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Over the last few decades, Vietnam has made striking progress in improving people’s well-being and reducing gender disparities. Vietnam now ranks 109th out of 177 countries in UNDP’s human development index (UNDP, 2006), placing it in the group of countries with medium human development. In the East Asia region, Vietnam stands out for its success in closing gender gaps in the last 20 years. It ranks 80th (out of 136 countries) on the Gender Development Index (GDI). These efforts have resulted in high adult literacy rates for men and women; school enrolment data that show little difference between boys and girls; and the highest percentage of women in national parliament in the Asia-Pacific region (27 percent since 2002). Vietnam also has one of the highest economic participation rates in the world: 85 percent of men and 83 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 60 participated in the labor force in 2002 (VDR 2004).

The Vietnam Gender Assessment was a participatory process that sought to build greater consensus between the government and donors on gender priorities in existing programs and projects, as well as areas for future research and dialogue. Criteria to identify priorities included issues (a) that were aligned with the government poverty reduction strategy; (b) that were associated with human rights; (c) that impacted a high number of people; (d) that had multiplier or secondary effects; and (e) that addressed underlying causes of gender inequalities. To develop recommendations, we analyzed the enabling environment using a framework with five components: (a) data and research, (b) policy and legal issues; (c) institutions; (d) resources and programs, and (e) attitudes, norms, and behaviors.

The Path to Gender Equality

Vietnam has made good progress in improving gender equality. Given the attention gender has received in national planning, further improvements seem assured. We highlighted four issues that require additional attention to keep on track. First, ethnic minority women and girls lag behind ethnic minority men and Kinh and Chinese women in accessing health and education services and economic opportunities. Second, there is persistent gender stereotyping in textbooks, which perpetuates gender inequalities. Third, greater recognition is needed regarding the increasingly important role played by women in the agriculture sector, recognizing the sheer numbers of women involved. Fourth, progress in increasing the number of women in decision making has been slow and inconsistent. To ensure continued progress, we recommend:

- Developing innovative solutions to increase access to health, education, and agricultural services in ethnic minority areas
- Preparing gender-sensitive modules and materials for use in schools
- Developing creative solutions to support women farmers more proactively
- Preparing a roadmap—including policy changes, training, instruments, and resources—to increase the number of women in decision making
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Leveling the Playing Field for Sustained Growth

Economic growth has improved economic opportunities for men and women. However, the playing field is not level, and women are not yet able to compete on equal terms with men. Women are over-represented in some sectors and occupations and men in others. Men benefit more from jobs with decision-making power and status. With a projected shift of the workforce from agriculture to wage labor and from the public to the private sector, some issues, such as the relatively lower wages and higher wage gaps in the private sector, will impact more and more women in the future and take on greater importance.

Women’s ability to compete equally with men in the private sector is constrained by open discrimination practices in recruitment, women’s lower education and skills, and lesser ability to capitalize assets when their names are not on the already-issued land certificates. In the public sector, which will continue to be a major employer for some time, the different retirement ages for men and women, while representing a transfer of public resources to women in the form of additional pensions, also works through the system to be a factor in reducing the career and promotion prospects for younger women. Meanwhile, Vietnamese women, while contributing equal time to income-generating activities, bear the burden of the work in the home. With a projected increase in the number of dependents, this burden may be increased. The government is addressing these issues through the preparation and approval of the Gender Equality Law. But turning the Law into practice presents considerable challenges. Leveling the playing field will involve:

- Support for policy dialogue on retirement and pensions
- Implementation of the Gender Equality Law and Labor laws to reduce discrimination
- Support for the provision of skills training
- Increasing the value of household work to encourage shared responsibility between men and women, as well as providing incentives for regulated private sector provision
- Re-issuing land use right certificates (LUCs) with the names of both the husband and wife

The Fallout of Social and Economic Change

Economic change brings social but the current approaches, policies, and institutions do not adequately address emerging social impacts linked to increased migration and risk-taking behaviors. In addition, current social support services do not adequately address issues such as the high rate of abortions or persistent domestic violence. All of these issues affect men and women differently and are founded on gender roles and relations which are changing. Addressing the issues would require:

