

CB-22

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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FEMINISM COMES TO VIETNAM

Are Vietnamese women losing to market reforms?

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA
4 West Wheelock St
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

The Women's Union bookstore, on Hanoi's Hang Chuoi street, sells a full compliment of novels by Danielle Steel, and few biographies of revolutionary heroines. On the back cover of The New Year's supplement of the city's communist party daily, a voluptuous blonde holds on to her falling bathing suit. Near the bookstore, an old peasant woman begs for food. The neighboring Army hospital performs "breast enlargement" for anyone rich enough to pay.

Welcome to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, a country whose women are famous for vanquishing Chinese invaders, shooting down American helicopters and serving a revolution that not only brought down centuries of feudalism but gave them equal rights, free day care centers and six-month maternity leaves.

"The revolution did a lot for Vietnamese women," says Nguyen Kim Cuc, Head of the International Relations Department of the Vietnam Women's Union and a member of the organization's 15-women presidium. "But the centralized economy was a failure. We had to change."

And so it was that *doi moi* (renovation) was born in 1986. Eight years later, Vietnamese and foreign scholars point to distressing signs that women are being short-changed by the reforms. Reliable information is scarce though. The whole country is undergoing tremendous social change and evidence sometimes points to progress as well as to drawbacks. "Market forces are pushing women out of employment," warns Hanoi-based economist Tran Thi Van Anh. "The social safety net is crumbling and without it women are at a disadvantage in the new market economy."

Signs of the retreat are indeed everywhere. Women's political representation has never been lower. Close to two-thirds of the work force laid-off last year by state-owned enterprises were women. Foreign investors and new domestic private enterprises often ignore the six-month maternity leave guaranteed by Vietnamese Law. Forced marriage has returned to the countryside.

Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

But signs also point to breakthrough. Tolerance of divorce and single motherhood is on the rise. Most new small trading and services enterprises belong to women. Young and educated urban women lead more independent lives as they access a wealth of new tourism and service jobs. Is it really all that bad?

According to some foreign scholars, the reforms have opened a new chapter in the thousand-year conflict pitting Vietnam's matriarchal indigenous tradition against the male-centered culture of confucianism imported from China. "In the deep recesses of Vietnam's past, women played an openly powerful role," writes Stephen O'Harrow of Hawaii University. "Vietnamese women are the main inheritors of that tradition and Vietnamese women have strategies of their own to counter confucian male power."

Agricultural-economist Tran Thi Van Anh shrugs her shoulders when she hears that kind of talk. What she sees now in the countryside is the feminization of poverty. "Time is running out," warns Anh who recently upgraded her Bulgarian training with a two-year stint at Oxford. "With the reforms our society is becoming more legalized. In the past women may have been able to wield unofficial power but now legal ownership is more important than *de facto* ownership."

Vietnam's new economic policies do not discriminate against women, but they are "gender-blind", complain a few Vietnamese women researchers using a term borrowed from international development jargon. "The government says it is enough to have a law saying men and women are equal," says Hanoi sociologist Le Quy. "They do not see that an equal policy sometimes work against women. To be equal, women sometimes need different policies."

Legally speaking, Vietnamese women are better off than their sisters in other developing countries. Equality is written into the Constitution and into the Law on Marriage and Family. Husbands and wives have the same responsibilities; sons and daughters have equal rights. The Law on Marriage and Family states that husbands should help women bring up the children and that domestic chores are a joint responsibility.

The Communists' commitment to gender equality goes back to the early 1930's. The Declaration of Freedom of the Indochinese Communist Party called for "equality between the sexes." The 1946 constitution declared "women equal to men in all respects." In 1959, Hanoi decreed "equal pay for equal work" and guaranteed women employees fully-paid maternity leave. The 1959 Marriage and Family Law set out principles of free choice in marriage partner and forbade bigamy. In 1986, early marriages were prohibited (under 18 for women and under 20 for men) as were marriages without consent. When dividing property during a divorce, non-salaried work in the household was even given monetary value.

But Family Law - as often with other Vietnamese laws - is often not applied. Some blame the country's lack of resources. Others say the problem goes deeper and has to do with mentalities. "Law in Vietnam rests not on the notion of individual rights, but on the notion of duty," argues A. Albee who studied the question for UNICEF. "Duty of the father to the son, the wife to the husband, the family to

the state. Beyond the progress made in establishing legal equality, women's daily lives continue in accordance with unwritten rules."

Women's lives improved though under communist rule. Forced early marriages stopped. Men who beat their wives were taken to task by local authorities. Domestic violence receded. Free day-care was available. Household work was recognized and counted. "Cooperatives members got food and status according to the hours they worked," recalls 38-year-old Tran Van Anh. "When the cooperatives disbanded in the late 80's, the work done in the house lost its economic value." And the economic value of one's work is certainly the key question in Vietnam now.

