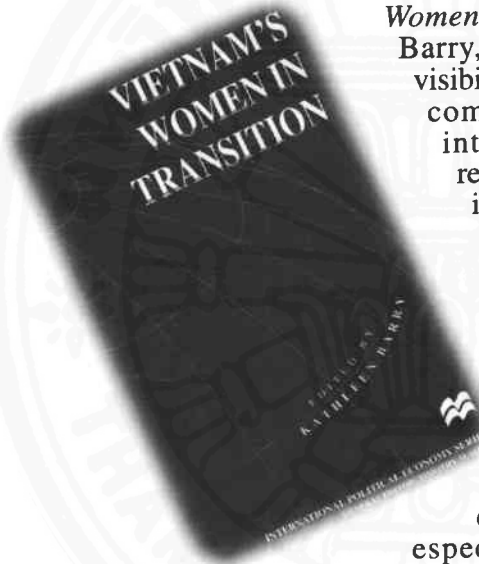


Doi Moi Women Slip through the Cracks of a New Market Economy



Information and literature on Vietnam, beyond matter of the Vietnam War or political and economic change, is scarce. Of particular rarity are studies on women. For this reason *Vietnam's Women in Transition*, edited by Kathleen Barry, is a welcome contribution to the visibility of women in Vietnam. It is a reader comprising 25 articles, including an introduction. These diverse articles represent an interdisciplinary approach to issues concerning Vietnam's women, covering a range of disciplines from sociology to political science, history, anthropology and psychology. This book touches on a number of problems facing women and presents various aspects for discussion. It enables us to draw a picture of Vietnamese women within a historical context, including the revolution, and especially through the process of the ongoing renovation, or *doi moi*, which began in the late 1980s.

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Vietnam's Women in Transition.
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One important factor reflected in the book is the influence of Confucian doctrine which still exists in Vietnamese society despite the revolution. The vestiges of the Confucian attitude of 'honouring men and despising women' still linger, and indeed may have regained strength after the unification of the South and North. This is, in the opinion of the authors, an important factor and condition leading to the absence of real gender equality in Vietnam. This imbalance seems to have emerged despite the fact that Vietnam's women played a very significant roll in the revolution, and are key contributors to the family, economic production, and the development of the country. The authors collectively argue that since the beginning of Vietnam's transformation from

a centralized, subsidized economy to a market economy under *doi moi*, the status of Vietnamese women has undergone significant change, and this is the main focus of the book.

The articles are written by two different groups of scholars, Western (mostly North American) and Vietnamese, and reflect, as Barry points out in her introduction, a new dialogue between Western feminists and the women's struggle in Vietnam (p. 14). One question needs to be raised here: Why didn't Barry use the term feminist when mentioning the Vietnamese contributors to the book? If those who struggle and demand for equality and rights for women cannot be defined as feminist, what then is the meaning of feminism? It seems that these Western researchers are strongly bound to their 'Western' definition of and approaches to feminism, applying them throughout the book. They use this Western structure as a universal criteria for defining what constitutes feminism. As one Western researcher puts it, "Vietnamese intellectuals have only recently begun to consider the conditions of women from what Western academics would label a feminist perspective" (p. 285).

Two different groups of authors also means two different styles of writing and presentation. Typically adopting a more inclusive framework, the US researchers draw upon diverse literature that leads to a discrete area of inquiry (p.16). Some sources of information they use draw on the findings of studies presented by Vietnamese colleagues in the book, thus a certain redundancy of information is unavoidable. Accordingly, the reader has the impression that different analyses based on diverse frameworks are made out of the same findings. It seems that in an attempt to locate Western and Vietnamese women within a common struggle, 'Western' frameworks and findings are being used as criteria for searching discrete issues concerning women in Vietnam, and that these 'issues', in turn, match 'Western' theories. They are cautious enough, however, not to undertake analyses of issues that are not configured in Vietnam. Therefore many questions are asked and methodologies for further discussion and analysis are suggested.

