

Employment and Life of Vietnamese Women – During Economic
Transition, Le Thi
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‘.... a new era of building an independent, prosperous and socialist-orientated nation.’ pv

‘.... she [the Vietnamese woman] also shares the responsibility for the temporary failure and difficulties during the process of national construction and bears the consequences therefrom. Thus, during the period of building socialism following the model of State subsidies (1960-1980), the Vietnamese people experienced many privations and hardships generating from the system of ration ticket distribution and the egalitarianism in work as well as in the enjoyment of material s]and spiritual welfare.’ pvi

‘There have been many positive factors and advances. However, new problems have arisen, together with new difficulties and obstacles that need to be urgently overcome.’ pvi

‘These phenomena [women working in all stages of agriculture] may be explained by the fact that many men, particularly husbands, have left their villages to go to earn their living in the cities. Therefore, their wives must take up all the links of the chain of agricultural production.’ p3

‘.....more and more women are engaged in *handicraft and small industry* to raise their income.’ p3

‘It is women that *maintain and hand down the fine cultural values of the nation* from generation to generation. Many fine qualities and morals of the Vietnamese nation have been preserved to date such as faithfulness and love of spouses, filial piety and gratitude to one’s parents, respect for the elderly, mutual assistance between relatives, friends, co-villagers, etc.’ p5

‘The economy has shifted from the State-subsidy centrally-planned and bureaucratic mechanism to a *market multi-sectoral economic mechanism* with different forms of ownership: State, collective, individual, private and others. In rural areas, land is allotted to farmers on a long-term contractual basis. This helps to push up the development of the household economy. People are allowed to do business in many different trades and branches, especially private services. The State carries out the policy to encourage foreign investments in the Renovation of technologies and techniques in order to industrialize and modernize the country.’ p6

‘State subsidies for health care, culture and education are being reduced. And the State encourages the development of private services in these fields.’ p7

‘Vietnamese people are moving *from the agricultural civilization to the industrial and post-industrial civilization.*’ p8

‘..... the difficulties of this period of transition to the market economy, the backwardness of production processes especially in agriculture, the lack of capital and technological knowledge and social evils that tend to be developing have a bad effect on working women and their families, limiting the implementation of gender equality.’ p12

‘The development of State and private social services to help families will contribute to alleviating the burden of housework for women.’ pp12-13

‘We should underline the *role of the State* in the implementation of gender equality, in the increase of democratic rights for women on the family and society.’ p13

‘.... the State should have effective measures to ensure women’s role. The revolutionary administration should be an important tool in the struggle for women’s emancipation and gender equality.’ pp13-14

‘.... only since the 1980s, women and social relations concerning them have become objects of study of a scientific branch.’ p17

‘According to K Marx and F Engels (sic), the path to emancipation of women and gender equality is closely linked with social revolutions, with the economic, political, cultural, ideological developments of the contemporary society.’ p20

‘At the same time, the establishment of the law-governed capitalist State brought about the recognition of human rights, including women’s rights, to freedom, equality and democracy.’ p20

‘..... we should take into account Vietnamese historical traditions, the influence of various cultures and religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism and so on.’ p21

‘..... the big problem here [in the urban areas] is the low standard of working conditions, low quality and effectiveness of labour. The common situation of workers, of both sexes in rural and urban areas, is not ‘total

unemployment', but 'employment shortage' or lack of jobs that can *bring enough incomes to ensure families' livelihood.*

The salaries of urban laborers are insufficient to meet the needs of their families. Therefore, many of them have to do extra jobs in the evenings or on holidays. In rural areas, the population keeps increasing but land for production is limited.' p32

'Job shortage is very serious and has the tendency to become graver.' p32

'Farmers have to leave their villages and go to find jobs in other localities, mainly in cities and towns.' p32

'Many people go to work abroad. The financial and monetary turmoil in Southeast Asia in 1997 has affected the export of Vietnamese labour.' p32

