicability of the GAD approach in Viet Nam, requiring it be revised or adapted to become more non-confrontational. It is important to recognize the fact that the 'opportunity spaces' for Vietnamese women to promote gender interests through state channels are very limited, in view of the monopoly role of the Communist party in the state.

However, there can be indirect ways to 'bargain' with patriarchy and with the state. It is also easier to bargain 'for the sake of poor women's welfare', without creating political conflicts, because of the traditions of mutual assistance and respect for women. It is also politically safer for women than men to be active in pushing the state for their gender needs, as women are still regarded as largely confined to the domestic sphere and to be involved in less important matters which do not threaten national stability. However, support from gender-sensitized men in positions of authority can be critical to achieving the goals of improved gender equality.

Other political issues to be taken into account are participation, power, and ethics. In the process of implementing programs and projects with a GAD component, women's
participation is always a key aspect. Participatory approaches are assumed to empower local people through their ability to analyze their own situation, to make decisions and take action, which in turn can be shaped to lead to more equitable and sustainable development. In Viet Nam, as in many other developing countries, ‘participation problems’ occur when the ‘community’ still is structured mainly by and for men; when only a handful of women (a privileged few) can participate; when the internal dynamics and differences in the community are inadequately understood; and when misunderstanding or ignoring women’s needs (especially those of poor, under-privileged women) are still widely prevalent (Guijt and Shah 1998).

For example, efforts have often been made to improve women’s economic conditions, without any attempt being made to consult them as to what kinds of changes they would like to see, and that would improve their well-being. It is therefore important to ensure the participation of the intended beneficiaries, which sometimes can be a power struggle when conflicts of interests occur. Another example is the notion of social capital which has been frequently used without sufficient information being collected or disseminated on the current forms and utilization in the community, or on the possible obstacles that might prevent its more efficient and equitable use.

International gender planning in Viet Nam needs to avoid the trend under which, ‘gender analysis had become a technocratic discourse, in spite of its roots in socialist feminism, dominated by researchers, policy makers, and consultants, which no longer addressed issues of power central to women’s subordination’ (Nighat Khan cited in Baden and Goetz 1997). It is crucial for international researchers and consultants to overcome professional biases, to put Vietnamese women and men and their priorities first, and to recognize and ensure that the realities of the Vietnamese poor are appropriately taken into account (Chambers 1995).

The above section discussed of the ‘gaps’ in implementing GAD approach in Viet Nam, does not imply that the implementation is impossible but rather that more careful planning is needed to overcome to perceived obstacles resulting from these ‘gaps’. The next section will summarize the finding on the dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture which needs to be taken into consideration in guiding social and cultural transformation towards improving women’s and men’s well-being.
8.2 Dualism in Vietnamese culture, and impacts of traditional norms and practices to women's and men's well-being

In Viet Nam, certain cultural beliefs and practices are seen to be harmful to women's well-being, such as those related to the issues of inadequate education opportunities for girls, women's disproportionate sacrifices for the family due to their 'triple roles' especially during difficult times; the financial burden women bear in their role of managing household finance; and their perceived lesser influence in intra-household decision-making compared to men. These perceived negative impacts on women's well-being often are buttressed by the Confucian attitude of 'looking down on women' to the extent they are relegated to inferior positions and subject to exploitation.

However, the negative aspects of such considerations often come with a brighter side. Indigenous practices, in contrast, place high social values and respect on women. Thus, two conflicting sets of values and practices co-exist, and can considerably mitigate the negative impacts of traditional culture on women. It is therefore crucial to identify this dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture on gender relations if we are to accurately diagnose the root causes and extent of gender inequity, and come up with effective measures to overcome the negative aspects while encouraging the positive practices accordingly to contemporary and evolutionary realities.

For instance, in terms of girls' education, although all children have been protected by the law in ensuring equal access to education, there is evidence that the cultural expectation of women having to bear household responsibilities, and especially the perceived lower economic return on girls' education, can reduce investment in girls' education by parents and by girls themselves, and other cultural factors can affect their educational motivation and achievement (such as girls being harassed on their way to school). However, in the midst of poverty and with the desire for daughters to avoid hardship in life, there are also parents, especially mothers, who give girls' education a higher priority than that of boys. This was seen in interviews with a middle-age migrant woman in Tan Tao commune who believed that girls need education more than boys so as to avoid manual work because of their perceived physical 'weakness' compared to boys. There may also be other cultural factors that work in favor of girls attending school but which were not identified in this
research. It can also be expected, as seen in the experience in Vietnamese urban centres (or in more developed Asian countries such as Japan), that single women can become independent not only economically but also emotionally (when they are less subject to social ostracizing due to their single status) women can invest more time and efforts in pursuing higher education.

Similarly, the issue of the women’s sacrifice for their families during difficult times, although sometimes seen as exploitation of women, can also be seen and rewarded as a women’s precious virtue. This can reinforce their urge to sacrifice for their families, to avoid family break-up, and to protect family and community harmony, while hoping for better time to come soon. This virtue can be seen to have developed throughout Vietnamese history, as women have often had to struggle to support their families in their husbands’ absence during warfare (also seen as related to instinctive patriotism) (Lê Thị Nham Tuyết 1973).

A typical example of this situation was the cooperative period when many people had to live through great difficulties. In Tấn Tảo commune (and in other parts of Viet Nam), many women recalled the difficulties they faced in caring for their family, and especially young children, while many men and children talked about the tremendous sacrifice made by the women, wondering how they could do such an ‘impossible’ job. (It is worth noting that gender harmony during this tumultuous period was often worsened due to poverty, as many men in the South went to re-education camps, while others resorted to drinking in face of widespread unemployment.) Women’s willingness to sacrifice for their families during difficult times, rather than stemming from systematic women’s oppression and exploitation, can thus rather be seen as a positive characteristic of gender relations in protecting family harmony and preserving family values.

The issue of the treatment of daughters-in-law can also be considered from two opposing perspectives. Often, wife beating and mother-in-law abuse are considered as systematic oppression or enslavement of wives and daughters-in-law:

‘...The perceived coalition of a young woman with her husband and the refusal of a wife to relinquish her private money were not the cause of wife-beating... To strengthen and sustain the hierarchical structure of subordination within the family, therefore, beating was believed to be
The abuse of women in Hsin Hsing was, in short, motivated by the need of older women and the men to reaffirm their control over those women who, by cultural definition, were their subordinates.' (Gallin 1997: 155)

However, this might be seen as only one aspect of the issue, which mainly stems from Confucian practice of looking down on women and treating them as subordinates. The other aspect, obtained from research findings from Tấn Tảo commune (as well as other areas in Viet Nam), is more related to ensuring family operation and reputation. Mothers-in-law sometimes feel with good intentions that they have to be strict with daughters-in-law to train her to adapt to a new family environment, and to protect family reputation, which could be slighted if daughters-in-law behave inappropriately. If such unruly or unacceptable behaviour occurs, mothers-in-law could even be placed in more culpable positions than daughters-in-law, since they could be considered as mainly responsible for things that go wrong in the family. Thus, being known as strict to daughters-in-law could also help shield mothers-in-law from responsibility in case when daughters-in-law decide to act inappropriately towards the family or the community. While daughters-in-laws abuse is clearly a form of women’s oppression that can still exist in Viet Nam, especially in rural areas, its nature needs to be examined not only from a power-related Confucian point-of-view but also as a means of maintaining family and community harmony and indigenous cultural practices respecting women.

