

**Investing in Women**

**Vietnam**

**Country Context Paper**

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## **Introduction**

This Country Context Paper provides an overview of women's contribution to Viet Nam's economy as farmers, entrepreneurs and wage workers. It identifies key barriers to women's economic empowerment and is undertaken under the auspices of Component Three of the IW initiative of the Australian government, which refers to government partnerships to remove selected barriers to women's economic empowerment and implement changes that will encourage partner government regulatory reform. It provides a snapshot of factors either facilitating or inhibiting women's economic empowerment in the country, focusing on: laws and their implementation (Part One); social norms (Part Two); access to markets and productive assets (Part Three); business and work (Part Four); and political representation (Part Five). It lists major factors and actors/institutions driving or resisting policy reforms to consecrate gender equality in the world of work, and provides recommendations for addressing underlying causes of gender gaps. This Country Context Paper is intended as a baseline against which to measure progress towards women's economic empowerment in Viet Nam, and as such its recommendations can benefit programmes outlined in Australia's Viet Nam Gender Equality Strategy (DFAT 2016).

Viet Nam has one of the most progressive gender equality legal frameworks in South-East Asia. This includes, among other statutes, the 2006 Law on Gender Equality, the 2007 Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control, and new extended specifications of women's labour rights in the 2012 Labour Code. The translation of equality before the law into substantive equality is however a complex process requiring solid and accountable institutional structures, conducive social and economic policies, and adequacy of resources for gender-sensitive programmes and organizations. In the last two decades, Viet Nam has made good progress towards closing gender gaps in a number of dimensions such as school attendance, child and maternal health, labour force participation and formal political representation. However there are some remaining challenges, including widespread gender based violence, women's continuing under-representation in leadership positions at all levels and unequal sharing of family responsibilities (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). Even within education and employment disadvantages persist, such as women's under-representation in technical subjects and a marked gender-based occupational segregation.

In 2010 Viet Nam reached lower-middle income country status, and the market-oriented reforms and trade liberalization undertaken by the government since the mid-1980s are being carried further forward. The overall development goal of the Government of Viet Nam, as stated in its 2011-2020 Socio-Economic Development Strategy, is to become a 'modern industrialised country by 2020' and to continue shifting labour from agriculture to industry and services. It is important to continue paying attention to the possible gender implications of this transition since the dynamics associated with the early stages of Viet Nam's structural transformation from agriculture towards manufacturing display strong gender patterns (World Bank 2011; Jones and Tran 2010).

For example, the growth of garments and particularly electronics has been impressive in recent years. However, the resulting employment opportunities for women so far have been largely concentrated in unskilled jobs. Opportunities for training, skills development and promotion in these sectors have been especially limited for them. For a large share of female workers who migrate to urban areas to take jobs in export-oriented factories, these problems are compounded by their limited entitlements to social services in the areas where they have come to work (Action Aid International 2012).

Noting that the quality of the Viet Nam labour force in general still constitutes a challenge, recent studies (World Bank 2013) point to enhancing the skills of workers through specialised training as a key ingredient for Viet Nam's increased international competitiveness. This point is a frequent focus of current debate in policy circles (UNDP 2016). It is crucial to ensure that women workers will be included in this process of skill upgrading on equal terms as men workers. Interventions in the areas of transport, infrastructure, and compliance with standards are needed too for improved competitiveness. It is important that these are designed in gender-sensitive ways.

Another matter of concern of special relevance to women's economic empowerment objectives is that the agricultural sector seems not to be sufficiently integrated into the more dynamic parts of the economy. Agriculture is still the source of employment for almost 50% of the female labour force, and for the poorest and most disadvantaged women in particular. Related to this, there is significant regional variation in Viet Nam regarding women's economic opportunities, with the Northern Midlands and the Central Highlands displaying the highest levels of female vulnerable employment. The Northern Midlands and the Central Highlands are the poorest regions, largely agriculture-based and where most ethnic minorities live. On the other hand, manufacturing production and employment are heavily concentrated around Viet Nam's two main cities, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The South East alone, where HCMC is located, receives more than half of all foreign direct investments (Cling *et al* 2011). This concentration is a source of regional imbalances and a factor in the flows of domestic migration. Domestic migration tends to be more frequent among men in the North and among women in the South (UN Women Viet Nam 2016), with different implications for women's economic empowerment in each region of the country.