'Generally speaking 80% of unemployed workers re young people; the majority of them having not received any professional training.' p33

'At the higher levels of education, the percentage of graduates is decreasing, especially with regard to women.' p36

'Generally speaking, *the professional standard of workers is low.*' p36

'State subsidies mechanism had brought about the habit of waiting for decisions of leaders and managers. Laborers showed little initiative in work and this limited their creativity.' p37

'In recent years, *the number of unemployed workers has been increasing*, due to the impact from reorganization of State enterprises and organs, the reduction of staff, the closing of a number of factories, the dissolution of many loss-suffering co-operatives.' p37

'In recent years, *the number of illiterate people has increased.*' p38

'There is an *increase in the number of children who leave school prematurely* because their families cannot afford to pay school fees.' p38

'The access to *information and the extent of cultural enjoyment* by the population, especially in rural areas and among women, is very limited.' p39

‘Besides, among the contingent of workers, some *psychological problems* remain, constituting hindrances to their integration into the new working environment, observing new labour discipline and regulations of modern production, of the commodity economy and the market mechanism.’ P39

‘Thanks to the Vietnamese State’s new socio-economic policy warmly supported by the masses...’ p41

‘The employer is no longer subject to criticism for “exploiting” other people.’ p44

‘Many people work all the time far from home and return to visit their family once a year.

This is a common situation in Vietnam at present.’ p44

‘But given the minimum daily need per head being 2,000 calories we see that 51% of the population (i.e., more than a half) still live in poverty. The percentage of poor people in rural areas is 57%; that in urban areas is 43%.’ p45

‘[The] data prove that *Vietnam basically remains an agricultural country*.’ p50

‘.... *the number of self-employed workers is very high*. In recent years, the number of people doing business in the informal sector and running small enterprises, (which utilizes the family workforce or hires some workers) is growing rapidly.’ pp54-55

‘When enterprises and businesses carry out organizational readjustment and staff reduction, 60% of the workers who have to quit jobs are women.’ p57

‘Among the population aged 15 upwards, who have permanent jobs, only 17% are wage-earners.’ p58

‘.....besides the *positive aspects* of the industrialization process (especially *economic effectiveness*), in the conditions of a market economy, a series of *social problems* have arisen concerning urbanization, the reduced need for human workforce due to higher skills, which leads to increasing unemployment, the development of social evils, the increasing pollution of the environment, etc. Production and business are aimed at earning the *highest profits*. The motive force for entrepreneurs is economic effectiveness, which means *fierce competition*

on the market regarded as a battlefield where each entrepreneur strives to defeat others.’ p59

‘Economists say that in order to ensure that State enterprises can be profit-making, their workforce should be reduced by from 30% to 40%.’ p63

‘In general, enterprises’ owners are reluctant to employ female workers as they have to implement State regulations on maternity leave, mother’s leave to care for sick children and so on.’ p64

‘The Minh Hoang Company Ltd.... has more than 1,000 female workers. In 1997, the income of each of them was only VND 300,000 per month. But they had to work regularly 12-14 hours a day.

In the Thinh Phat Wool Company more than 100 workers had to work in increased shifts. Sometimes they had to work 20 hours a day.’ p64

‘..... in a number of occupations, women prove to have more strong points than men. For instance, in the economic branches which require patience, prudence, diligence, dexterity, good eyesight, etc., (garment industry, education, services, tourist guide, finance, banking). In those industries and branches, enterprises’ owners are likely to prefer women to men, for the sake of their profits.’ p65

‘..... we find that those State policies and regulations are well implemented only in enterprises where there are strong trade union organizations, active in the protection of workers’ interests.’ p68

‘..... the various articles of the Labour Code are being implemented at different levels depending on the situation, the economic capability of each enterprise or organ, in the State as well as the private sectors.’ p69

‘..... many professional diseases develop, badly impacting the health of female workers; in some cases the articles of the Labour Code may be seriously violated.’ p69