The role of women as the family’s ‘safe box keeper’ is also a symbol of their voice and influence over decision-making in the family. While this can be interpreted as men wanting to avoid dealing with money (e.g. since it is associated with low-status trading occupations and with trivial dealings), in reality, women’s control over financial aspects of the family often gives them significant power to make family decisions. In Viet Nam, the common practice of men giving their wife most or all their income also signifies men’s respect for women’s financial and household decision-making, and is evidence of gender harmony in the family.

As for intra-household decision making, findings from Tấn Tảo commune reveal that women also play an important role in the family, although there were often mixed perceptions as to who would be the primary decision makers. This ambiguity is in effect
the result of the interweaving two conflicting practices: the Confucian way of ‘husband orders, wife submits’ (*phu xuong, phu tuy*), with indigenous norms that ‘First comes wife, then God is second’ (*Nhai v* *c Nhi troi*) or ‘Husband’s orders are drown by wife’s gong’ (*Linh ong khong bang cong ba*). The intertwining of two contradictory practices seems to give women *de facto* decision-making power that exists but is not always clearly recognized, while men’s assumed power might not always be realized in practice.

The issue of single women and the universal expectation of marriage also have conflicting perceptions. On one hand, the society still, to a certain extent, remains unsympathetic towards single women, or even stigmatizes or ostracizes them. Their parents are also under pressure from the community and thus expect them to get married soon. Sometimes, it is the parents’ worry that places most of the pressure on the women, Due to the belief that women are dependent on men, they are seen as ‘worthless’ and will lead a difficult life if single, as in the following proverb:

A woman having a husband is like wearing a shackle around her neck  (*Gai co chang nhu gong deo co*)
The one having no husband is like an uneven bed frame.  (*Gai khong chang nhu phan go long danh*)
While the uneven frame can be fixed,  (*Phan long danh anh con chua duoc*)
The one having no husband always running
back and forth worrying [more difficult to fix]  (*Gai khong chang chay nguc chay xuoi*)
Having no husband is so miserable, sisters!

On the other hand, there is also the attitude that, considering the heavy household responsibilities that women must bear, many have protested regarding the social expectation of marriage:

Young woman, who has just enough water and rice for yourself  (*Co kia nuoc lo com niu*)
You don’t have a husband and children,
and just take care of yourself
- Husband and children are burdens.
I’d rather stay single and take good care of myself.

Therefore, while the judgment against single women due to their ‘failure’ in fulfilling ‘God’s mission’ of building and caring for a family of their own still exists and holds widespread in the society, many of them have managed to defend their dignity and their right to lead a life without a husband, especially when their single status was caused by
circumstances, not by choice. This courageous attitude has been backed up and supported by the government when it passed the law in 1986 to allow single women to have a child born out-of-wedlock to form a single-parent family.

In summary, the dualistic nature of Vietnamese culture has produced conflicting perceptions and norms that could at the same time lead to both negative and positive impacts on women’s well-being. Efforts to improve their lives and gender relations need to consider promoting the positive dimensions of gender and social relations, especially the embedded respect for women, gender equality and social cohesion, while recognizing and tackling the sources of women’s exploitation and oppression. The following section will discuss the third research finding, that the achievements since doi moi in improving women’s lives in Viet Nam still remain limited due to certain cultural factors.

8.3 Successes of efforts to improve women’s well-being, and shortcomings due to cultural factors

The improvement in women’s lives in Tân Tảo commune since doi moi was illustrative of the better situation witnessed by most women in Viet Nam. In general, women had more employment and livelihood opportunities, improved access to credit and other resources, and enjoyed better gender and social relations and stronger legal protection. While urban women tended to benefit more than their rural counterparts, migration often helped to extend the benefits to migrants and their families in rural areas. Many female migrants have broken the norm of women staying home to care for family members, coming to urban areas to work in factories and becoming more economically independent while still helping their families back home.

The negative impacts of the switch to a market economy, namely the laying off of female State workers, and cut backs in social services, was offset to some extent by the absorption of labour into new economic activities outside the State sector, and by the expanding availability of private service providers. Although the percentage of women losing their State employment represented a small proportion of the female labour force (less than 15%), many women now also concentrate in the informal sector often with low paid and unstable work. However, other data also suggest that many State employees
voluntarily quit their work to pursue higher paying jobs in the private sector, especially in foreign joint-venture enterprises.

The improvement in women’s well-being associated with the process of urbanization in Tân Tạo commune could signify overall improvement in women’s prospects throughout Viet Nam, as the country develops further in industrialization and modernization. However, some research results on Tân Tạo commune (detailed in Chapter Seven) reveal that women are still facing disadvantages, which are common for other women in the country. Data show the uneven gender distribution in most sectors of the labour force, where women tend to be located in lower paid and less skilled jobs. Gender segregation in the labour market, where women are concentrated in low value-added industries and services such as agricultural production and the informal sector, is one of the main causes of persistent poverty and gender-based wage differentials. The gender stereotyping of jobs with complex and routine tasks, which require patience and dexterity and less formal training, often leads to the assignment of women’s jobs as unskilled or semi-skilled and thus their work is undervalued in terms of wage rates.

In addition, the ‘male breadwinner’ ideologies perpetuated in popular conceptions that, women’s culturally suitable workplace is at home, and that their economic role is minimal compared to that of men. Such structural inequalities tend to keep women in subordinate positions in the labour market and fail to appreciate the true value of their labour.

State support for women to improve their income prospects includes providing credit and technical assistance in production. While most women were able to obtain credit for productive plans to improve their livelihoods, the poorest women still face obstacles such as lack of collateral or social isolation. Due to their triple roles, these women often have to contribute a higher level of income to the family than women in families with higher income, spend more time for housework and have more difficulties in managing day-to-day family finances. They are also more vulnerable to the impacts of social evils and violence in their family and in the community.

Projects on improving girls’ education need to consider cultural factors which prevent girls from attending school and university. In a study on girls’ education in Nghi Phong
commune, Nghệ An province (Nguyễn Thị Mỹ Trinh 2001), it was found that in the context of poverty, women's role as breadwinners became even more important, which was likely to influence them to drop out early from school, due to the cultural expectation that women should able to financially support family daily needs so that men could concentrate on their more 'important', higher paying work. The study showed one of the reasons that girls tended to drop out after completing their lower-secondary education (grade 9) is the common practice that, in order for girls to be chosen for marriage, they had to prove that (a) they had income-earning skills so as to be able to financially support their future family, and (b) they had a certain amount of savings earned and accumulated previously as a 'proof' of their income-earning skills (as distinct from money received from outside such as inheritance from parents, which did not prove their money-earning skills). Since the marriageable age for girls in this commune (as in other rural areas) was around 18 to 22, many girls were anxious to get married before they were considered to be 'on the shelf' (6), which could be devastating for them and their families.

The common practice, therefore, was for girls to drop out at age 15 (after finishing grade 9) to work for three years before entering 'the marriage market'. The combined effects of a series of cultural practices, namely the pre-set marriageable age (usually early, with the 'limit' is often as early as 20 or 25 in rural areas), the fear of being single, the expectation of women being responsible for day-to-day family financial survival, and probably the higher mobility among young men to be able to leave the commune compared to young women which created a 'perceived' surplus of marriageable women, have thus created a motive for girls to drop out early.