Competition for jobs is fierce. Women have been hit hardest by the recent wave of cutbacks in both administrative jobs and state-owned enterprises. According to official statistics 67% of redundancies in state-companies are women. Real figures could be even higher. In HCM City alone, between 1987 and 1990, 69% of laid-off workers were women. And those are official statistics. In industry, women are losing employment first, largely because directors complain about the cost of maternity leave and child care benefits.

"Women are weak, both physically and intellectually," says 37-year-old Vu Tuan Anh, a researcher at the Institute of Economics, an influential government think-tank. "They are disabled in society. If I was a businessman, I would not hire them because they must take care of their children and often be absent from work. Our enterprises must be competitive if Vietnam is to develop and women are a handicap."

Anh's tirade stuns the room into silence. A whole smelly durian exploding in the room would not have left the place more baffled. For a few seconds, the Canadian experts who have come to Hanoi to hold a three-day gender-awareness seminar cannot hide their disgust. With his fine silver-rimmed glasses and his demureness, Anh is probably the last person from whom they expected such an outburst. (Anh later tells me he made the comment on purpose to take the seminar out of its polite academic manner and right into the heart of the matter.) "My colleagues often say things like that when we discuss economic policy," he confides during the following coffee break. "But they would never say it in front of foreigners."

Anh's strategy pays off. A few minutes later, other participants are joining in with their own bits of wisdom such as: "All the best cooks in the world are men, the best tailors too. Men cannot bare children. Men must go out to earn money while women stay home and take care of children."

The discussion heats up and Vietnamese women participants begin to argue; translators get sucked into the discussion and forget to translate. The Canadian experts try to talk over the chaos. "I did not expect it to be so backward," admits one of them.

The Vietnamese women are obviously used to it. "The foreigners should let us speak," a young Vietnamese participant tells me. She is unhappy to hear a Canadian expert use a lot of feminist rhetoric. Her male colleagues latch onto the jargon to discredit the debate. Vietnamese women participants plead in favor of

improving women's lives as a way to improve the family and the society as a whole. They never talk of "individual rights".

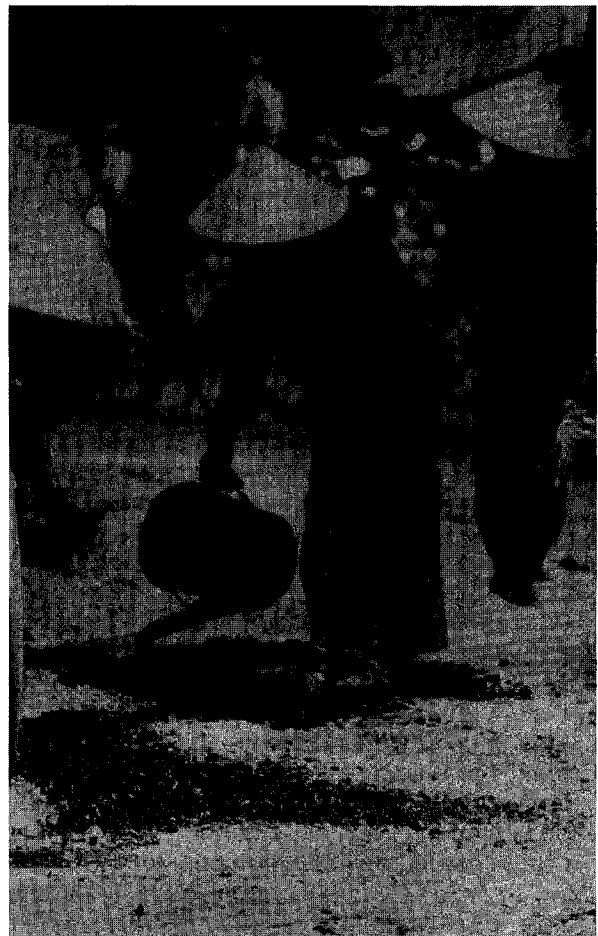
Seminar on "gender policies" are a new thing for Vietnam. The Canadian one, held in March, was wrongly advertised as being about "sex" instead of "gender". Male delegates, whose participation had been hard to secure, were greatly amused. "The ministries we approached did not see why they should send men," admits one of the organizers. "They think gender is just a fad of the Westerners. They say Vietnam has no problems between men and women."

Socialist-feminism vaulted women as equals to men in the labor supply. In Vietnam, women make up more than half the workers in road repair, agriculture and garbage collection. Visitors are sometimes stunned to see women carry containers of burning asphalt and baskets of rocks to hand-fill potholes on Hanoi's streets.