In sum, Viet Nam's greater economic openness and liberalization policies have the potential to offer a range of exciting opportunities for both women and men, but also increase its vulnerability, unless a vigorous policy of human capacities and skills development, with particular attention to women and girls, is put in place. This will require a more equitable public provision of quality education, health and other care services. From a gender and care perspective, the Viet Nam model of social welfare so far has been characterized by limited public support for care services and rigid gender norms that still assign primary responsibility for care provision to women within the private sphere of the household (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). For example, access to health is socially stratified and skewed against low-income women and internal migrants. Similarly, the provision of services such as water infrastructure and early childhood education (ECE) appears skewed against rural populations, particularly rural ethnic minorities living in remote areas. These gaps need to be redressed, for both equity and economic efficiency reasons.

## **Part One: Legal and regulatory framework and their implementation**

### **Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) in the law**

Viet Nam has one of the most progressive gender equality policy and legal frameworks in South-East Asia. The government is a signatory to human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the ILO Conventions on Equal Remuneration (No. 100) and Discrimination in Employment and Occupation (No. 111). Over the past decade the country has made significant progress in reforming its legal framework to guarantee equality and non-discrimination between women and men in line with CEDAW. The Gender Equality

Law (GEL) adopted in 2006 guarantees equal rights to women and sets out specific measures for achieving gender equality for each ministry. The Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control passed in 2007 is another significant piece of legislation for it acknowledges for the first time violence against women by partners as a punishable offence.

In addition to the enactment of laws that specifically concern women's rights, efforts are being made to ensure that gender equality objectives are reflected in all other laws. For example, the revised 2012 Labour Code that came into effect in May 2013 adds new provisions on non-discrimination and women's labour rights such as: prohibition of sexual harassment; extension of maternity leave to six months; equal pay for work of equal value; and official recognition of the rights of paid domestic workers. On this latter aspect, although Viet Nam has not yet ratified the ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), it has taken further steps towards better protecting domestic workers' rights by passing in 2014 Decree 27/2014/ND-CP9 (Decree No. 27) and its accompanying Circular 9/2014/TT-BLDTBXH (Circular No. 19). These texts set out specific requirements for domestic workers' employment such as a written employment contract between the domestic worker and her employer, as well as obligations regarding their wages, hours of work, bonus and leave entitlements.

Other aspects of the 2012 Labour Code might require further refinement to better support gender equality objectives, and women's economic empowerment in particular. For instance, Article 154 refers to the responsibility of enterprises to support childcare provision for workers, including partial cover of related expenses. But this form of childcare provision raises two challenges: first it creates the problem of excluding all those women who work for informal firms or are self-employed—the majority among low-income groups. Secondly, it may also act as a disincentive to the employment of women by firms, which might perceive the statutory requirement to support childcare for their female workers as an unacceptable cost burden.

Another challenge for women's economic empowerment in the current Labour Code relates to the regulation on retirement age, which remains 55 years for women, but 60 years for men. This is an example of explicit gender bias since by differentiating the age at which men and women can retire, this rule not only terminates women's careers at an earlier age than men, but also reduces the period of time in which women would be able to gain the experience and qualification necessary to advance to senior positions, a reduction that men would not face (World Bank 2011). This gender bias in retirement age regulation might in some cases be exacerbated by its interaction with other regulations. The Party regulation according to which anyone who becomes a member of a party committee for the first time must be of an age that allows them to hold the position for at least two terms in succession, is one such regulation. This excludes a larger proportion of women than men from seeking such membership since women must be five years younger than men to qualify. It should be acknowledged that not all women are in favour of raising their retirement age. Blue collar women workers may enjoy earlier retirement.