According to the same study, another factor affecting girls' ability or decision to pursue upper-secondary or higher education, was the prevalent prejudice against girls' education due to envy it could create within the community. While boys would not have problems in pursuing further education other than 'family's economic difficulties', girls also had to face discrimination such as being stopped, harassed or beaten on their way to school, and enduring nuisance created by some children and even adults in the neighbourhood when they studied at home. Embedded in the belief that girls should remain within the domestic sphere, endorsed by the overall perceptions of looking down on women and girls and thus
the 'rights' to harass and act violently against them, often driven by common jealousy, some community members thus still create destructive barriers for girls seeking to advance their education.

As education is often considered one of the most important issues for women to improve their status in family and in the society, many women's projects have set out to tackle this issue. It is, however, crucial to examine the cultural context in the community in order to identify detrimental beliefs and practices against women's and girl's education. Law enforcement on the prevention of violence against women and girls regarding this issue must be strengthened to overcome the persistent practice of 'The king's order must yield to the people's customs' (‘phếp vua thua lệ lạng’).

Overcoming gender stereotypes, especially among younger generations, is also essential in offsetting gender discrimination in all aspects of life. School textbooks need to avoid gender biases in presenting the images of males and females. Publications need to be re-examined so as not to promote reactionary social beliefs and norms, especially Confucian tenets, which put women in inferior and submissive positions in the family and in society. Mass media need to reinforce gender equality through education, raising awareness, and providing information on legal protection for women.

The perception that women are responsible for bearing the burden of household responsibilities is still widespread, and continues to thwart women from realizing their educational and career potential and negatively impacts their physical and mental health. The notion is embedded in the belief in the dichotomy between public and private spheres, where 'women' with low status are associated with 'private' or low value, while 'men' with high status associated with 'public' or higher value. It is often the case that men are aware of their work share responsibilities but are afraid of comments by their own families and neighbours who tend to ridicule men who do housework. Raising awareness among the public is thus very important to ease the household burden on women and to achieve other aspects of gender equality by improving the respect and appreciation for women and their work both at home and outside the home.

Social evils are also often a by-product of development which builds upon certain gender stereotypes. Poverty, the lack of employment opportunities, and sometimes the lack of
protection of women from social and sexual harassment and abuse by men stemming from the beliefs that they are ‘entitled’ to do so, often push women into prostitution. Young men who aim for high paying, ‘culturally suitable’ jobs due to the ‘male breadwinner’ ideologies tend to refuse to settle for less and thus are easily attracted to illegal activities such as using and trafficking in drugs. Men’s alcohol consumption is also often seen as their ‘entitlement’ and an aspect of masculinity, and this can encourage alcohol abuse, in addition to causing a public nuisance and violence often against women. The impacts of social evils on women should receive greater attention from policy makers and society, and efforts at prevention should be an important part of improving women’s lives.

**Box 28. Men’s Involvement in Social Evils as Being Culturally ‘Spoiled’**

Men’s involvement in social evils also needs to be analyzed more thoroughly and thus prevent the common cultural practice which tend to give them the ‘entitlements’ to act inappropriately, such as in the popular song: ‘Men tend to behave dissipately, while women need to restrain themselves and behave properly.’

(Đàn ông tính khí lỏng lỏng. Đàn bà con gái giữ gìn nét na)

This popular song can be interpreted as follows: ‘In feudal periods, men were kings in their families [and women were slaves] (chồng chửa vợ tôi), and they also had prestigious status in the society. In contrast, women were confined to their home to serve their husband and children. In addition, public opinion was always easy on men. Many of their vices were forgiven, such as alcohol abuse and gambling, while public opinion was very harsh in judging women, even for minor mistakes. Being ‘spoiled’ men thus became ill-behaved, while women became well-behaved because they were strictly disciplined.’

Source: Việt Chức ng (1996: 465)

In short, women-related policies and international assistance since  đổi mới have helped to significantly improve women’s lives, including their living and working conditions and their status in family and in the society. However, to achieve more effective results and ensure better gender equality, more consideration needs to be given to the cultural aspects of gender relations and its dynamics in adapting to a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. The following section will discuss the finding that, due to their relatively lower socio-cultural status and persistent structural inequalities, there are contexts where women appear to be unequal partners in the process of development in the sense that they often have to bear higher sacrifices while receiving lower benefits, which can critically affect their socio-economic prospects and future well-being.
8.4 Changing gender relations and women's well-being in the new socio-economic context

The need to adapt to the new socio-economic conditions in Tấn Tảo commune in the process of industrialization and urbanization has posed enormous challenges for both women and men, not only in finding ways to survive and to take advantage of new economic opportunities, but also how to incorporate new culturally 'acceptable' gender and social relations. In other parts of the country, women and men are facing similar challenges in specific local contexts with possible regional variations. Since social norms might impose some limits on the extent to which women and men want to make changes in the many personal and social aspects of their lives, both women and men often need to make sacrifices and compromises between their social, cultural and economic interests and expectations, and it appears that women often are expected to bear most of the disadvantages due to their relatively inferior status.

For instance, while availability of work in the formal sector remains limited compared to the expanded labour force, women more often resort to informal sector activities as readily available options for women. Market trading is one of the most common informal sector occupations considered 'suitable' for women because they are commonly believed to be good in financial negotiations, thrifty and responsible (compared to men who might not pay attention to details and might be inclined to spend money on alcohol, cigarettes and to socialize with friends). Men also may not opt for this occupation because it is ranked the lowest in the Confucian social hierarchy. As mentioned earlier, women are also more likely to trade due to the flexibility in the working hours, and because trading often yields higher income than other occupations and enables more flexible access to cash for day-to-day family needs, especially when husbands cannot bring home sufficient income.

While women are apparently less concerned about the low status associated with petty trading, this occupation can overload them with work and family responsibilities. In most cases, their roles in maintaining everyday family operation and financial survival are rendered more critical than those that men must bear. This shows that the traditions of women being most responsible for household work and for meeting the family's daily
financial needs (on the expectation that men can then focus on their 'more important' work in the formal public sector), creates tremendous pressure and workloads for many women while men may not be fulfilling their 'principal breadwinner' role.

The impact of men's unemployment or under-employment (whether short-term or long-term) on women was also significant in both economic and non-economic terms. Since women are considered directly responsible for coping with day-to-day family needs and crises, when their husband brings home lower income, the more women must take over the breadwinning responsibility. Women also are impacted the most from their male family members' involvement in social evils and other unhealthy activities.

The availability of factory work for women in Tân Tao commune (as well as in other parts of Viet Nam) is consistent with the international pattern whereby manufactured products are increasingly being produced in developing countries and exported to more developed ones. While the Labour Code attempts to protect female workers' rights, their inferior status in gender-ascriptive relations still relegates them to subordinate positions in the labour market. 'Women's work' is often considered 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled' (as opposed to men's 'skilled' work) because women are 'pre-determined' as inferior workers rather than their labour effort and skills being actually inferior.

It has been documented that internationally, women are considered to be not only more dextrous, but also in general more self-disciplined and willing to accept more stringent work rules, and are more uncomplaining when required to perform monotonous, repetitive work procedures. The cost of employing female workers is often lower than male labour, while their productivity can often be higher. The issue of women's subordination in factory labour is evidently rooted at least in part in the common practice of excluding women from 'public' work, and confining their choices in more 'private' activities, which include domestic sewing and similar work requiring manual dexterity and this can make them more easily trainable for factory jobs. Their 'secondary status' in the labour market is thus embedded in their subordinated role of nurturing children and other family members, lacking a truly representative role in the exercise of social power (Elson and Pearson 191-203). This status conditions their willingness to accept lower
wages, more onerous working conditions, and greater instability of employment, and other forms of occupational discrimination.