‘.... female workers retire at the age of 55, 5 years earlier than men, and this practice is influencing badly the promotion of women to leading positions.’ p70

‘Vietnam’s Labour Code underlines the principle of gender equality in employment and salary. But in reality, female workers are still suffering many disadvantages even in State enterprises and agencies.’ p70

‘.... the policies concerning female workers such as paid maternity leave, leave due to sickness, annual home leave, etc., are rarely implemented. Trade unions are not active in defending the workers interests. In many enterprises, such an organization is still absent. In general, cooperatives are implementing social welfare regulations better.’ pp75-76

‘Over the past years, *medical insurance and social insurance* have almost not been implemented in non-State enterprises. The State has not yet a compulsory policy on this matter, while enterprises’ owners only think of their immediate interests, and workers, who compete with each other on the labour market, are ready to accept jobs without such kinds of insurance.’ p77

‘This sector [the informal sector] brings about only small incomes, but it is very easy for women to change occupations and in general the occupations *are suitable for women*.’ p77

‘Many women who have jobs in the formal economic sector, but have small incomes work overtime in some occupations of the informal sector.’ p77

‘Due to poverty, they have to search for the most effective solutions to getting high incomes and experience some temporarily ‘partition’ with their family.’ p78

‘The haphazard, lax, familiar character is characteristic for the employer-employee relations in the informal sector, relations that are not clearly defined by official labour contracts.’ p83

‘In the informal economic sector, in general, entrepreneurs do not have stable *incomes*. They often calculate their incomes per day.’ p85

‘In general, women dare not take risks. They like to do business with small capital, the money being turned over quickly and bringing about small but sure profits; the occupations require only little training so they are easy to be changed.’ p87

‘The burden of housework, especially childbirth, nursing small babies and illness, creates many obstacles for women, preventing them from concentrating efforts, time and intellect on their business. If the husband does not share the burden of work and help his wife, it is very difficult for the women to succeed in her business.’ p87

‘As for the State, it should give assistance to the models of women doing well business. It should support the development of enterprises bringing about social welfare, meeting the needs of women and children, the need of the locality (concerning material sources and markets for products), help to create new occupations, new jobs for workers, pay attention to professional training, skills training for women, help women to improve their knowledge of business management, laws and regulations related to business, banking and credit, to get access to new technologies, material sources, markets for products and to update economic information.

The support of the State’s economic, social, and labour policies for female entrepreneurs is very important in this period of economic transition.’ p89

‘In general, guest workers have received little training and have a low skill level. Therefore, they have to accept simple manual jobs, which are strenuous and bring forth low incomes.’ p90

‘In Instruction 41 CT/TW of 22 September 1998, the Vietnamese Communist Party Politburo pointed out: ‘The export of workers and experts is a socio-economic activity, which contributes to developing human resources, creating jobs, increasing workers’ incomes, improving their skill level, developing the foreign currency sources for the country, and strengthening the international relations between our country and other countries of the world’.

The objectives set by Vietnam from now until the year 2005 is to export in the year 2000 about 5,000 Vietnamese workers, among them 1,500-2,000 will be females. Between 2001 and 2005, the figure will be 10,000-15,000 workers per year; among them women will account for 35%.’ p91

‘The Vietnamese State should have drastic measures and severe punishment in respect of those who use workers in an illegal way and the people who serve as intermediaries for them, waging a resolute struggle against the *illegal trading in guest workers*.