Viet Nam's gender equality commitments are also embodied in National Strategies and Action Plans. The National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (1997-2000) was the first of this kind. The current National Strategy for Gender Equality (NSGE 2011-2020) is part of the Government's primary planning document, the 10-year Socio-Economic Development Strategy and Five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP). The NSGE

2011-2020 sets several laudable but ambitious targets to be achieved by 2020 in a number of areas, such as: all ministries and government committees to have women in leadership positions; 100% of ethnic minority women to have access to credit; and a reduction of the time spent on housework by women relative to men. A recent Government report on the implementation of the National Program on Gender Equality in the first five-year period of the NSGE (NPGE 2011-2015) recognizes that progress is still slow, and sometimes stagnant, or even regressive in some areas (MOLISA 2015 reported in ISDS 2015).

Both the Gender Equality Law and the Labour Code are currently under revision, thus offering a fresh opportunity to correct some of the shortcomings highlighted in this section. However, reforming the law is clearly not enough. Adequate allocations of public money and technical capacity are crucial to guarantee that legal reforms translate into substantive gender equality, and progress towards women's economic empowerment is made.

### Institutions that implement WEE

Viet Nam has an extensive institutional structure for the promotion of gender equality, which could serve as a strong base for implementing policy but often suffers from a marked top-down approach and weak capacity.

The basic structure of the national machinery for gender equality involves various entities including: the Gender Equality Department (GED) established in 2008 within the Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA); the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW); Committees for the Advancement of Women (CFAWs) in all government ministries; the Family Department within the Ministry of Culture Sport and Tourism (MOCST); and the Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU). GED coordinates the implementation of the Gender Equality Law and is also responsible for the development and implementation of NPGEs. GED also works with the Department of Legislation in MOLISA to report on compliance with CEDAW. NCFAW, whose secretariat is based in the GED of MOLISA, is an inter-sectoral body that advises the Prime Minister on gender equality and women's empowerment. Each ministry and province of Viet Nam also has a Committee for the Advancement of Women (CFAW), which is tasked with developing their own ministerial and provincial plans of action, which are in turn monitored by the NCFAW. The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MOCST) leads on the national plan of action on domestic violence.

A particularly important role is played by the VWU, which is the largest and most important mass organization in Viet Nam with over 13 million women members out of a total female adult population of over 26 million (General Statistics Office Vietnam, 2014). Membership is through application, and open to all Vietnamese women aged 18 years or older (VWU 2007, article 3). For women working in state agencies, the military, the police, and the Labour Union, membership is compulsory (VWU 2007, articles 4 and 5). VWU has branches in every province and village of Viet Nam and implements a wide variety of programmes ranging from technical and vocational training and entrepreneurship development; social and financial support schemes for the most deprived; counselling; micro-credit programmes; and mass education (often called 'propaganda') on family planning, hygiene and food safety, parenting, environmental protection, and gender-specific policies (such as the Gender Equality Law and the Domestic Violence Law). The VWU thus represents a potentially

effective mobilizing force to advance gender equality goals at both local and central levels. However, their capacity to do so does not always match their numerical presence.

The VWU still dominates the context of women's collective action in Viet Nam but the number of academic institutions involved in critical gender studies is on the rise, and, in recent years, other civil society organizations focusing on women and gender equality have been founded. Although civil society activities remain in principle restricted, some of these new organizations have started to build coalitions and engage in advocacy work. The publication of the first non-government organization report on CEDAW implementation in Viet Nam in 2010 (GENCOMNET 2010) is just one of the outcomes illustrating a shift to greater diversity in gender activism in the country. Some of these aspects are further explored in Part Five, which deals more specifically with Vietnamese women's voice and representation.

### Issues with implementation

As is evident from the earlier sections, Viet Nam has important laws and policies in relation to gender equality and an extensive gender machinery, but turning laws into practice presents considerable challenges. The reasons for this are varied and include a very limited knowledge of the laws among the wider public (ISDS 2015, Chapter 9) and a lack of capacity on the part of those responsible for implementing laws and programmes. For instance, a recent study by ISDS (2015) finds that among the population surveyed, about 25% reported they had never heard of the Gender Equality Law while only 4% reported they had a clear understanding of its content. More women than men had never heard of the Law and fewer women than men had at least some basic understanding of it (35% of women compared with 42% of men). Knowledge about the Gender Equality Law was especially limited among women with low education and among ethnic minorities, both women and men. Moreover, more women than men had never heard of the Law on Domestic Violence (21% of women compared with 14% of men) but there was high awareness, and a lower gender gap in knowledge, in urban areas. A related problem is the limited presence of women in public decision-making and in politics more generally and the failure to mobilize the broad-based support needed for effective implementation. The following paragraph concludes by listing selected examples demonstrating the extent of the problems with implementation.