Recent research on female workers in seafood processing factories in HCMC also addresses the impacts of their work on emotional well-being (Nguyễn Phú Hòa 2001). Most married women struggle under the burdens of both work and family, risking their health with overload but do not ask for spousal help with housework since they felt guilty and may fear family break-up. Unmarried workers, meanwhile, fear not being able to find a husband (as already has happened to older groups of female workers) due to their low education, low and unstable income, and lack of time and opportunity to meet prospective partners outside the workplace.

The fact that women tend to change occupations more often than men seems also to be influenced by cultural factors such as their subordinate positions in the labour market which causes their jobs to be low paying and unstable, their responsibilities for day-to-day family expenses, and their willingness to accept many available ‘little’ jobs. Since men, especially young ones, often refuse to take low paying jobs as ‘unsuitable’, and thus contribute inadequately to family income, women work harder to find available work, in addition to their already heavy household responsibilities.

The concentration of women in the informal sector also contributes to the persistence of feminization of poverty. However, other non-economic aspects of poverty can be even more damaging to women’s well-being. Most of the time, they are the direct victims of the social phenomena often seen in poverty situation, such as domestic violence or mistreatment by in-laws, divorced or single women being socially ostracized, or being poor, are overloaded with work more than women from higher-income families, including their relatively more critical role as income earners.

Intra-household relationships in the context of changing socio-economic conditions represent a continuous process of negotiations between the sexes. Women’s productive and reproductive roles in the family (as well as the role of men in family and in the society) can become ambiguous when social expectations and gender interests are involved. In reality, women’s domestic roles remain while their contribution to family income becomes increasingly important, often crucial for family survival. While men
also have to struggle to maintain their culturally assigned role as the main breadwinners, and often face disappointment of expectations, there are times when women have to replace men’s role to provide for their family especially among poorer families. The differential power and divergent interests within the household operate to ensure that women bear domestic responsibilities even at their own high level workload. Women appeared to be the group who not only pay higher sacrifices for their families and society, but are also most affected by social problems and other ‘negative fallout’ from socio-economic change. Their inferior status translates into vulnerability to social ills and various forms of domestic abuse. While the incidence of domestic violence may be significantly reduced through improved living conditions, it can also be exacerbated by the pressure to adapt to the often conflicting requirements of new socio-economic conditions, coupled with the persistence of ‘victim-blaming’ attitudes. Invisible violence, in the form of pressuring women to exploit themselves for the family, to absorb emotional and psychological abuse, and in preventing them from realizing self-actualization, continues to exist as part of cultural structural inequalities.

In short, although both women and men have had to struggle to adapt to the new socio-economic situation, women’s relative disadvantageous position has made them more vulnerable having to bear higher sacrifices, while receiving lower benefits than men. The next sub-sections discuss implications for policy making and international assistance in terms of incorporating traditional and modern values in the concerns of both material and non-material aspects of women’s well-being.

8.5 Policy Implications and Conclusion

As defined in Chapter Five, ‘human development is a process of expanding choices so that people can improve their overall well-being in a sustainable manner’. Certainly, the overall well-being of women and men cannot be determined only by economic factors but also needs to recognize non-economic influences. Well-being is also dynamic in the sense that it can constantly be affected in positive or negative ways, by the changes in socio-economic conditions, and by changing perceptions of what constitutes well-being (or ill-being) identified by a set of both traditional and modern values.
While acknowledging the significant improvements in women's well-being since đổi mới, it is also necessary to recognize that many issues still negatively impact their well-being and need to be more carefully considered by policy makers and international assistance agencies. Specifically, it is vital to address their practical and strategic gender needs to give adequate consideration to both material and non-material aspects of their lives, while respecting the social and cultural values attached to their well-being. These values can be unique to Vietnamese society and can also be locally specific, and are the outcome of a dynamic process of merging traditional and modern practices in the context of increasing globalization. The following section discusses policy implications related to three main areas which have been mentioned throughout this study: education and employment, social and family relations, and legal protection.

(1) Education and employment

Ensuring education for female children needs to rank as one of the most important policy issues. While girls' education can be supported through the government's socialist commitment to education and to gender equality, and through certain cultural practices that favour girls' educational achievement (see page 193), the realities that face many female children still pose many challenges that call for major changes and initiatives in policies regarding women and education. First of all, there is a need to transform the current depressed state of education in Viet Nam due to "the contradiction between individual pursuits and the public demands for education" (Nguyen Van Chinh 1998: 92). Inappropriate school curricula which do not provide students with relevant, useful skills that are increasingly required in the new labour market often cause them to leave school at the lower- and upper-secondary levels. While economic considerations, such as high school fees (especially due to cutbacks in education) and the desire to earn money to help parents, are most often cited by parents and children as the cause of such drop-outs, other important factors relating to teacher training and motivation deserve careful attention of policy makers, such as low teaching quality, pressure to attend additional tutorials (hoc thêm, offered by some teachers in order to earn extra income), and ill-treatment of students by teachers (while causes related to teachers can often be less emphasized due to the long-standing tradition of deference to education ethics, tôn sư trọng đạo).
In this context, girls are also more likely to drop out than boys due to their culturally-assigned household responsibilities and other factors related to their socially inferior status. National and international efforts to promote girls' education thus need to address and mitigate these negative influences. For instance, gender division of labour in the household needs to be transformed through raising public awareness and educating young children, helping them to overcome gender stereotypes with regard to domestic responsibilities. Cultural norms relating to women's economic contribution to the family as part of their domestic duties also need to be adjusted to create positive incentives for them to continue their education rather than drop out from school (see page 107). Their income-earning prospects need to be enhanced through participation in skilled labour sectors of the economy, rather than being shunted into unskilled, low-paying, low-prestige, and unstable work in the informal sector. This structural change will also require legal reform and stronger law enforcement to counter gender discrimination in recruitment and on-the-job in the workplace.

Girls' safety in school and while travelling to and from school is another critical issue, since there is often a very real or a perceived danger from harassment, assault or even rape that can deter female students and their parents from continuing in school or in higher education. While raising public awareness of the social and legal equality between the sexes should be a continuous effort, law enforcement needs to intervene swiftly and surely to deter those who interfere with girls' attendance and performance in school. This is especially crucial in rural areas where the distance between home and school (especially more remote secondary schools), is considerable, and where tradition expects girls' virginity to remain intact before marriage. Specific support for female students, especially from remote and rural areas, can also include monetary incentives, such as fee reduction and scholarships, and counselling and career orientation, to build up their knowledge, ambition, social skills and self-confidence.

In terms of provisions and delivery of social services, there is clearly a need to increase budget approvals and disbursements for education, since it is one of the key factors that are essential in achieving gender equity. It is important to have national programs and projects on education for women, including a universal law on access to primary education for girls, illiteracy reduction, increasing female participation rates in training
programs for government employees, and financial support to private training institutions to attract higher rate of female trainees. There should also be public education to encourage the society to respect and participate in women’s education and training, and specifically to financially and emotionally support female teachers (who account for more than 75% of teachers nation-wide), to launch and encourage social organizations for literacy and vocational training for women, and to provide scholarship funding for female students at the secondary and university levels (Phạm Xuân Nam 1997).