The style of presentation by the Vietnamese researchers is different. The articles are mostly presented in the form of reports which, according to a 'Western' research perspective, do "not match the western approaches to research of theoretical articles" (p. 16). Data and information employed in the articles are findings of field research, mostly conducted by the authors themselves. Describing their findings, they point out concrete problems leading directly to policy recommendations. Vietnamese scholars, particularly in the area of women and the family, address the critical need to produce change which will alleviate suffering and improve society. The style of writing is descriptive, without complicated theoretical frameworks, and is easy to read. Moral language is not avoided - right and wrong, just and unjust - are framed in terms of both socialist values and vestiges of traditional morality (p. 16). It would not come as a surprise if Thai readers of these contributions had the impression they were reading the work of a progressive writer during the 1970s student movement in Thailand.

The book is divided into six parts.

Part I: Status of Women: In History and Revolution

Based on Western-language sources, the roles and status of Vietnamese women from prehistoric times to the time of the communist revolution are presented. In Vietnam, prehistoric women held a high status and lived in matrilineal and matrilocal communities. It was the time before the onset of Chinese influence which came with the annexation of Nam Viet (the Southern Viet) in 111 BC. In the 1,000 years of Chinese colonization of Vietnam, China imposed patriarchal institutions and religion upon Vietnam's culture. Confucian philosophy gradually filtered through Vietnamese society - a philosophy in which Vietnamese women are bound by the duties of conjugal fidelity and obedience to their fathers and husbands (p. 32). Vietnamese women played a significant role both in expelling the Chinese in 939 AD and during the communist revolution. Vietnamese women, therefore, retained a high status in law. The revolution has given equal rights to women in the political and domestic spheres, but it has failed to overthrow the patriarchal attitude of Confucianism. Two trends, the deterioration in Vietnamese women's electoral fortunes and the gradual disappearance from public life of the "grand old women of the revolution", are referred to. The combined impact of these two trends is viewed as a leading factor in reducing women's political authority and the legitimacy of their claim to leadership positions in the national government (p.50). The authors attribute the decline in the status of Vietnamese women in both former and present times, to the patriarchal attitude which has its root in Confucian philosophy.

Part II: Family and Modernization

In this section of the book, the situation of women in family and marriage is examined in context with the process of modernization. Nowadays there are several family types in Vietnam. Besides the traditional family based on a registered marriage, there are families with de facto couples living together without a legal marriage certificate. Another form of family found in the research is the single parent family, comprising one parent, mostly a mother and her children. This is because after divorce or separation from their husband, women must acquiesce to keep the children. Since 1975 many men have gone abroad, leaving behind their wives and children. The women then declare themselves as divorced and live as a single parent family together with their children. There are also a number of unmarried women living with their children. These women have valiantly confronted not only the old social prejudices, but also, like most women living in single parent families, the material inadequacies and difficulties. The size of this group of women and this form of family is increasing, and is usually concentrated around silvicultural (forestry) and agricultural farms, although they also feature in the demographic landscape of villages and cities. The increase of such families, especially in silvicultural production teams, may relate to an imbalance in the division of labour because women comprise some 60% to 70% of the total workforce.

From the articles included in Part 11, one will learn of the enormous burden of work Vietnamese women bear - from household labor such as cooking, water drawing, washing, caring for the sick and children, to paid work in the fields, office or factory. This paid employment is necessary for most women to assure family income and basic living standards. The women therefore have little time left to rest, to engage in social relations and activities, or to enjoy cultural pursuits. As a German feminist would say, they have to bear a 'double burden', reducing their chances to promote their own career, unless they work harder than their male colleagues in order to reach the same position. Despite the dual responsibility of domestic work and income generation, Vietnamese women play only a minor part in the decision-making of the family. Hence, in the authors' opinion, there is a trend of decline in equality and democracy within the family.

One interesting issue raised in this part deals with abortion. Unlike women in many countries, Vietnamese women have a constitutional right to free abortions. According to the research, abortion rates are increasing rapidly at present. Unwanted pregnancies are related to problems in the use of IUDs and to the lack of alternative contraceptive methods.