- Increased research and monitoring, for example on trends in migration or risk-taking behaviors
• Passing and or implementation of laws on domestic violence, labor exports, and trafficking
• Changing policies and procedures for registering domestic migrants
• Considering future policy and institutional requirements that provide increased range and coverage of support services to address the emerging issues of the modern-day population
• Building short-term capacity to address issues such as sexual health in young people, risk behaviors, victims of domestic violence, and support to migrant workers before and after they migrate

Specific Recommendations

The recommendations arrived at in each section of the report were consolidated and made more specific under the different components of the enabling environment framework (Annex 2).

Research and information. In general, statistics are relatively good in Vietnam. Further improvements could be made through the following:
• Institute a comprehensive and gender-sensitive periodic labor force survey to analyze trends in relation to the labor force.
• Include in the Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey (VHLSS) questions relating to migration or intra-household power relationship. Other monitoring systems, such as crime reporting systems, or hospital admission records could be used for regular tracking of trends in domestic violence, or risk-taking behaviors.
• Undertake special surveys or qualitative research on the impacts of migration, changing gender roles, or issues relating to unprotected sex, abortions, or trafficking. Conduct impact evaluations to assess the effectiveness of interventions designed to reach ethnic minority women, to increase the number of women in decision making, or to reduce women’s burden in the home. The effectiveness of current vocational training strategies, as well as the impact of having the names of both men and women on land titling certificates, also need to be researched.
• Conduct economic and trend analysis in three specific areas: (1) to assess the economic impacts of different options for policies on the age of retirement; (2) to quantify the amount of care work being undertaken in the home; and (3) to analyze future trends in the labor force so that more effective strategies for vocational training could be identified.

Policies and legal frameworks. Significant progress has also been made in putting conducive policy and legal frameworks in place. Priorities that have been highlighted in this document include the following:
• Concerted efforts and support will be needed to put the Gender Equality Law into practice and ensure its implementation. The same will apply to the Law on Vietnamese contracted laborers working abroad (labor export law in short) and also to domestic violence law once it has been passed.
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- Policies to target services to ethnic minority women, including recruitment and training of more ethnic minority women to become service providers, and to improve the access that women farmers have to markets and technology would build on the Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP) commitments and provide a basis for targeting of resources in these areas.

- Reproductive health, sexual health, and HIV/AIDS policies and programs that focus on adolescents and unmarried men and women would help to mitigate the impacts of risk behaviors in these areas. In the long term, however, comprehensive policies need to be considered for institutionalizing the provision of skilled, professional help to address social problems and issues, and help those who are struggling to cope with the rapid social changes taking place.

- In the area of care work within the home, there is the potential for policies that would help relieve the burden of household work on women. Policy options could include policies to encourage and regulate private sector providers to develop and provide care services (e.g. for young children, old people, or the sick), policies to train and certify individuals to provide care services, or else for the services to be provided through specific government programs, possibly working with communities. Paternity leave may help to remove gender bias and encourage men to share the burden.

- A comprehensive roadmap is needed to increase women’s participation in decision making by identifying policies that need to be changed and setting targets and action plans.

Institutions and Organizations. Well-developed institutions, organizations, and procedures exist for the traditional sectors such as health, education, and agriculture. In addition, mass-based organizations play a significant role in reaching out to members. Further institutional development or change is needed in the following areas:

- Build capacity of staff in sectoral institutions such as health, education, and agriculture, and who work in rural areas, to improve capacity to provide culturally sensitive services to ethnic minority women.

- Develop programs in relevant organizations to support the achievement of the targets set out in the Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (POA-3) and SEDP.

- Develop the institutions that, according to the law, have the responsibility to implement the Gender Equality Law, or to monitor its implementation.