Employment policies also need to take into consideration women’s disadvantages due to their traditional household responsibilities, so as to support and extend them rather than further limit their employment options. Vocational training for women is thus necessary, combined with strengthening legal protection in the informal sector to help them avoid being exploited. Although cultural factors in employment can be more difficult to address, the government can use laws and regulations to improve women’s choices, pay equity, and working conditions. Credit policy needs to reach more poor women and to take into account their social and cultural disadvantages, and other aspects of poverty such as unemployment, lack of mobility, and abuse within the family. Women’s participation in leadership roles also needs to be further enhanced and facilitated, rather than being assessed simply by the number of female delegates in a few organizations.

Migration policy needs to consider the cultural context of gender relations in both rural areas, where most of migrants originate, and in cities, which are often their destination. Although most migrants (especially males) leave home for economic reasons, there is increasing evidence from the Tần Tảo study that females often leave for cultural reasons, for example to escape heavier domestic responsibilities in rural areas and the arduous and low-paying agricultural work, or to improve their chances of finding a husband (especially when many males have already left the villages, and women are concerned about their age).

In rural areas, while modern values have to some extent countered the tradition of women having to stay at home to take care of family, and women’s mobility and independence is now more generally promoted as a means to earn income, certain traditional values still apply, such as the value (or imperative) of marriage and family for young women, and of working hard in cities to send money back for their children and other family members.
(2) Social and family relations

While most policies relating to women tend to address their economic well-being through such issues as women’s education, income generation, and asset ownership, and the state often affirms its commitment to gender equality through current laws for protection of women, the progress in realizing gender equity in Viet Nam does not seem to correspond to the promise inherent in this legislation and official rhetoric. Data on gender relations during the doi moi period suggest that modernization, socialist reforms, and women’s increasing economic power have not necessarily led to improved gender equality or to have radically transformed gender relations (Luong 2003, Goodkind 1995). Apparently there is need for policy makers to put more emphasis on the social and cultural aspects of gender relations if they are to be more effective in improving women’s well-being. As suggested by Luong (2003: 221), ‘the currently available Vietnamese findings suggests that the socio-culturally and historically embedded definition of gender relations may be as powerful as the political economic framework in reproducing and potentially transforming gender relations in Viet Nam.’

Policy making needs to tackle more directly the issue of women’s household burden which negatively impacts their opportunities in education and career advancement, and which is one of the root causes of their economic dependency on men as well as their socially inferior status. In the context of the commonly-practiced patrilocal post-marital residence in Viet Nam, domestic responsibilities include not only caring for children and husband but also for his family, and especially his parents. Thus, while analytically, women’s triple roles described internationally by GAD as productive, reproductive, and community management, the triple duty carried by most Vietnamese women required by cultural norms are working, home making, and being a daughter-in-law.

Health policy also needs to address the issues of alleviating women’s domestic burden, which negatively affects them both physically and emotionally. The experience of overwork and of submission of Vietnamese women, especially in the context of persistent patrilocal residence often creates tremendous psycho-social pressures on women, and as suggested by Luong (2003: 220): ‘women’s heavy leaning toward Buddhism with its concepts of karma and infinite cycle of miseries was also a reaction to the problems that they faced in the Vietnamese socio-cultural and economic systems.’
Among the tactics used by women in Tân Tảo (and other parts of Viet Nam) to cope with this situation of exploitation is to express physical sickness so as to make the in-laws more sympathetic, and to induce the husband to share in the household chores (since typically husband’s help is often only available as a ‘relief’ effort in ‘emergencies’ such as when the wife is absent or is too sick to perform ‘her duties’.) Understanding this aspect of women’s lives can help assess more accurately the state of their physical and mental health, and provide insights for policy making in how to promote a more equal domestic division of labour.

While policy making can encourage women’s virtue of sacrificing for their families, to preserve family stability and especially to benefit the children, it needs to address the traps of exploitation and self-exploitation. The unique domestic role of women can be emphasized in order to appreciate their work, and thus to enhance their status rather than to relegate and confine them within the domestic sphere.

In addition, health policy needs to improve women’s access to health clinics especially in rural areas, to financially and emotionally support local female health workers who account for over 80% of those working in this sector (Phạm Xuân Nam 1997), to raise awareness among leader cadres and local communities of maternal health care needs and new family planning techniques, to increase choices in birth control and to ensure men’s participation in family planning.

Intra-household relationships, including decision-making power which is at the root of structural inequalities within the household, and differential gender access and control over resources and benefits, still needs to be addressed openly as part of women’s related policies. It is essential to consider the varying degrees of relative decision-making power between women and men, not only regionally and by ethnic group, but also among different households, which results from the interweaving of indigenous norms respecting women and the Confucian practices which look down on women as seen in the case of Tân Tảo commune.

Even while traditional values still perpetuate negative aspects which curtail decision-making power in the family and in the public sphere, the increase in women’s income-earning role and economic power, and their wider participation in the public domain, are
creating new values which give women higher acceptance and encouragement to work outside their domestic roles. In fact, the importance of women’s roles in both the domestic and public areas has long been promoted in Viet Nam through socialist dictums such as ‘excel in public work, and be resourceful in housework’ (giỏi việc nước, đảm việc nhà), which was often proudly quoted by both young and older women in Tân Tao commune.

However, as in other ‘ex-socialist’ countries, women’s double roles often operate as a form of self-exploitation since they were almost never free from domestic responsibilities to be able to fairly compete with men in work outside the home, and they thus retain an inferior status in the labour market and in leadership roles, causing the ‘promissory notes’ of gender equity never to be fully realized. As stated by Luong (2003: 203), in Vietnamese society, ‘women’s visible roles in the economy were intended not to replace their domestic duties but to increase the financial resources of the households for which they were responsible.’ In the concern to integrate traditional and modern values to promote gender equality, it is thus crucial to incorporate cultural insights into careful gender planning which addresses both women’s practical and strategic gender needs in their domestic and public work, and also tackles the sensitive issues of intra-household asymmetry to gradually ameliorate power structures between women and men.

Effective programs reaching children that can raise gender awareness are also of special importance. The commitment to ensure gender equality needs to start very early in children’s school textbooks, and in protection for female students from social and sexual harassment, culturally-based systematic discrimination, limited or skewed career orientation and counselling, and to seek to overcome gender-biased beliefs such as that ‘girls will eventually drop out to help their families’, or ‘girls need to choose a ‘suitable’ field’ requiring lower skills, less education, and which offers lower pay, less mobility, less decision-making involvement, lower cultural status, and that emphasize women’s ‘physically and mentally weak’ nature.

The issue of single women also needs to be taken more seriously by policy makers and by the society. As seen in Tân Tao commune and also from research on other parts of the country, for many single women, the non-material aspects of their well-being can be
more important than material ones, even for very poor women. Traditional values asserting that women should be married and have children by a certain (often young) age will need to be changed to reflect new conditions and values of today’s women. Many people in Viet Nam would agree with the following assertion: ‘Female workers today are confident in their ability to contribute to the improvement of family life and of the country. However, the State needs to pay attention to their cultural-emotional well-being and their desire to build a happy family at the right ages accordingly to national traditions and customs, so as to prevent the occurrence of mass single, ‘past the marriage age’ women.’(Bùi Thị Kim Quỳ 1997) It is also necessary to ensure the legal rights of children born out-of-wedlock.