Some researchers explore the change in Vietnamese society, especially concerning marriage and the family, within the context of the process of renovation (*doi moi*). One indicator found in the research is divorce rates. The number of petitions for divorce presented by women is higher than that of petitions for divorce presented by men. It was assumed that the women have more self-confidence and want a more independent life. A more disturbing trend which has emerged since the opening up of a *doi moi* market economy is the dramatic increase in the number of women working in prostitution. An attempt is made to show the connection between migration and prostitution. Migrant women from rural areas become prostitutes because they often can only find jobs with low wages, even lower than the earnings of a prostitute. This makes it possible for the sex industry to buy off poor women.

Part III: Urbanization and Women's Work

Part III of the book deals with the situation of working women in cities. In urban areas women constitute about half of the labour force. For example, in Ho Chi Minh City female labour represents 53.7% (p. 185). They are working for government-run organisations, non-governmental economic units, association units, industry, foreign invested enterprises, and within the household economy and informal service sectors such as housekeeping and child care. There are also a high number of women working in the areas of scientific creation and technological transference. Here again the 'double burden', or as it is labelled in this book, the 'double function' of Vietnamese women in formal employment and in the household sphere is emphasized. It seems that the responsibilities of family life, especially child bearing and rearing, are an obstacle to the progress of women's careers. Nowadays women workers in Vietnam suffer much hardship from exhausting work and their health has worsened considerably. They are not, however, being provided with sufficient labour or occupational health protection.

Beyond the formal economic sector in Vietnamese urban areas, there is the informal economic sector which also contributes considerably to the generation of employment for the urban population. The activities in the informal economic sector vary from itinerant traders, street vendors, cyclo drivers, baby-sitters, to photographers in parks. Workers in this sector are diversified, coming from different socio-economic backgrounds and geographic locations, and possessing different skills. Many of them are young rural folk coming to town because of crop failures, natural disasters or other mishaps. Women make up the largest number of workers in this sector. Among them are homeless and street-women. In Hanoi, most of the homeless women arrive from cities or provinces in the North (some from Central and South Vietnam), because of difficulties in their daily lives and the decrease in agricultural production. They are regarded as the lowest rung on the social ladder and are the lowest paid segment of the urban population. Some of them are hired workers. A number of women itinerants buy and sell reusable waste materials, whilst others work as prostitutes.

Rural to urban migration and prostitution are not new phenomena in Vietnam, but they have increased alarmingly in recent years alongside the process of renovation. For some women, prostitution seems to be an alternative way to increase their income. Migration is also an alternative option for the rural poor to earn their living when agricultural production bears insufficient income. Also mentioned are changes in society since the beginning of the transformation to a market economy, particularly changes concerning women. Has this change something to do with the increase of rural-urban migration and prostitution, and if so, in what way? One could understand the context of migration and prostitution in Vietnam better if these two issues became a main topic of study and were more than just mentioned in passing in conjunction with other issues.

Part IV: Rural Women and Agricultural Development

In this section, the situation of women in rural Vietnam is explored. Forestry workers and peasants constitute an important segment of the rural population. There is a tendency for nuclearization in both the families of forestry workers and those of peasants, but with a different basis. Most of the forestry workers are young migrants coming from other places. This is the result of the government's policy to attract a young workforce from the countryside to build forest farms. In the peasant families, many young men and women leave their farms for the new economic zones to earn their living. As for the type of family, a number of women in forestry worker families live in single-parent situations. In general, the household economy in rural areas bears the characteristics of self-sufficient production and consumption. Women in rural areas shoulder hard work both in the household and in agricultural production, but are still assigned a very modest role in decision making. One researcher concludes that the vestiges of patriarchal relations still exist and as evidence she takes the beating of wives and the polygyny of the husbands.