Market reforms launched in 1986 quickly exposed the limits of labor equality. The hidden cost of maternity leave and day care became visible. Some entrepreneurs and officials began to develop a new rationale to explain why women were being pushed out of some jobs. "With Marxism, we only looked at women as laborers," explains Le Ngoc Vanh, a family-researcher at the Hanoi Center for Women and Family Studies and one of the few men on staff. "This was a mistake. Women must also develop as mothers and as wives. They need to develop their beauty, their personality. Confucianism is part of Vietnam's culture. Some of it is good and must be preserved. It can help us build a new model for the good Vietnamese family."

Thai professor Teeranat Karnjanauksorn of Chulalongkorn University, in Bangkok, is worried that confucianism will ally with the new market economics to push women back further. She is watching Asian countries move their manufacturing interests to Vietnam and does not like what she sees. An advocate of better working conditions for young

Thai factory workers, Teeranat became famous in Thailand when she took up the cause of young women severely burned when a fire razed the toy-factory where they worked. (Doors were locked when the fire erupted, there were no sprinklers in the building and supervisors refused to let the young women leave when early smell of smoke was



*Woman pouring asphalt
on a Hanoi street.*

detected.) "Do not go the way of your neighbors in Southeast Asia," she tells a group of Vietnamese assembled in Hanoi to discuss gender policies. "Do not relegate your women to the role of a cheap and uneducated labor force to supply export-led growth. Make sure some of them have access to education, management and scientific training."

Statistics from the Education Ministry show that more Vietnamese girls are dropping out of school than boys. A quick look at most foreign-funded management business training program, reveals a larger number of male students. "Many women head small private enterprises," says Teeranat. "But they are left out of the training. You need the private market but you need to control it too. Otherwise it controls you."

The labor situation is moving so fast, even the best Vietnamese women researchers can hardly keep up. "Do you mean to tell me this could be illegal?" asks Tran Thi Van Anh, when I show her a Vietnam Airlines recruitment ad published in a local paper. The jobs - well-paid office ones - were "for men only." At first, Anh does not understand why the ad interests me. "We never thought about it," she says, scribbling furiously on her note book. "We saw good new jobs being reserved to men and did not think it could be challenged legally. But you are right. Vietnamese law says men and women have equal work opportunities."

An attempt by Australian Trade Unions to help train Vietnamese women trade unionists has had an unexpected outcome. The school they funded does exist. It occupies quite a few rooms at the Hanoi headquarter of the Confederation of Trade Unions, Vietnam's only recognized body of organized labor. But women there do not learn how to defend workers's rights. "We give them skills to help them find work," says director Pham Gia Thieu as we tour the typing class and the cooking class. In the computer room, more than half the computers are being used by men. Thieu is very proud of his center. "The Education Ministry and the Labor Ministry are jealous of us," he says. "Even the Social Affairs Ministry does not have a Center like this."

High-level officials of the Trade Unions admit to be unsure as to what direction to take in this new market economy. "If we have too many strikes the investors will not come," says one of them requesting anonymity. "We need investments to create jobs so we tell the workers to be quiet. But what can we do when the workers are unhappy and go on strike without our permission?" (Strikes are not legal in Vietnam. They are not illegal either. A new Labor Law presently discussed at the National Assembly proposes to legalize them. The draft law is the object of intense discussion.)

TROUBLE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The situation of Vietnamese women factory workers does not worry Vietnamese researchers half as much as the countryside does. Close to 75% of the female labor force is employed in agriculture. With de-collectivization, individual families were left to their own device. Training in the use of new technologies and new high-yield varieties, once-given by the cooperatives, has been thrown in disarray. Extension workers, those who disseminate agricultural

know-how, are slowly learning to deal with individual families. But all their work is targeted to men farmers. "We have met with officials at the Ministry to ask them to teach women too," explains Tran Thi Vanh Anh. "But they have little time for us. They are busy adjusting to the dismantling of the cooperatives." Most northern extension workers have only known the communist system and do not know how to work outside of the cooperatives to reach isolated farmers. "I did not know about gender policies before," says Bui Van Hong, a young woman working at the Hanoi headquarters of the Farmers' Union. "Now, I will try to include it in our projects."

Hanoi's decision to de-collectivize land (See CB-11) did not only increase food output. It also plunged many families into turmoil. With land being allocated to "households", two-generation households began to increase. "Young people are eager to form their own household, separate from the old people," says sociologist Le Thi, director of Hanoi's Center for Women and Family Studies.

According to custom and confucian values, men assume the role of head of household. No national study has yet been done to see if men are being issued land use rights in larger number than women. But most assume this is the case. "Most women would not even see a problem with that," says Tran Thi Van Anh. "They cannot imagine that a piece of paper could one day be more important than tradition. But with a market economy, legal ownership will have more importance than de facto ownership. I know a man in Soc Trang Province who sold the land to a developer without his wife's consent. Now, the family is poorer than they were before because the man has found no work."