The 1993 Land Law is a particularly salient example as it continues to exhibit gender bias despite practical measures taken over the years to redress issues in its design that could undermine effective implementation. The original Law granted women and men equal rights to use land. In the initial years, a source of gender bias was that the land use certificates (LUCs) had space for only one name to be filled by the household head, which tended to be a man. This changed with a 2001 government decree stipulating that the names of both husband and wife should be stated on the LUC if the land was jointly owned. But the number of female farmers with formal entitlements to agricultural land remains small to these days. UNDP (2013) attributes this to: a lack of administrative capacity, which is especially weak in remote rural provinces; the difficulties women have in accessing basic legal services because of complex bureaucratic procedures and language barriers; and the role played by the local mediation committees, which tend to make decisions in accordance with traditional family norms more than the formal law when resolving disputes over land.

Another example of the many additional steps required to translate laws into practice, and which are still missing, is provided by the target to reduce women's time in household duties

by two times by 2015 and by a further 1.5 times by 2020 as compared to men's time, a target that is included in the current NSGE under its objective to ensure gender equality in family life. However, the absence of a nationally representative time-use survey (and systematic collection of other related data) makes the task of identifying inequalities in housework burdens as well as monitoring progress on this target, unfeasible. In addition to better and more regular collection of time-use data, there is also an urgent need to develop analytical frameworks and tools that enable a better understanding of the links between unpaid domestic work and various components of macro-economic policies for use in relevant ministries.

Of interest here is also the launch in April 2015 of the Labour Inspection Campaign. The first stage of this Campaign, aimed at raising awareness of labour laws in the garment sector, was implemented by MOLISA in collaboration with the Viet Nam General Confederation of Labour, Viet Nam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and supported by the ILO. According to official reports, it has been a success and MOLISA plans to replicate the same initiative in the construction sector (see ILO Viet Nam's website on the *Final Review Workshop* on 16 October 2015). It would be interesting to find out the motivation for focusing on construction, instead of other more tradable sectors such as electronics or footwear, where there is a high concentration of female employees.

## **Part Two: Social Norms and Unpaid Care Work**

### Social Norms

At present, gender relations in Viet Nam reflect a complex combination of norms and values from a distant 'Confucian past' as well as a more recent socialist one, together with influences from current economic changes and greater integration into the global economy. Cultural traditions centred on patriarchal norms about family and gender roles continue to prevail, but a gradual change in attitudes can be discerned at least for some aspects, and particularly among the younger and better educated who live in urban areas. These aspects are documented in recent research by the Institute for Social Development Studies (ISDS 2015), among others.

The ISDS study uses a nationally representative sample of about 8,500 adult women and men to provide insights into the values and expectations held by men and women in Viet Nam and their implications for the gender division of responsibilities in a range of domains. The ISDS findings suggest that many of the attitudes and norms that hold women back are still widespread. With regard to education for example (ISDS 2015, Chapter 3), while gender gaps have been closed at all levels of formal education and the majority of families recognises the value of sending both sons and daughters to school, there still persists the idea that men are better at learning than women, particularly in the natural sciences and technical subjects (nearly two thirds of respondents, or 66%, believe so), and that a wife with a higher education than her husband is likely to lead to a unhappy marriage (about 30% of respondents believe so). The problem of biased perceptions does not lie with men alone. Many women also subscribe to these gender stereotypes. In fact, overall, the number of women expressing these views in the ISDS survey is higher than the number of men, although this does not hold true in the 18 to 24 years age range. Similarly, perceptions regarding men being better than women at jobs requiring technical or managerial skills, or being more assertive decision-makers, are quite common. About 64% of female respondents and 58% of male respondents believe that men have stronger leadership abilities, and that organizations would work more effectively if headed by male leaders (ISDS 2015, Table 8.13).