Female guest workers should receive *protection from the authorities of the country where they come to work* in case of misfortune, on-the-job accidents, illness or other troubles and plagues.’ p92

‘In Vietnam, land constitutes the whole people’s property and is under the unified management of the State.’ p94

‘Article 3 of the [Land] Law stipulates: ‘Households and individuals entrusted by the State with the right to use land, can change, transfer, inherit and mortgage the land use right’.’ p94

‘The State always affirms the independence of households, encourages everybody to practise the occupations they know well, and make a fortune by legitimate labour.’ p96

‘The income of the majority of the rural population has increased. But given the minimum need of 2,000 calories per day for each person, we find that 57% of the rural population still live in poverty.’ p97

‘..... 48% of houses have no electricity; 28% of the population are provided with safe water and 15% of households have appropriate hygienic facilities.’ p97

‘The division of land into small plots is creating obstacles to the industrialization and modernization of agriculture and rural areas.

Due to the relatively egalitarian distribution of land to households, which is based on the number of members and workers of each household, in the whole country in 1998, there were *75 million plots of land* belonging to nearly 12 million households. The area of each plot is on average under 200 square metres; in all communes there are plots of only 20 to 50 square metres.’ pp97-98

‘The accumulation of land in Vietnamese rural areas takes place in different ways: rich families buy back their lands once offered to the State or taken away during the land reform period; a number of well-heeled households buy lands from households suffering losses in business; other households can ask for more land than the set limit, which is taken from the fund of land reserves of the locality, and they volunteer to pay higher taxes. Many households, not succeeding in production during many years cannot repay the sums of money borrowed and fail to pay taxes for the State three or four consecutive years, therefore, *a number of land plots have been taken back* and transferred to the households who volunteer to pay higher tax rates. In many cases, 40% to 100% of the allotment has been taken back.’ pp98-99

‘.... they still earn not enough for their living, and they have to search for other jobs to increase their incomes. *They are not totally unemployed but suffer job shortage.*’ p99

‘They may be temporarily registered in cities, but retain their names in the official householder register of their family and they continue to state

that they are agricultural workers. It is very difficult to define the exact number of people migrating to cities, because this number changes continuously.’ p100

‘The *differentiation between rich and poor households* is more and more visible in rural areas.’ p100

‘47.74% of the households say that the cause of their poverty is that they have no land, or not enough land for production.’ p100

‘Vietnamese agriculture is marked by a *very high percentage of self-sufficient production* whereas the percentage of commodity production is very low. In the whole country from 50% to 60% of farmers provide themselves with all foods; in many localities the figure is 70% to 80%. The fact that farmers may sell a number of agricultural products to buy some consumer goods cannot be regarded as manifestation of commodity production, it is only a form of primitive exchange of products.

At present, in our agriculture, workers only ‘take labour as profit’. To have more products and higher incomes, they usually increase their working time and their labour intensity.’ p101

‘The public expresses concern about the differentiation between rich and poor households in rural areas, about the gap between different regions of the country, between urban and rural areas. Opinions have been raised to request the Party and State to have guidelines for overcoming difficulties and shortcomings and improving the situation.

The relation between economic growth and social development in rural areas is being handled in the direction toward *pushing up the activities of wealthy households* in making fortunes and giving help to poor households in a more effective way. Attention is being paid to economic *growth and social justice* by policy makers, who are seeking to balance this relation with effective measures.’ p102

‘Due to the idea that the family needs to have male children to perpetuate the lineage, many husbands (and their parents) force their wives to continue to give birth to the third, the fourth child or more, in the hope of having at least one son. Therefore, 90% of women having already two daughters continue to give birth to the third child; 60% of women having three daughters continue to give birth to the fourth or fifth child.’ p108

‘In developed countries, expenses for each meal include 10% for agricultural production, and 90% for industrial production in service to agriculture.