Social policy and criminal law need to address the growing problem of the commodification of women’s bodies. While poverty, particularly in the context of the widening rich-poor gap, is often considered the main (most cited) cause for women to engage in prostitution, the government can significantly reduce the problem by: (1) raising public awareness to undermine the cultural norm of double standards in which men are ‘entitled’ to pre- and extra-marital sex, or they only receive very lenient punishment and criticism; (2) strengthening law enforcement in regard to prostitution, and correcting the current gender-biased law on punishment which requires the women to go through re-education but only a small fine on male customers; and (3) providing more adequate, appealing and better paid livelihood opportunities for the women.

The issue of commodification of women’s bodies also extends to the problem of trafficking of Vietnamese women to rural China and Taiwan to become wives, and also to Cambodia to work as prostitutes. The social phenomenon of many Vietnamese women wanting to marry foreign husbands is again often attributed to poverty, and to budget cuts in education and health care, but policy makers can also consider other possible causes, such as: (1) the prospect of a hard life (both economically and emotionally) in marrying a local man (especially for rural women in the context of a male-dominated kinship system, or for single, ‘past-marriageable-age’ women who potentially face social ostracism) which leads them to seek an alternative route to fulfillment; and (2) the male-breadwinner ideology, and the current state of economic under-development that provides limited livelihood prospects, especially for poor women, create a strong social expectation that
young girls should try to find a wealthy husband (rather than seek to make themselves economically productive and independent). While choice of marriage partner should always be a personal freedom, unhealthy social trends can be potentially harmful to many women whose predicament deserves more attention from policy makers. Improving women’s livelihoods, reducing their household burdens, providing better vocational training and employment assistance, coupled with raising awareness in eliminating the mentality of being economically dependent on men, could help many women to not have to take these risks in their migratory and marriage choices.

As discussed in previous chapters, since women tend to be the ultimate victims of men’s involvement in social evils, the problem needs to be addressed in policies, law, and public advocacy. In this regard, it becomes crucial to raise public awareness of the need to transform gender relations to a more equal state, and to overcome double standards in gender entitlements and responsibilities.

(3) Legal protection

Legal protection for women has been significantly improved since đổi mới, mostly with articles explicitly spelled out in the Labour Code, the Marriage and Family Law, and the Civil Code. These are intended to protect women’s rights in the labour market, in the family, and the basic right to live in a violence-free environment, and they carry a commitment to ensure stronger law enforcement. However, despite the enormous legal commitments to protect women, there is still much room for improvement, especially in paying attention to the cultural aspects of women’s disadvantaged status that facilitate illegal practices and criminal actions against them. Women’s ownership rights also need to be institutionalized, along with more effort to educate local people regarding the importance of women having equal control and access to the family’s resources. However, to be culturally appropriate, this task also requires encouraging the positive traditions of family harmony while avoiding the notion of women-men adversarial and conflicting interests.

Domestic violence especially calls for stronger legal oversight and intervention, and for a more supportive social movement to completely remove the victim-blaming belief and cultural perceptions that women naturally have an inferior status in the family, and that
domestic violence is a private matter to be settled within the household domain. Grass- 
root intervention by local Women’s Union and by local reconciliation groups can provide 
considerable assistance to victims, but the extent of this local intervention should not be 
overestimated, considering the facts that not all local Women’s Union are active enough 
to have effective support, and that reconciliation efforts can be male-dominated, as 
revealed in the government-approved application of gender-biased ‘popular songs and 
proverbs’ (see page 149).

Sexual harassment against females also needs to be stringently addressed, not only to 
ensure a harassment-free environment to give girls and women the freedom and 
confidence to pursue their life choices, and to put an end to men’s control through 
psychological intimidation and physical and sexual violence, but also to significantly 
curtail criminal activities such as kidnapping, prostitution, and physical and sexual 
assaults against women, especially young girls, stemming from the no longer acceptable 
yet perhaps still culturally endorsed perceptions of looking down on women.

Raising awareness on gender equity and providing information on the current law 
regarding gender relations should be a priority in protecting women and improving their 
well-being. It has been shown that many men, especially in rural areas, mistreated or 
abused women and female children simply because they did not adequately understand or 
were not sensitized to certain gender issues and the consequences of their actions under 
the government law (Nguyễn Thị Khoa 1999: 314). It has also been recognized that many 
gender problems cannot be solved by government policies or legal measures, but rather 
require changing public opinions and raising gender awareness not only for men but also 
for women (Phạm Ngọc Anh 1999: 331).

Conclusion

Despite the socialist commitment on gender equality including ensuring women's legal 
rights, and the implementation of women's programs and projects with a gender and 
development focus, women in Viet Nam are still in a disadvantaged position although 
their economic well-being has been improved.
This signifies that gender equality and women's well-being cannot simply be achieved by improving their economic well-being and by ensuring their legal rights, but attention must be paid to the socio-cultural construction of gender relations. This calls for major policy changes to address women's strategic needs in transforming the current unequal power relations and in improving their well-being with an emphasis on the non-material aspects. This requires continuing negotiation in the cultural and political framework which involves many stakeholders in the process.

The negotiation process ensures that women can take advantage of the national and international support for them and benefit from what development has to offer. To be able to make the most of the gender and development approach, women need to negotiate with patriarchy rather than challenge it in order to be compatible with the tradition of social and gender harmony, and to bargain with the State for their autonomous liberation movement within the one-party system.

Negotiation can occur at the national level, community level, family level, and individual level. In many cases, women take initiatives and act as 'fence breakers' to negotiate for their well-being by providing inputs to government policies. Women negotiate in their community and their family for their equal participation in decision-making and for the improvement of their status. At the individual level, facing contradictory social norms and beliefs and the prevailing gap between policy and practice, women also need to balance their perception and make the necessary changes in their awareness and acuity to suit the new socio-economic environment.

National and international support for women to address their strategic interests will need to overcome difficulties such as

(a) the common lack of acceptance of feminism stemming from the perception of an already-existing socialist assertion of gender equality and the perceived cultural incompatibility and threat to social harmony;

(b) the obstacles that exist in cross-cultural communication of gender theories and terminologies. For instance, patriarchy is often translated to mean a family headship system (chế độ gia trưởng) in which the oldest man has the power to lead all other family members (including sons, brothers and nephews), while the much broader meaning of
patriarchy (chế độ nam trị / chế độ phụ quyến) which infers men’s oppression of women is still unfamiliar in Viet Nam (Mai Huy Bích 1999: 58-9);

(c) gender has often been confused with nationality and class, and in this respect, men were absent from gender research. This is because for a long period, women’s oppressors were identified (through government propaganda) as the invaders and the feudal classes, while men have not been recognized as a ruling and oppressing class (ibid), suggesting a need to pay attention to the social and cultural construction of gender relations.

In conclusion, it is vital to address women’s practical needs and strategic interests to give adequate attention to both material and non-material aspects of their lives, while respecting the social and cultural values attached to their well-being. The task of combining traditional and modern values to form a new, socially acceptable environment that is favourable to women and men and their inter-relations, can appear both ambitious and ambiguous, and will be subject to complex debate and conflicting perspectives. It poses a challenge not just for Viet Nam but also for many other countries in the world in the context of increasing globalization.

**Future Research Directions**

Future research in this area will need to focus on more detailed analysis of specific issues regarding how the economic and social changes in Viet Nam are affecting women’s well-being; how gender and family relations are changing in the process of development; and how Vietnamese indigenous approaches are negotiated in the gender and development discourse.