Such views have evidently a deterrent effect on women's willingness to persevere in their professional careers and participate in public life. This problem is often compounded for women from ethnic minority groups and from remote provinces, who face additional constraints relating to the attitudes and practices of their own communities. It is however encouraging that these gender prejudices are becoming less prevalent among women and men of a younger age and/or with higher levels of education (ISDS 2015).

There are many reasons for the persistence of such views. The fact that gender stereotyping continues to be frequent in textbooks and teaching styles from primary schools onwards is one main contributing factor, which several gender policy assessments have repeatedly singled out over the years, so far with limited success (UNDP 2006; World Bank 2011). The fact that a major women's organization such as the VWU tends to embrace conventional ideas about the 'happy family' and avoids addressing the issue of gender inequality as an issue of power relations in its grassroots activities is another important determinant (further discussed in other parts of this Paper).

Another related factor greatly undermining women's economic empowerment in Viet Nam is the pervasiveness of violence against women, which is widespread (although still under-reported), cutting across all socio-economic groups, education levels and regions, as confirmed in recent studies (UN Women Viet Nam 2012; ISDS 2015). Experiences of violence and sexual harassment, or even simply fear of these, have huge costs for women themselves, including limitations to their safety in workplaces as well as transports to work, and monetary costs due to income forgone and medical and legal expenses.

#### The unequal gender distribution of unpaid work

The belief that caring for family members is the primary responsibility of women is one of the most persistent gender norms, and one which women themselves appear to deeply internalize. A more equitable perception regarding housework as a shared responsibility between wives and husbands might be perhaps emerging in some urban areas of Viet Nam, among younger groups. It nonetheless remains a minority view in the context of strong traditional gender norms that still consider a propensity for domestic and care work as an important defining feature of the 'ideal wife'. It is striking that almost 100% of the ISDS survey respondents, both women and men, agree with the statement that the ideal wife is the one who takes care of husband and children, and that taking care of the children is unquestionably women's 'granted' task (ISDS 2015, Figure 7.6).

This widely held view evidently results in a marked gender division of labour in unpaid domestic work and care. The ISDS study (ISDS 2015, Chapter 7) documents that women on average carry out at least ten or more housework tasks, while men carry out only one task or two. This pattern holds true in both rural and urban areas, with little variation across socio-economic groups. Preparing food, cleaning and caring for household members is the almost exclusive responsibility of women while men largely engage in work for the community such as representing family with local authorities, or fix household appliances. As for childcare, men tend to focus on tasks that involve some forms of interaction with the public sphere such as attending parental school meetings. On the other hand, activities involving more direct personal care such as feeding and bathing children, playing with them, or attending to them when they are sick, are mostly carried out by women. Two thirds of women compared to one quarter of men report to have regularly carried out housework during their childhood. Interestingly, it is those men who carried out housework in their childhood who are also more



willing as adults to share it with their wives, thus underscoring the importance of exposure to positive role models when people grow up.

A smaller scale survey conducted still by ISDS in Ha Tay province around 2008 looks not only at the gender division of household tasks, but also at the actual time spent on various housework activities. It finds that husbands on average spend only one third of the time spent by wives on household tasks. The largest gap between wives and husbands is in activities related to food preparation and nutrition (men spend 1/9 of the time women spend on these tasks). And it appears that men in urban settings tend to spend more time on housework than men in rural settings. The explanation offered for this pattern is that in urban areas a higher number of both women and men work as civil servants and, when working schedules are fixed and regular for both wife and husband, couples may be more inclined to share household work. Women who have at least one child younger than six years of age have the heaviest housework burden (more than six hours a day). These findings offer some insight into family circumstances and factors affecting the extent and distribution of unpaid care work, but are of limited use since they are neither generalizable nor have time-use data been systematically collected.

Given the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's renewed emphasis on a fairer distribution of unpaid care work as a key element of gender equality, and the inclusion of an explicit target to reduce women's housework in the current Viet Nam's NSGE, it is surprising that the GoV does not yet promote collection of nationally representative time-use data despite several recommendations made over the years by various policy advisors (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). The availability of quality nationally representative time use data is a necessary step for the effective design and monitoring of national and sectoral care policies for gender equality.