In Vietnam the percentage is, perhaps, 70-80% for agricultural production. This situation is unfavourable for workers and for the national economy and should be changed.’ p109

‘Women work with all their energy on the plot of land allotted to them but they earn not enough for their living because the productivity is very low. They have very small capital to invest in fertilizers, new strains or new technologies. They only use manual labour. Sometimes they can pull the plough in the place of buffaloes in order to save the money that would be spent on hiring ploughmen.’ p110

‘Rural women are working from 12 to 14 hours every day, 16 hours in harvest time. However, they still have the *need to find more jobs* to increase their incomes and support their families.’ p111

‘As defined by the Party and State, the important point of the cause for industrialization and modernization of the country is first and foremost in agriculture and rural areas.’ p115

‘The economy is being globalized, commerce liberalized, and the economic growth is becoming sustainable with high quality. [Article by Ho Anh Hai, Communist Review, Issue 3, 1999.]’ p121

‘The Vietnamese economy is still basically a backward agricultural economy. Therefore, we need time to complete industrialization before moving to the knowledge-based economy. But it is clear that *the role of intellectuals* is a very important factor, allowing our country to advance rapidly on the path of industrialization and modernization. This is a *vital factor* in our competition with other countries in the world for increasing GDP, improving the people’s living conditions and achieving a solid development.’ pp122-123

‘..... under the revolutionary regime, children of the working people can go to school, and many of them become intellectuals.’ p124

‘Regarding female students, who will succeed the present contingent of female intellectuals, the 1994 sociological survey carried out by the National University shows: 26% of students come from intellectual families, 20% from civil servant’s families, 15% from workers families, 9% from peasant families. These figures demonstrate the consequences of the 1989-1993 period. At the time, due to the reduction of State subsidies, families began to pay school fees for their children attending the junior and senior general schools, as well as colleges or universities; many students, especially those who come from peasant and worker

families, first and foremost, female students, dropped out of school.’
p125

‘So, in 10 years about 72% of the total of female scientific cadres will reach retirement age. Meanwhile, the contingent of young female cadres who will replace them is developing very slowly.’ p132

‘Comparing the percentage of female students and male students, we find that the percentage of female students in colleges and universities has decreased from 40.2% in the period 1985-1986 down to 28.8% in the period 1994-1995. One important cause is the reduction of State subsidies for educational activities, which forces families to pay school fees for students of the 2nd level upwards. A number of families cannot afford to pay school fees for their children and therefore they let their children drop out.’ p133

‘This is due partly to the fact that families better understand the necessity to invest in the education for their children, because the latter can find good jobs only when they have a high educational standard.’ p133

‘However, many female students prove not to be active in raising the quality of their studies and their morality. They hope that with the social relations of their own, of their parents, relatives and friends and with money, they can have good jobs after leaving school, without the need to be good or excellent students.

To become qualified female intellectuals to contribute actively to the development of sciences in the country, is not their objective. They pursue *pragmatism*, entering universities to find in the future a cushy job, with rather good incomes and the work place near their home or in big cities. This helps them avoid hard manual work in agriculture and forestry.

The self-consciousness of students tends to be decreasing. The academic records are not good and the percentage of good female students is low. In Hanoi Teachers’ Training University No 1, 70.8% of female students are classified as having medium capacity. They lack an ardent ideal to record good achievements in service of the country. Meanwhile, *social evil* are penetrating universities, a number of female students become ‘high-class’ prostitutes to have money to spend. Some of them even are drug addicts, join robbers’ gangs, have ‘loose’ relations, resulting in early abortions. Those phenomena cause worries for the whole society.

Considering the *quality of female* students we cannot be optimistic about the quality of the future contingent of female intellectuals.’ p134

‘In 1998, more than 20,000 students graduated from regular colleges and universities. Until now, 10,000 of them have not yet found jobs.’ p135

‘.... in the market mechanism, female intellectuals have *more favourable conditions* to bring into play their abilities and talent, to improve their knowledge and to earn higher income with their intellectual labour. However, new requirements are severe. Scientists should have deep knowledge of their special branch and broad general knowledge; and they should know foreign languages.

Many women have strived to well perform their duties, winning the confidence and respect of the community. But not few women are facing *difficulties and deadlocks*.