Comparative studies between Viet Nam and another Southeast Asian country will require substantial research on the socio-cultural foundation of a specific country and its political and economic dynamics, which is clearly beyond the scope of my research. Future research directions can thus include comparative studies of an indigenous approach to assess the changes in women’s well-being in the context of increasing globalization.
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Appendix 1. Chronology of Events Relating to Gender Equality and Women

43 AD  Trung sisters lead the first national uprising against the Chinese.

248 Lady Trieu leads a rebellion ousting the Chinese.

1483 The Hong Duc Code of the Le Dynasty gives women equal inheritance rights, the right to divorce and protection from violence.

1930 Formation of Indochinese Communist Party and the Women’s Emancipation Association (forerunner to the Women’s Union)

1941 Foundation of the Women’s Association for National Salvation.

1946 Article 9 of the First Constitution states: “All power in the country belongs to the Vietnamese people, irrespective of race, sex, fortune, class, religion...” and that “women are equal to men in all respects.”

The foundation of the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU).

1950 Women’s Association for National Salvation merges with the Vietnam Women’s Union and holds the first National Women’s Congress.

1956 Second National Congress of Vietnamese Women.

1959 Article 24 of the Constitution states: “Women enjoy equality with men in all spheres of activities – political, economic, cultural, at home and in society... There should be equal pay for equal work... The state guarantees women employees fully paid maternity leave both before and after birth.”

1960 The first Marriage and Family Law emphasizes the principles of free choice of marriage partners, monogamy, equality between husband and wife and the protection of women’s and children’s interests.

Third National Congress of Vietnamese Women.

1960 Formation of Union of Women for the Liberation of South of Vietnam.

1965 Women’s Union launches the “Three Responsibilities” campaign.

1974 Fourth National Congress of Vietnamese Women.


1980 Article 63 of the Constitution states: “The state and society ensure the development of maternity clinics, creches, kindergartens, canteens and other social facilities to create favourable conditions for women to work, rest, and study.”


Fifth National Congress of Vietnamese Women.

1984 Penal Code Article 138: “Every form of violation of women’s rights is to be punished.”
1986  The new Marriage and Family Law prohibits early marriages (under 18 years of age for women and 20 years for men), and gives spouses equal rights regarding property and inheritance.

1987  Sixth National Congress of Vietnamese Women.

1988  Population and Family Planning Policy encourages each couple to have one or two children; suggests the age of the mother and father at the birth of their first child to be 22 and 24 in urban areas and 19 and 21 in rural areas; and states that spacing between children should be three to five years.

Decision 163 of the Council of Ministers: “Authorities of every level should facilitate women’s unions at the same level to involve and to be heard on the process of policy formulation, law drafting and planning concerning women and children.”

1992  Article 63 of the new Constitution states: “Male and female citizens have equal rights in all respects – political, economic, cultural, social and the family. All acts of discrimination against women and all acts of damaging women’s dignity are strictly banned. Men and women shall receive equal pay for equal work. Women workers shall enjoy a regime related to maternity. Women who are State employees and wage-earners shall enjoy paid prenatal and post-natal leaves during which they shall receive all their wages and allowances as determined by law.”

Seventh National Congress of Vietnamese Women.

1993  Resolution 4 of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party puts forth the goals of “improving women’s material and spiritual life,” and “enhancing women’s social status and the realization of their right to equality.”

1994  Directive 37 of the Party Central Committee states that the Government and Party should aim to have at least twenty percent of positions filled by women. All branches of state apparatus are required to improve gender awareness, formulate policies to develop women’s skills, develop plans for (re)training women cadres, and increase the number of female employees.

1995  Article 20 of the Labour Code: “Everyone has the right to freely choose a profession and a place for apprenticeship suited to the need of future employment. All businesses, organizations and individuals who meet the conditions prescribed by law shall be allowed to open a job-training establishment.” Article 10: “The State officers have the responsibility to devise diversified and convenient forms of training for women laborers so that besides their current jobs they can have reserve jobs and so that the use of female labor can become easier and more and more suitable as well as their motherly function.”

Chapter 10 of the Ordinance of Labor protection outlines separate provisions for women. Article 13 bans women from work considered heavy or dangerous, such as working on ocean-going ships, oil rigs and operating cranes.

1997  In October, the Prime Minister of Viet Nam signs the National Plan of Action (POA) for the Advancement of Vietnamese Women by the Year 2000. Eighth National Congress of Vietnamese Women held to set objectives, orientations, and tasks of the women’s movement for 1997-2002 period.

1999  Viet Nam lodges its Second Report on CEDAW with the United Nations. The Prime Minister announces (No. 207/TB/VPCP) the decision for ministries, branches and People’s Committees to integrate gender into planning for the socio-economic development plan from 2001-2010. NCFAW is to work in coordination with others to formulate and submit to the Government the National Strategy for the Advancement of Women for the period 2001-2005, in line with the Government’s socio-economic development plan for the same period.

Since late 1999, a Government/Donor Gender Strategy Group has been meeting to develop a joint government/donor gender strategy by the end of 2000. This process includes the completion of a literature survey and identification of research and projects on women and gender in Viet Nam from 1993-2000.

2000  Viet Nam sends a delegation of 24 to the UN Beijing +5 Special Session in New York, to review the implementation of the International Platform for Action.

Source: Gender Briefing Kit, United Nations in Viet Nam, December 2000
Appendix 2.

1. Residence Status Categories

Permanent and temporary residents are classified as KT1, KT2, KT3, and KT4, according to their local residency, length and frequency of residency, job stability, and other factors, as follows:

KT1  Permanent residents with official residence permits

KT2  a) People with permanent residence permits in other parts of Ho Chi Minh City, but living in the locality  
     b) People with permanent residence permits in the locality but sold their house and moved elsewhere

KT3  Migrants from other provinces who have lived in the locality for more than six months and have permanent stable work. This category also includes decommissioned army personnel whose residence permits have not yet been transferred back to Ho Chi Minh City after completing their military service.

KT4  Short-term migrants, seasonal migrants or relatives of official residents. This category also includes foreigners and overseas Vietnamese. This category comprises many unregistered migrants and official figures for this group of people are not accurate.

2. Other factors determining income level in Tân Tạo commune

a) Age. Results from CSSH survey (see Table 39) show that for people between 15 and 60 years old, the older the person, the higher income that person received (the Labour Law in Viet Nam allows people over 15 years of age to have paid work). This can be explained that older people have more experience and capital and would thus be able to earn higher incomes (except those over 60). It can also be related to social and cultural norms which emphasize age as more important than education, skills or work experience.

Table 39. Tân Tạo Commune: Income According to Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income (dong)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>396,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>647,062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>959,145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-50</td>
<td>946,998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>1,105,546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>581,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>852,553</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

b) Employment sector. The survey by CSSH shows that in households with people working in different sectors, on average each person earn 873,004 dong/month. While cadres working in Party and mass organizations earn the highest incomes (1,671,500 dong/month, see Table 40), no-skilled labourers earn the lowest which was only 2.5 times less than the highest (671,089 dong/month). This could be partly explained that cadres can do other income-generating work (except for certain work prohibited to be performed by government cadres) while still receiving state salary. Employees of State management organizations, foreign entreprises, private entreprises, or small household production or service earned about 1,000,000 – 1,200,000 dong/month. People who were self-employed or who worked for their family businesses earn less (833,805 dong/month), followed by workers in joint ventures with foreign investment, mostly textile and footwear factories (733,642 dong/month).