In the North especially, land is so scarce, the individual plot so small and agricultural prices so low, that men are moving to the cities to find work to feed their families. The increasing number of men waiting on Giang Vo Street, a main Hanoi thoroughfare, to be hired for a day, is a telling sign. They come to the city, while women stay behind to cultivate the land. Which does not mean that the land user right is issued under the women's name. "Even the Land Management office agrees with me now that both names should be on the users-right," says Tran Thi Van An, looking suddenly tired. "But they say they cannot change their methods because they have already given out many papers." (Land reallocation is not completed yet.)

Without land-use rights, women have no collateral and can not get a bank loan. "Evidence from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines demonstrates that this is a leading cause of the feminization of poverty in rural areas of Southeast Asia," says Canadian Nancy Spence, coordinator of Southeast Asian Women Development Programs for the Canadian Development Agency.

Many Vietnamese men disagree. "What the man owns, the family owns," says Le Ngoc Van. "The Family Law says assets must be divided equally in case of divorce. Foreigners do not understand the dynamics of Vietnamese families."

He may be right. In some Hanoi families I know, important decision such as buying a house or investing in a new business, are the

subject of large family meetings. Children come back from as far as Eastern Europe and the Middle-East to take part in the discussion. Women who contribute their savings to the planned-investment have as much of a say as men do. And their management skill often makes their opinions count even more.

The cultural gap is real and it clearly showed during a session of the Canadian gender-seminar. The Vietnamese male interpreter modified the content of the speech given by a Canadian researcher, systematically replacing "in the family" by "*nuoc ngoai gia dinh*" which means "in foreign families." "She said men spent all the money on frivolous things and left women little money to feed the family," he explains to me later. "Maybe that is true in other developing countries, but it is not true in Vietnam. My friends give all their money to their wives. They only have pocket money."

The idea that Vietnamese women scare the hell out of their hard-working husbands, is the subject of many a cartoon in local newspapers. Some women admit it conveys a measure of truth. But most tell me, it is just a joke men enjoy because it makes them look like martyrs. "The real power is in the hands of men, especially in the countryside," says sociologist Le Thi.



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WOMEN SEIZE MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Some of Vietnam's best known new entrepreneurs are women though. One of the most popular may be Nguyen Thi Anh Nhan, a Hanoi engineer who launched a new Vietnamese beer with the help of a Danish Brewery. The new brew, called Halida, successfully challenged both international and local brands and turned Mrs Nhan into a media darling. Mrs Nhan takes every opportunity to say that her company employs close to 60% women. She has also been active in an embryonic informal network of Vietnamese businesswomen. Another popular figure is Pham Chi Lan, the respected secretary general of Vietnam's General Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"We all have a woman friend or a relative who was laid-off from a state-owned company and decided to open a coffee-shop, or a beauty parlor, or a *com bin dan* (street restaurant), or a silk shop, or a tailor shop" says Tran Van Anh. "They have done so relying on friends to get basic training, learning from each other, trusting their own sense of market rules."

Today, although no study confirms it, many believe women own most of the thousands of new small private enterprises that have blossomed in Vietnam. In fact, women never left market economics. Under the centralized economic system, they kept alive the market principles. While men got government jobs, women did the petty trading in both rural and urban areas. "Before the reforms, I used to sell smuggled cigarettes to earn a living," says 35-year-old Minh. "Now I work as a cook for foreigners and I am hoping to soon open my own restaurant."

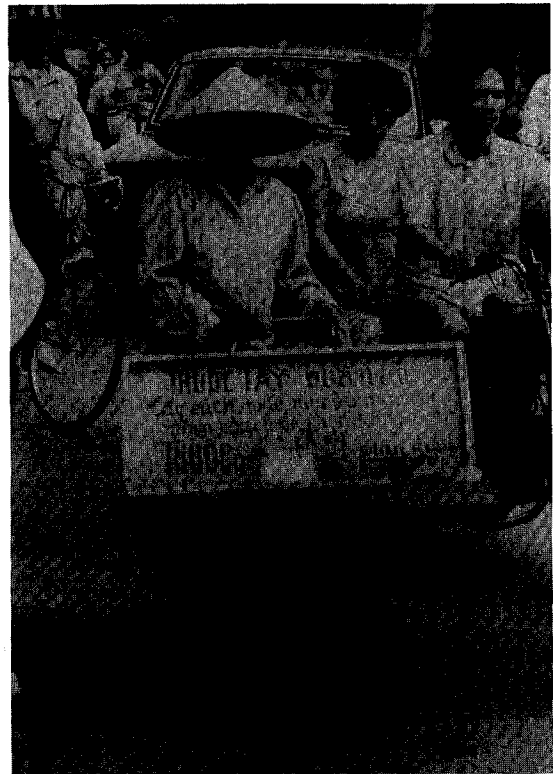
In the rural areas, women are helped by the arrival of many foreign-funded small-credit programs targeted to women. But there is a dark side of the rainbow. Raising chickens or ducks, weaving baskets or planting fruit trees, takes time. Already burdened with their work in the field - men plough but women do all the replanting - and the increased work load of caring for their