One problem discovered in rural areas, for example in the districts surrounding Ho Chi Minh City, is that of an underdeveloped level of agricultural production (a mono-culture of rice production etc.). This is the main cause of hunger and

poverty which regularly befalls people in rural areas. One programme aimed at solving this problem provides financial assistance to starving families so they can generate capital, means of production and occupational skills to build a viable existence based on the outcomes of their own labour. Almost all poor families, many of whom are female-headed, single parent families, can borrow funds to develop household economy projects. Household economy can be viewed as a type of overall activity using capital and labour at the family level with the purpose of increasing family income. Activities include: vegetable crops, raising pigs, ducks or chickens, traditional handicraft production, or commerce and service. One problem women face in the running of household economy projects is that of capital management and marketing techniques.

Another programme devised to provide peasant households with the means to increase production is direct loans of capital from the Vietnamese Bank of Agriculture. The legal borrower should be the head of household. This condition creates problems for women who are the defacto family heads because of the frequent absence of their husbands. These women do not have documents issued in their own name giving them the right to use the cultivated land, or the ownership of valuable objects which can be given as payment of the loan. For these women, the programme is ineffective because they are not entitled to the loans.

Aside from their responsibilities in agricultural production, other issues related to income earning, household maintenance and family care, and environmental problems also fall on the shoulders of rural women. In the last chapter of Part IV, the situation of rural women in other regions of Asia is referred to in order to highlight problems and strategies. This chapter also raises questions about possible implications for rural Vietnamese women in matters of the environment. The suggestion is made that rural women's experiential understanding and knowledge might provide special perspectives for agricultural development and environmental regeneration.

Part V: Violence Against Women

According to one Vietnamese researcher, domestic violence can be divided into two forms: invisible violence and visible violence. These two forms may be closely inter-related but in other instances are separate occurrences. The invisible violence is considered a symptom of the belief rooted in society that unconditional service to men is the natural function of women - a required sacrifice and an expression of self-denial necessary for the role of women in the family. This belief originates in Confucian morality and creates a kind of surreptitious and sinister violence against women by transforming them into obedient slaves for drudgery and menial jobs; although no one actually flogs, scolds or curses them (p.264). The result of research conducted in Thanh Hoa province shows that women and children have to work from very early in the morning till very late in the afternoon, doing most of the heavy jobs in agricultural production, whilst the husbands pass their time drinking or playing cards. Under such conditions the women have no time left for self-education or even for rest. Hence, in the opinion of the researcher, invisible violence emasculates women's intellectual power (p. 266).

Visible violence consists of all actions that can cause injuries or deaths. Violence in the family is found to be a major ground for divorce. And this family violence is caused by a blend of factors including, financial stress, level of education, cultural and social background and health status.

Another aspect of violence against women discussed in this part of the book is that of rape. Considering the social and economic conditions which keep Vietnamese women in tight family situations and communities, the author assumes that it is reasonable to speculate that sexual victimization by strangers in Vietnam would be low. Adapting the findings of Western feminist scholars and researchers that rape by strangers is the exception, while rape by acquaintances is the rule, she asks whether marital or acquaintance rape does occur. It seems that in Vietnam the concept of rape occurring among intimates is still a foreign one.

Part VI: Beyond War.

There is only one chapter in this final section. Using 'gender awareness' - a phrase adopted by United Nations' women officials to describe an attitude, a way of seeing - the authors point out some of the lessons on unequal post-war conditions revealed in women's studies and try to explain Vietnamese women's complex experiences of post-war life. The area of examination consists of museums, divorces and demobilization. In the opinion of the author these three subjects are effective 'windows' for making sense of women and men's different experiences of post-war society. The post-war economic reconstruction is also viewed as leading to different experiences among women and men because economic reconstruction occurs amid severe financial constraint and is therefore a process which demands choices. In an environment of shortages, choices are especially likely to have pronounced gender consequences (p. 312).

As a whole, the book provides important information on and perspectives of Vietnamese women in various settings. Some readers might be irritated by the over-emphasis and frequent repetition of the 'double burden' theme, and of the sometimes redundantly stated proposition of the disadvantageous situation of women - a proposition that restates the timeworn dynamics of discrimination but does not open up any new perspective. Despite these aspects of possible criticism, *Vietnam's Women in Transition* is well worth reading, especially for scholars interested in women's issues in Vietnam.