Labourers and factory workers were in the sectors with lowest income. Labourers, including many local farmers who left agricultural work (due to having no land or
insufficient family income from agriculture) have no transferable skills or capital, so they have to rely on unskilled hired work on a daily basis which is low paying and unstable. Factory workers have at least lower-secondary education but no capital, and who are mainly migrant workers, also earn low incomes in occupations which are generally considered not desirable for city residents.

**Table 40. Tân Tao Commune: Income According to Employment Sector**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment sector</th>
<th>Income (dong)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State management organizations</td>
<td>1,013,595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party and mass organizations</td>
<td>1,671,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign entreprises</td>
<td>1,092,602</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private entreprises</td>
<td>1,195,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small household production or service</td>
<td>1,201,846</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entreprises with foreign investments</td>
<td>733,642</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>671,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed or working for family</td>
<td>833,805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>873,005</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).*

c) **Location of work.** The survey by CSSH also shows that location of work was also a factor determining income. Those who had family businesses outside their homes earned the highest incomes (1,624,192 dong/month), followed by formal employees in offices, entreprises and factories (1,023,205 dong/month). Farmers working in the fields earned the lowest pay (596,423 dong/month), followed by street vendors (627,273 dong/month). It should be noticed that most farmers and street vendors were women who work long hours with very low income. Contradictorily, market traders without booth (unregistered) had higher income than those with booths (registered). This was explained that those with booths had to pay taxes and rent every month, in addition to an initial contribution as part of their market registration, while those without booths did not have to incur these expenses (but they might periodically have to pay a fine when caught selling without a registered status.)
Table 41. Tân Tao Commune: Income According to Location of Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of work</th>
<th>Income (dong)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At home</td>
<td>811,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business outside home</td>
<td>1,624,192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the street</td>
<td>627,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In market without booth</td>
<td>872,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In market with booth</td>
<td>775,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family agricultural land</td>
<td>596,423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No regular place</td>
<td>838,867</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offices, entreprises and factories</td>
<td>1,023,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>855,488</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

Table 42. Tân Tao Commune: Per Person Income According to Household Main Occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&lt;250,000</th>
<th>250,000-354,666</th>
<th>354,666-468,666</th>
<th>468,666-635,466</th>
<th>&gt;635,466</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade, services</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small production worker</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
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<td>State employee, retiree</td>
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<td>%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
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<td>8.1%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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</table>

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).

d) Household main occupations. The survey by CSSH also shows that a household’s main occupation could be an income determinant. Households with trade and services as the main occupation had the highest average income (17.5% and 27% in IV and V quintiles in 16.3% total), as well as households of State employees and retirees (11.1%
and 14.3% in IV and V quintiles in 9.5% total), and “others” (17.5% and 12.7% in IV and V quintiles in 11.4% total). Farming households were among the lowest income recipients (32.8% and 18.5% in I and II quintiles with only 12.7% in V quintile in 19.9% total), along with labourers and home-makers. It should also be noticed that, although households of traders and service providers, State employees and retirees, and others were among the highest income, there was still a considerable rate of these households falling in the I quintile (14.1%, 10.9% and 12.5%, respectively.)

e) Household occupation group. Figure 8 also shows that household income strongly depended on whether the household is in agriculture, half-agriculture or non-agriculture. In general, it depended on the degree to which the household has switched from agriculture to non-agriculture: higher switch would result in higher income. Agriculture households had lowest income, accounted for 50% of I group (lowest income) and only 10% in V group (highest income). Half-agriculture did better, with only 26% in I group and close to 13% in V group. Non-agriculture households on average were the richest, with only about 18% in I group and 22% in V group. We can also see that there was significant income polarization among households in the agriculture group, which did not occur so dramatically in other groups.

Figure 8. Tân Tạo Commune: Household Income According to Main Household Occupation Group

Source: Survey by CSSH (2000).
3. Questions for Individual Interviews and Survey Questionnaire

Open-ended Questions

1. Livelihoods/Employment

How would you describe your general living standards since the urbanization? What are the positive and negative impacts of socio-economic changes on women and men?

What do you think poverty is? How can you tell or measure it?

Speaking of poverty, could you talk about your situation (if applicable) and the causes of poverty?

Could you also talk about the poverty situation of your relatives, in your neighborhood and your commune (if applicable)?

What are the differences between women’s poverty and men’s poverty? What factors can determine how women and men are at risk of falling into poverty?

How do you think people can escape from poverty? What can the commune government help and what can the poor do to help themselves?

Have you received credit? How many times, when, from what sources, interest rates, and for what purposes? Have you paid them back on time?

Do you think women or men have better access to credit? Why? Specifically, do poor women or women without a husband have access to credit? What are the difficulties if any?

How do you think can credit be more accessible to women and the poor in general?

What do you think about the migration situation in your commune? What are the positive and the negative factors that migrants might bring into the commune?

For migrants: Could you talk about the economic background in your home land, how you decided to migrate, and whether/how your economic situation has been improved?

In your opinion, what is the current situation of women’s and men’s employment in the commune?

What types of work do women do? And men? Can they switch?
What do you think the reasons are for the unemployment among young men? And the implications?

What do you think about the positive and negative aspects of women having more opportunities to find work?

Are there other issues regarding your economic situation or the situation of the commune you want to add?

2. Education

What do you think about the general situation of education in your commune since the urbanization? And in your family?

Do you think there are differences in terms of access to education for boys and girls? Please elaborate.

What are the obstacles for parents and children in trying to keep children in school? Are the obstacles for boys and girls different?

Do you think girls' domestic responsibilities especially after getting married affect their education? How?

In a hypothetical situation, if a parent has to take one of his/her two children (one boy and one girl) out from school for economic reasons, which child should drop out? Why?

Could you elaborate the different perspectives (if any) between parents and children on education?

How do you think education can better improve women’s well-being?

Are there other issues regarding education you want to add?

3. Social and family relations

How would you assess the status of women compared to 15 years ago and comparison between older and younger women? Between residents and migrants? Between women of different occupations? Please give specific examples from your experience in your family, with relatives and in your neighborhood.
Do you think women’s economic role has changed since the urbanization? What about men’s role? How do these changes affect women’s and men’s well-being?

In your opinion, is there any significant change in people’s perception of women’s domestic responsibilities? Have men assumed a larger share of domestic work? Please compare the situations of older and younger, poor and non-poor women, residents and migrants, and women of different occupations.

Who makes decisions in the family? Please elaborate.

Do you think gender discrimination still exists in family and in the society? How and at what level? Please compare different groups (as above).

Could you discuss the problem of social evils in your family (if any) and your neighborhood and commune? What are the causes? Who suffers the most from it? In what way?

4. Legal protection

In your family, have the woman’s name been added in the land certificate? How do you think the impact of that will be?

Could you talk about the problem of domestic violence in your neighborhood? What are the main causes? Has it been reduced or on the rise since the urbanization? How do you think it can be better prevented?

Do you think girls can go anywhere by themselves like boys? If any, what are the reasons for the differences between girls and boys in terms of their vulnerability to emotional and physical violence?
Survey Questionnaire

1. How do you rank the importance of girls’ education today?
   - Very important
   - Important
   - Not important

2. Do you agree with statement that ‘No matter how high girls study, they will end up doing simple, low-paying work and staying home to do housework and take care of children’?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure

3. Who should be breadwinners in the family?
   - Husband
   - Wife
   - Both

4. Who should assume household responsibilities?
   - Men/boys
   - Women/girls
   - Both

5. Do you think domestic violence is still a problem for some families in the commune and needs help from the government and mass organizations?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Not sure