children without the help of the cooperative, women are working increasingly long hours. "We must be careful when we introduce those new programs," warns Monique Sternin, a French nurse who has been working in North Vietnam for four years trying to improve women's health. "Some of these women are already working themselves to death. The buffalo gets a few days of rest after giving birth, the woman does not. She goes right back to the field." In one commune where Oxfam-UK manages a health-program, 50% of the local women were diagnosed as suffering from some kind of gynecological infection and being weakened by it.

Down in HoChiMinh City, young Saigonese women are riding on the tourism boom and getting well-paid jobs in the hotel industry. (best wages in town according to city statistics). Some, like Nguyen Thi Thu Ha, are making it big. A kitchen manager in a restaurant at the onset of the reforms, Ha is now Vice-President of the Youth Union Tourist Company. She master-minded the logistics of Saigon's newest and most luxurious Hotel: the Omni. "Women talk less and work harder", she says.

Young women are taking advantage of renewed opportunities in another lucrative business: prostitution. "The authorities talk of a morality problem, of a social illness," complains Tran Thi Van Anh. "If women had better ways to earn money, they would not become prostitutes."

Even once-prudish Hanoi now has its bar girls and its high-class prostitutes. Foreigners hiring rickshaws outside hotels report



*Young woman selling
cleaning products.*

being offered "a woman" or a "boom-boom" by the cyclo-driver. In HCMCity, badly-paid policemen are party to the networks. When a humanitarian aid agency working with prostitutes to fight AIDS in HCMCity contacted the local police to make sure they would not harass their workers, they were told; "Distribute as many condoms as you wish but do not disturb the business." (Male prostitution also exist but on a much smaller scale. Walking around Hanoi's central Hoan Kiem Lake one night we accidentally stumbled on a pick-up spot and witnessed a few negotiations between a Vietnamese youth and some fat foreigners.)

THE SOCIAL COST OF ECONOMIC REFORMS

The social cost of the new economic activities is more and more visible. "I have little time left for my son," says 34-year-old Thu, a secondary-school teacher who moonlights as a private Vietnamese teacher and real-estate speculator. "I am always tired and I have no time to see my friends or help out at the school. I have not read a whole book in a long time."

The safety net that used to assist women with child care, education and health has steadily deteriorated in the past few years. Even the authorities admit it. Caretakers in nurseries are so badly paid that they must seek alternative work to make ends meet. As a consequence they are often absent from work and less dedicated to their job. "Many women have turned to private day-care to make sure their children are well taken care of," says Thu. But those are expensive: 300,000 dong (US\$30) a month for a baby, 150,000 dong (US\$15) for a toddler. With her US\$20 dollar monthly salary, Thu is glad her 11-year-old son takes care of himself.

Even the extended family is not as much a help as it used to be. "Everyone is busy trying to make money," says Tran Thi Que, another Hanoi economist. The phenomenon may not be as wide-reaching as she says though. On my street alone, the children of three neighboring families are visibly taken care of by their grand-parents. My closest-neighbor is a grand-father I always see surrounded by toddlers. I see few men at the market though. Women are definitely the buyers of food. Aside from restaurants, I have seen no men cook. "Some educated men in the cities will help with household work," says Que. "Not in the rural areas."

According to Vietnamese experts, housework is done mainly by women, sometimes "assisted" by men. "Many women have to plan for or even carry out work related to their families during office hours," says Que. "It constitutes an additional reason for State organizations not to want to hire them."

But the reforms have also brought positive social impact. Women of all ages talk of "new freedoms", of more social tolerance to individual choices, of less social pressure to conform to strict pattern of behavior. "I can go out with my friend and ride at the back of his motorbike and it does not mean I will marry him," says 20-year-old Ha who studies marketing in Hanoi.

Since 1986, divorce has been on the rise. For some women, the new opportunities brought by economic reforms have meant a chance to end an unhappy marriage. "We were not happy my husband and I but we

could not divorce because we had no money," explains 64-year-old Lan who now sells art from the small house where she lives alone. "Now we are able to afford another house, and my husband moved out."

Thirty-five year old Minh also took advantage of the increase revenue from her new job as cook in a foreigner's house to get a divorce. She paid her husband the cost of a new house and kept the old apartment, happy to be alone with her daughter.

