

Vietnamese women's status and the government's effort to promote the gender rights

By Nguyen Tien

In September 2015, the world set out an ambitious new agenda to end poverty, combat inequalities, promote prosperity, and protect the environment by 2030. The agenda sets out 17 goals in which gender targets have been set for every goal, tackling the gender dimensions of poverty, hunger, health, education, water and sanitation, employment, safe cities and peace and security. This article reviews the current Vietnamese women's status, equality and some highlighted government's effort realized after 5 years implementing the world agenda in perspective of gender equality.

Vietnamese women's status and gender rights

As we all know, gender inequality makes and keeps women poor, deprives them of their basic rights and opportunities. Women are economically active each day - from earning an income, to creating jobs as an entrepreneur, to taking care of their families and elders. However, a woman farmer, for instance, may not have the same access to seeds, credit, technology and extension services as a man. In Viet Nam, women's access to land is often limited by legal ambiguity, lack of access to legal services, and limited awareness and understanding of the law. In an economic downturn, poor women are less likely to have savings or able to make up for lost income.

The 2nd goal of the agenda mentions the hunger ending, food security and nutrition improving. Although women prepare up to 90% of household meals around the world (WHO & UNICEF, 2014), when times are tough they often prioritize others, and leave themselves hungry. Nourishment is not only about the quantity of food, but also quality. Women in poor households are less likely to get the nutrients they need, making it more difficult to manage the physical demands of pregnancy and breastfeeding. The maternal mortality rate for some ethnic minority women is four times higher than that of majority Kinh. Ethnic minority women are often unable to seek services due to their remoteness, the poor quality of care, language and cultural barriers, and their inability to pay. As a result, the coverage of antenatal care for ethnic minority women remains low. One in five ethnic minority women still receive

no checkups during pregnancy and in northern mountainous provinces, between 40-60% give birth at home (GSO & UNICEF, 2015).

In terms of education, although gender gaps in primary and secondary education have largely been narrowed down, women still face many challenges. In particular, women and girls of ethnic minority groups and poor households have fewer opportunities, and have higher rates for school dropout and illiteracy. In Viet Nam, gender stereotyping is still common in school textbooks and methodologies, reinforcing gender bias and traditional gender roles. Girls and boys are often streamed into different areas of study and training, which affect their future career prospects and earning potential. Dedicated resources for gender mainstreaming are insufficient that limits the considerable potential of education to make a real difference to gender equality.

The sustainable development goals seek to change the course of the 21st century, addressing key challenges such as poverty, inequality, and violence against women. Women's empowerment is a pre-condition for this. Vietnam ranks 26 out of 156 countries implementing the Goal 5 of the agenda regarding equality and women empowerment (MOLISA, 2019). While there has been some progress over the decades, some limitations still remain: women's wages are still lower than men, even with similar qualifications; Gender equality at home needs improving,... Vietnamese women still bear the burden of unpaid care and domestic work, only 56% of men help with housework and with growing urban or overseas migration, high costs have shifted responsibility for childcare from younger to older women, often relatives.

In addition, child marriage remains a problem. Poor girls are more than twice as likely to marry in childhood as those who are wealthy. According to Vietnam General Statistic Office, one in ten women still marry before their age of 18, mostly in remote ethnic minority areas. This puts them to the risks of early pregnancy, and with limited access to education and a heavy burden of household work, their future opportunities are limited, which traps them in poverty. In these communities, awareness on reproductive and sexual health and hygienic practices is low, especially for girls living in boarding schools without parental support.

Some poor, remote, or migrant communities are unable to access clean water, exposing women and girls to high risk of gynecological diseases. With nearly 65% of households lacking a water source on the premises, women and girls are usually responsible for collecting drinking water. This percentage is 10% higher among ethnic minority households. Although women are still the major users of water, they are less likely to participate in decision making on either domestic or public water supply (ILSSA & UN Women, 2015).

In Viet Nam, the majority of workers in the informal sector are women, earning on average 50% less than men, with lower job security and little access to social protection (USAID,

2010). Moreover, women account for higher percentage of all self-employed and unpaid family workers, which are classified as the most vulnerable section of the workforce. The unemployment rate amongst young women is also higher than young men, making them more likely to migrate to the cities and overseas. Combined with limited education and lack of professional skills, they often engage in low-paid, poor quality jobs such as domestic workers and caregivers. This carries a high risk of labour and even sexual exploitation. Their uncertain legal status also limits access to social protection and legal aid.

Some highlighted Government's effort realized to promote gender rights and equality

To improve the women's status and promote gender rights, for the past five years, the Vietnamese Government has made lots of effort in implementing the World Agenda on ending poverty, combating inequalities, promoting prosperity and protecting the environment by 2030. Gender equality activities have made progress, which is highly appreciated by the international community: Vietnam ranked 6/57 countries in terms of women-owned businesses, 56/156 countries (69.7 points) in implementing the goals of sustainable development and 26/156 countries (79.8 points) in implementing the Goal 5 of the agenda on gender equality and women's empowerment (MOLISA, 2019).

Numbers of laws recently passed by the National Assembly such as the Law on Architecture, the amended Law on Execution of Criminal Judges, the amended Education Law, the Law on Prevention and Control of Alcohol Harms have integrated the principles of gender equality, gender-based non-discrimination in their provisions. The amended Labor Code has many new contents on gender equality such as: reducing the gender gap of retirement age from 5 years to 2 years; eliminate gender-based discrimination provisions in workplaces; strengthen maternity and childcare provisions so that men and women can balance their work and family responsibilities; and improve regulations on sexual harassment in workplaces.

Vietnam has actively exchanged and shared its achievements in developing and implementing policies and practices to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment; actively contributed ideas and views on draft resolutions with gender equality issues; participated in co-sponsoring and agreeing on resolutions to protect women from violence, human trafficking and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women.

A part from that, Vietnam successfully organized the 3rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Women (AMMW) with the theme "Social security for women and girls towards the ASEAN Vision 2025" and other related meetings in 2018 in Vietnam. At the same time, Vietnam has actively participated in and promoted ASEAN cooperation in social security for women and girls with the aim at ensuring the role of ASEAN chair of Vietnam in 2020.

Key reference:

- *United Nations in Vietnam, 2016, Women and sustainable development goals: Vietnam towards 2030;*
- *Ministry of Labour Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), 2019, Report on implementing national targets on gender equality in 2018 and the first half of 2019*