- In the longer term, and after policies have been developed, institutional structures, either within existing departments, or indeed new departments, may be developed firstly to provide care services to help ease the burden of care work in the home (care of young children, sick, or old people), and secondly, to provide professional help and support to help address social issues, including risk behaviors, sexual health, and domestic violence. In the short term, staff in existing institutions such
as police or health workers could be provided with additional training and incentives to help improve the support provided to those in need.

- Simplifying the registration procedures for migrants could improve the status of migrants in urban areas.

**Resources and programs.** With policies and institutions in place, programs and projects can be implemented by mainstreaming the responses into programs or developing pilots. These include:

- Implementing innovative projects to increase the access to health, education, and agricultural services for ethnic minorities, especially women.
- Developing projects and pilots to link women farmers more effectively to markets and resources, which they can use to increase productivity.
- Addressing gender stereotyping in textbooks and school curricula by developing and printing new materials.
- Scaling up a pilot to amend old land certificates to add women’s names.

Other programs may need more discussion and effort to develop, but as pilots, could have an impact on future development of more institutionalized approaches. The following fall in this category:

- Specific projects and activities designed to prepare women for leadership positions and to participate in decision making.
- Pilots to test different models of care provision, including community-based provision of services such as day care or care of the sick and old.
- Pilot activities to provide support to migrants both before they leave their villages and when they arrive at their destinations. This support could be in the form of information, training, and the provision of a helpline and other support. This could go beyond working with domestic migrants, and include working with Vietnamese embassies overseas to support migrants in other countries.

**Implications for Government Institutions**

Institutionally, there are implications in these recommendations for the organizations concerned specifically with women’s issues such as the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW) and the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), as well as for the line agencies and for donors.

NCFAW has done a good job at ensuring attention to gender in the SEDP and in preparing the POA, but it is important to stress the limits of their role with respect to implementation, which will mainly be carried out by others. However, a large share of the responsibility for implementing the Gender Equality Law will lie with NCFAW and the VWU. There is also a role for them to play in moving the agenda forward into new areas such as the recommendations made in this report relating to care work. In its coordinating and monitoring role, NCFAW will need to work with other agencies to prepare plans for implementing the POA-3 and developing a roadmap for increasing women’s participation in leadership and decision making.
Throughout this report, there are significant implications for the role of the Ministry of Labor Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Not only are they central to the discussions about labor force, retirement age, and migrant workers, but also potentially for the improved and expanded provision of social services, including care services. If MOLISA is prepared to take up the challenge, they will need to prepare a strategic approach and prioritize their responses. They would also need to be well supported by donors.

Ministries of Health, Education, and Agriculture are the agencies that would need to take the responsibility for ensuring that services reach ethnic minority women and girls. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), together with the VWU and banks, would be the primary agencies for developing services for women farmers. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) would be responsible for revising the textbooks to remove gender stereotyping. Recommendations for improvements in sexual and reproductive health are especially relevant to the Ministry of Health (MOH).

The General Statistics Office can make a tremendous contribution by helping in the preparation and implementation of a labor force survey (with MOLISA) and amendments to the VHLSS. Vietnam has some excellent research institutions that could contribute to the areas identified for analysis such as the analysis of care work, approaches for reaching ethnic minorities, risk behaviours, or the situation of migrant workers and their families.

The Ministry of Finance (MOF) could assist with economic analysis of the costs of care work in the home and its inclusion in the national accounts. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MONRE) would need to take the lead in the reissuance of old LUCs so they include women’s names as well as men’s. Also there are implications for the police force and MOH who need to improve the way they respond to and treat the victims of domestic violence.

**Implications for Donors**

Donors have the means to help government agencies act upon these recommendations. Some donors are well-placed to fund discrete research studies. Others with a comparative advantage in economic analysis could provide technical support for analysis on future trends in labor force issues regarding pensions, or help to establish the economic justifications for further investment in care work. The international finance institutions are well-positioned to help mainstream operational responses into sectoral programs, for example on land management, agriculture, health, HIV/AIDS, or education.

A few of the issues identified call for developing well-planned and coordinated support to the government, for example to help with the implementation of the Gender Equality Law, develop and implement a strategy for provision of care services, or address risk behaviors.