Vietnam is also seeing an increased number of children born out of wedlock, a phenomenon once severely frowned upon. In the past, having a child out of wedlock was severely punished. In the north, women would have their head shaved and be marched around town. Today, in some northern mountainous areas, un-married women over 30 having children are tolerated. Forestry enterprises - where women sometimes form 90% of the staff in tree nurseries - even gave them maternity leaves.

Vietnam's population imbalance may partly explain the phenomenon. According to the 1989 census, females make up 51.5% of the population compare to 48.5% for men. "A woman without children would be destitute," explains Hanoi professor Le Thi Nam Tuyet who has first written about the phenomenon in forestry enterprises. (Vietnam has few old-age safety nets. Aging people rely on their children for care.) A club for single women over 30 opened at the HCMCity Youth Cultural House. The club is called "The bridge to happiness" and helps women find husbands.

In March 1994, reports the Youth Union's newspaper, HCMCity cops busted an illegal matchmaking firm catering to Taiwanese men under the unromantic name of Marketing and Investment Services Center. Men paid US\$13,500 for one-stop service including dowries and wedding ceremonies. About US\$3,000 went to the bride's family.

INCREASED TOLERANCE TO INDIVIDUALITY

Many Vietnamese researchers say authorities never envisioned the magnitude of the social and cultural changes, economic reforms would engender. "To do well in a market economy people have to be creative and resourceful, they have to act independently and take responsibility for their actions," says a Hanoi sociologist. "In the 70's and 80's everyone had to behave the same way. Now, many are transferring individualistic values into their private lives."

Signs of that are everywhere. A women's health club, EVA, opened on the 3rd floor of Hom-Duc Vien market, near my house. For a while, women rowed and pumped iron to tone up their figure. (The club recently closed for unknown reason.) Newspapers are full of advertisements about aesthetic surgery, face lift, peeling, breast augmentation etc. The most famous beauty-treatment center in Hanoi is run by the plastic-surgery department of Army Hospital 108. (A "new nose" cost 70 to 80 US\$) The city boasts an increasing number of beauty parlors where a haircut and a facial cost less than US\$3. "When my mother was my age she says only bad girls wore make-up. Now it is natural to want to be more beautiful," says 19-year-old Lan who studies at the Foreign Language School in Hanoi.

In 1989, when I first came to Hanoi, I was told cosmetics were impossible to find in Vietnam and would be most appreciated gifts among women (compared to cigarettes or alcohol for men). The lipsticks I had brought then were a sensation. Today, they pale in comparison to the fancy MaxFactor make-up kits and the expensive French perfume available in many boutiques.

Dancing halls are also popular. On Saturday nights, the one near my house is dark, smoky and crowded. Disco music spills out into the street where well-dressed teens pose and flirt. Unaccompanied young women giggle at the entrance while young men gather their courage to approach them, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. "Some of these kids make more money than their parents because they have jobs with foreign companies," explains retired economist Nguyen Lam Hoe. "They do not respect their parent's opinion anymore."

THE RETURN OF THE FOUR VIRTUES

To some intellectuals the most puzzling phenomenon is the cohabitation of such "liberal western" values with the resurgence, mostly in the countryside, of conservative traditional confucian values and religious rituals. The August Revolution of 1945 did not only put an end to eight decades of foreign domination. It meant to introduce new democratic practices, "new modes of life" meant to liberate people from "outmoded customs"

According to the dictates of Confucianism, women had no right to citizenship and private independence. They were totally dependant on men. Their lives were governed by the three obediences: as a daughter to her father, as a wife to her husband, as a widow to her eldest son. A girl, once married, left her family and became responsible for the care of her parents-in-law. A son stayed within the family and supported his parents. Only sons could carry out the important task of ancestor worship. Hence many a family's strong desire for sons. "Old traditions are coming back," says Anh. "But it is hard to know to what extend."

Some Hanoi researchers are worried of those new trends. Others see the chance for Vietnamese women to define a new role for themselves, closer to their heritage than the imported communist one was. In the new atmosphere of religious tolerance, women are not only crowding pagodas and churches, they are also reviving ancient beliefs in goddesses and spirits. (See backcover) For the youth, it is mainly a time of confusion. "What is it to be a good Vietnamese woman today?" ask 25-year-old Hanh who works with a humanitarian aid organization in Hanoi. "It is not the Confucian model of my grand-mother. And not the model President Ho defined, with the woman sacrificing everything to build the nation and to educate the children. What is it then?"

Hanh, a program officer with World Concern, admits she was never much interested by "gender debates" until this morning's meeting at the Center for Family and Women Studies, Hanoi's most promising feminist think-tank. Vietnamese and foreign researchers have gathered in a cramped room of the Center to discuss their respective work regarding women.