Firstly, there are general weak points of women many still have the *inferiority complex*, submissive to their fate, remain passive in their work.’ p140

‘Women aged 35-40 years old upwards usually have more conditions to work well, since their children have grown up, and they can concentrate their efforts on their jobs. However, being middle-aged women, they can not retain the same acumen or the same good memory as before.’ p142

‘Coming from families of workers, peasants, employees, or self-employed people, the contingent of Vietnamese intellectuals is developing, becoming the *key factor* for pushing up the country’s economy and culture to advance and achieve outstanding progress, liberating large masses of working people from hard strenuous jobs, creating high labour productivity, increasing incomes, improving rapidly the living conditions of families, and contributing to the realization of social justice, happiness, progress and civilization in our country.’ p144

‘We do not demand a unique model of worker, irreproachable people who are totally similar to one another. But we need diversified concrete workers having different peculiarities, talents and professional knowledge, meeting the requirements of work in different circumstances and conditions.

The country needs good experts on economic, military, political, cultural, educational. And medical fields, wise managers, talented entrepreneurs, as well as scientists with a practical and creative mode of thinking.

At the same time, the country needs large masses of ordinary workers, with professional conscience, certain educational standard, professional

level and abilities to cope in time with changes in production and professional activities.

The country also needs outstanding artists, writers, poets, cultural workers, etc., meeting our people's need for enjoyment of cultural products, their internal life, their sentiments, their ideology, preserving and developing the fine features of Vietnamese culture.' pp145-146

'To work in a scientific way is difficult for women who usually work at haphazard, doing what they are seeing, without plans to ensure the first priorities. They are often attracted by sudden jobs, trifling jobs in the family, let unimportant things occupy their mind, and forget the main problems.' p149

'In the life of a person, different events may take place, joyful and sad, encouraging and annoying. Women should keep for themselves the *psychological spiritual equilibrium*, and the calm, easy inner feelings. They should not be distressed or angry without reason or with insignificant causes, damaging their family happiness and their relations with friends and relatives.

Women should preserve the beauty of both their inner feelings and their appearance. The beauty of soul, grace and charm in the manner of speaking and in behaviour are necessary in women, if they want to achieve success in social activities as well as in family life, including true happiness for themselves.' p151

'Thanks to this [the new economic policies of 'Renovation'], the sources of social material welfare will increase, creating prosperity for the whole community.' p152

'.... the differentiation between rich and the poor has become more visible in society.' p153

'Different groups and social strata have different social positions. They participate at different levels in the economic, political and social life. Therefore, it is necessary to have social policies to regulate properly various relations and ensure equal rights of all citizens to achieving mastership over society. Besides it is very necessary to increase public welfare, so that everybody, rich and poor, men and women, can have access to health care, education and cultural products.' p153

'....women's labour has been mobilized to the maximum to build the household economy and make a fortune.' p154

‘So social justice requires the creation *of more favourable conditions* for women, so that they can enjoy equality in employment with men. Here, the ‘discrimination’ is necessary to ensure justice and equality between the two sexes.’ p155

‘While positive social policies do not make female workers to become beggars for help. Female workers themselves should strive to seize the favourable opportunities and conditions to organize production, to improve the living conditions of themselves and their families, to assert their equal position and role in the family and in society.’ p158

‘Communities, villages, and precincts can raise funds for poor pupils. Children who do well at school, should be praised and rewarded in time. Excellent pupils should be allowed to move from one level to another level of education, including to enter universities without the need to undergo examinations. Scholarships from foreign countries can be distributed to good students and poor gifted students.’ p160

‘In communal medical stations and district hospitals serving rural populations, those who come for treatment of diseases, particularly women and children, should be *exempted from hospital fees* and receive free medicines during a number of days (depending on the patient’s condition); *especially in case of emergency*.’ p165

‘The population is now urged to buy medical insurance policies.’ p165

‘Another fact is the *decrease of the number of nurseries and infant schools* that affects badly women and children. Without State subsidies like in the past, the system of nurseries and infant schools has been curtailed.’ p166