The meeting proceeds normally until Professor Dang Thanh Le, a 55-year-old professor wearing a worn-out nylon blouse, says she and her colleagues at the Hanoi Teachers Training College are caught in a very difficult debate. She wishes to hear some of the assembly's views on it. Some professors want to rehabilitate women's four virtues. Others disagree. Some Westerners are alarmed and demand to know what those virtues were.

Many Hanoi souvenir shops sell paintings representing those four virtues. In vietnamese they are *Cong, Dung, Ngon* and *Hanh*. Roughly translated it means: good domestic work, beauty, speech and behavior. "Why not have human virtues instead?" proposes a British woman. Dang Thanh Le explains that men had their four virtues too. Those virtues were much more "outward looking" than women's. Men were (my paraphrasing) "to be gentlemen, to control their family, to get involved in the governance of the country, and to expand the country." According to Dang Thanh Le, those virtues should be rehabilitated - "to give some guidance to the youth" - but they should be modified. "We must try to counterbalance what is happening in the countryside by offering virtues that are acceptable but still progressive," she says.

But the debate quickly fades. "Women's virtues are very limiting," says Hanh as we walk out of the building, her high-heel shoes and brand new motorbike offset by Dang Thang Le's plastic sandals and old rusted bicycle. My own Vietnamese teacher thinks the four virtues are important. "Today, no one cares anymore about knowledge and good behavior," she complains. "The young only want beauty."

The student culture in Hanoi is very laid-back. A graduate of the Economics University, 21-year-old Loan is supposed to be studying English. That is what her HCMCity-based engineer father thinks. But Loan only studies in the morning. Afternoons she rides her motorbike to town, and hangs around cafes with her friends. "You work too much," she tells me when I refuse to go out with her.

Hanoi can be a very pleasant city if you have some money and privilege. The growing restlessness of the capital city's youth has become a great worry to officials. "They only think of pleasure and fun," complains a Communist Party member and retired government official who created a humanitarian organization to which he devotes most of his time. "They have no sense of responsibility and sacrifice. They want to become rich without having to work. They do not want to get involved in community affairs, they have no ideals. Only the ambitious ones now want to join the party."

VIETNAMESE WOMEN WITHDRAW FROM POLITICS

Politics and public affairs definitely attract fewer women today than they did twenty years ago. Compared to the 1970's, the number of women actively involved in politics is shrinking. In 1975, women formed 32.3% of the elected members in the National Assembly. Since then, their numbers have dwindled: 26.7% in 1976, 21.8% in 1987, 17.7% in 1987. The number slightly rose in 1992, with women forming 18.5% of the Assembly. "Women are busy earning additional income and raising their families," says Oxford-trained economist Tran Thi Van Anh. "They are withdrawing from the activities of society and state management. They have no time left for politics."

The same shift downward is visible in most party and government bodies. Today, only 16% of Communist Party members are women, compared to 34% in the 60's. In Party Committees, women make up only 8 to 10% of members. In the provinces and districts, women are more likely to be vice-chairs of People's Committees than chairwomen. In the communal people's councils, 19.5% of the members are women. (Figures are also under 20% for district and provincial levels.) "The 70's were the height of the war against America," explains Anh. "Many men were busy fighting the war so women took over the running of the administration. When the men came back, the women had to retreat." Today, less than 10% of ministers and vice-ministers are women (respectively 9.5% and 7.05%)

The country's vice-president is a woman but a popular joke shows in what esteem men hold her. "No wondering our country has problems," says the hero of that joke. "Our president is half-blind (a reference to Le Duc Anh eyesight problem), the Vice-President is a woman (Nguyen Thi Binh), and the President of the National Assembly is a primitive (a reference to Nong Duc Manh who belongs to an ethnic minority)."

SO WHO SPEAKS FOR WOMEN?

Officially, the Women's Union is the main force defending women rights. One of Vietnam's so-called "mass organizations", the Union is said to have 11 million members, 7000 employees and a network of cells reaching down to each of the country's 12,000 communes.

In 1988, the Council of Ministers's decision Number 163 gave the Women's Union "the right" to be consulted, informed and involved in any discussion, plan or policy in relation to women and children at all levels of government. But most foreign experts say the Union is in a "sunset phase". It is nominally in charge of reviewing policies but lacks technical knowledge of macroeconomic changes to really do so. (As I write this, the Union is trying to block an article of the draft Labor Law reducing maternity leave from six to four months.)

A Canadian mission found "little evidence" that the Union participates in economic planning or policy formulation in practice. "Many key economic actors clearly told us the Union is now merely a focal point for the delivery of social welfare programs," says mission leader Nancy Spence.

The Union's main strength, its countrywide network, may be the cause of its downfall. Many foreign organizations have latched on to the network to provide a large variety of programs: immunization campaigns, family-planning, credit programs, nutrition sessions etc. "The Union is so busy with social programs it has no time left for policy-making and lobbying," says Canadian geographer Lisa Drummond who did her masters thesis on female traders. The Union is also busy trying to make money. In 1989 it became the owner of a Tourism Company and of some guest houses.

Peasant women have less time to attend meetings anyway. The average budget of a commune's Union branch is down to US\$200, barely enough to pay one full-time staff and organize one or two meetings a year. "Activities have shrunk at the commune level," says Que.

Those meetings were often the place where women complained of abusing husbands or refusals to respect inheritance laws. "The men would be taken to task by the whole community with the Union acting as mediator," recalls Tran Thi Van Anh. "Now the Union has no time for personal matters. With the social pressure off, we are seeing a resurgence of domestic violence."

While the Union fades as a lobbying body, other voices have emerged. Among the most active is the Center for Family and Women studies. Established in 1987 as part of the National Committee for Social Sciences (NCSS), the Center quickly grew in strength and resources. With the support of the Swedish Aid Agency, it was able to buy the second floor of an old colonial house near the Hanoi garrison and turn it into the country's first gender think-tank.

Two other centers, the Center for Research and Training on Women and the Research Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development also function in Hanoi. The first was created in 1991 and is attached to the Teachers College. The second belongs to the Science Institute. Both are involved in gender research but have not achieved much prominence. A fourth center is active in HCMC at the Open University and is called the Women Studies Center. The Ministry of Labor also has a Women Research Unit. "We are all competing for the same funds," admits one of the women researchers. "Until recently we had no incentives to cooperate."

Foreigners triggered the cooperation with the creation of a "Gender in development working group." For the past four months, aid workers interested in women's issues have been meeting and inviting Vietnamese researchers to share their discussion. Cooperation is mounting.

Last week, at one of those group meetings, the Vietnamese Centers united to complain that Vietnam's National Committee for the Advancement of Women is preparing its Strategy for the year 2000 without consulting them. A letter to the Committee to request a meeting was quickly drawn with the help of the foreigners.

Set up in 1985 for the Nairobi Conference to mark the end of the United Nations Decade of Women, the Committee was inactive for quite a while. It was recently reactivated in anticipation of the 1995 Beijing Conference where progress of the world's women will again be appraised. The Committee consists mainly of high ranking officers from the Government, the Women's Union and mass organizations. The Committee's draft strategy document is vague. Among other objectives, it aims at teaching women "how to become rich legally." The phrase has some women chuckle. The term probably applies to prostitution but some understand it differently. Hanoi's gossip mill is awash with rumors about the prime minister's wife. While Vo Van Kiet fights mounting government corruption, she is said to accept large gifts from Asian investors. Some also say she is making a fortune smuggling diamonds. The newspapers never write about her. "She has had affairs with many ministers, and even with her chauffeur," one 55-year-old Hanoian tells me, looking partly disgusted, partly admiring. A few months ago, the Party warned the Prime Minister against taking his wife along on official visits abroad.

So the future is worrisome but many believe it is also full of opportunities. Initiatives in favor of women are numerous. A Fund for Assistance to Women's Innovation (FAWI) was created in 1992 to assist women's initiatives in the renovation of the country.

The League of Italian Cooperatives is assisting Vietnamese women to promote middle and small-size businesses. In Thanh Hoa province, the Farmers's Association has created a "Men Farmers Club for Family Planning." In Hanoi, a core group of women researchers are slowly inching their way to a new advocacy role.

Many foreign women living in Hanoi think their Vietnamese friends will need a lot of patience. "It is nothing like the level of harassment women get in muslim countries," insists Catherine, a soberly dressed French scholar who got her breasts pinched in Lenin Park, a major central Hanoi park where she was strolling in broad day light. "But when you stay long enough you realize that behind the veneer of Asian reserve, the Vietnamese are very macho, authoritarian and sexist." An American woman who was attacked in the same park punched and knocked down her young assailant and now avoids the place after dark. Many of the new jokes born out of foreigners' attempt to speak Vietnamese have a sexual connotation. One of them recalls how a foreigner trying to ask "Have you eaten tonight?" mispronounces and says "Have you eaten a penis yet?"

When I arrived in Hanoi in the fall of 1992, little boys in my neighborhood only knew one English word: "Hello". They said it almost shyly and beamed with joy when I answered. A few months later, the little urchins had learned a new one: "Money" and they sneered at me because I refused to give them any. Recently, I have been increasingly treated with a third word: "F...y...". I cannot begin to imagine what the fourth one will be.

Carole Beaulieu

Carole Beaulieu
Hanoi, June 1st



*A cigarette stall in Hanoi.
Three generations of women.*