It is important to stress that the unequal distribution of unpaid domestic and care work (especially its drudgery component) has an income-poverty dimension as well as a gender dimension. An awareness of this must be at the centre of equitable policy planning. Tasks such childcare or cooking meals are more onerous if households lack tap water on their premises, or access to labour-saving devices and cannot afford to send their young children to care centres. Analysing data on differential access to basic infrastructure by income, location and ethnicity can thus provide useful insights as to which households are likely to be most overburdened with the drudgery of unpaid work. This is the approach taken by UN Women Viet Nam (2016) which shows that Vietnamese women from poor households and from rural areas face a double disadvantage because of limited availability of public infrastructure and services to reduce and redistribute their unpaid domestic and care work.

Tap water at home in particular is a luxury that only a tiny fraction (6%) of households in the poorest quintile can afford. And water collection (and treatment) remains a cumbersome activity especially for ethnic minority households. According to 2014 MICS data, water collection is a daily and time consuming activity, at times requiring longer than 30 minutes per trip, in 20% of ethnic minority households. This compares to a national average of less than 4% households with a similar burden (MICS 2014, Table WS.3). Much like access to basic physical infrastructure, differentials by socio-economic status in access to childcare services are considerable. For example, the use of organised early childhood education appears to be higher in Vietnamese rich households than in poor ones, because rich households are both more able to afford it and more likely to live in urban areas where childcare services are more available. Children's attendance of early childhood education centres is lower in rural areas than in urban areas and in southern regions than in northern

regions. None of these gaps in access to physical and social infrastructure appear to have narrowed in the last few years (UN Women Viet Nam 2016).

It seems evident from these findings that the unequal gender distribution of unpaid care work constitutes one of the most significant barriers to women's economic empowerment, and is reinforced by still widespread perceptions that such work is a 'natural' thing for women to do. This situation constrains women's choices for paid employment: for example, a much higher proportion of women than men mention having more time for their family as the main reason for choosing low remuneration forms of self-employment (ISDS 2015, Table 4.3) and, if in a wage job, women in their childbearing age are the least likely to be promoted (Table 4.9). It also limits women's opportunities for political participation as well as other forms of social and educational engagement: for example, according to the same ISDS 2015 survey, a larger number of women than men report that family issues are a barrier to participating in social-political organizations, and a staggering 80% of respondents state that women's political leadership abilities are undermined by the fact they are easily distracted by family issues (ISDS 2015, Table 8.14).

### **Part Three: Access to assets, finance and markets**

There are important gender-based differences in access to land, credit and other assets, which would need to be more systematically documented. Findings reported in UN Women Viet Nam (2016) show that:

- In 2013, the percentage of rural women named as sole owners (17%) or joint owners with their husband (14%) on the land-use certificate (LUC) was lower than the percentage of rural men named as sole owners (59%) (UNDP 2013: Table 25). Women owning a LUC were shown to be more productive;
- Limited access to land affected women's access to other productive resources including credit;
- There is no explicit gender discrimination regarding credit in Viet Nam, but in reality, women tend to use micro-credit programmes rather than more formal finance, with the result that women tend to get smaller loans;
- There is no evidence of any conscious effort on the part of the Government to integrate women farmers in the new agricultural value chain initiatives (UNDP 2016);
- Men have higher rates of ownership of all kinds of assets listed in the ISDS survey (ISDS 2015) compared with women. For example, 73% of men own motorbikes, more than double the proportion of women (30%).

## **Part Four: Business culture and practices**

This section provides key data on gender differences in earnings and job opportunities, and offers a brief overview of recent trends in the Vietnamese labour market. It identifies a lack of technical skills and training, as well as limited enforcement of labour laws and insufficient attention to unpaid domestic work, as the main barriers to women's greater participation in secure and well remunerated forms of paid work. At 74% in 2016, Viet Nam's female labour force participation rate is one of the highest in the South East Asian region (World Bank World Development Indicators). The overall picture is thus one of a small gender gap in labour force participation, but still persistent forms of gender occupational segregation and sex-based discrimination, which limit the quality of jobs available to women. Current economic policies are contributing to create better opportunities for some groups of female workers in emerging sectors such as labour-intensive exports. But they are failing to offer more secure economic alternatives to women with low levels of formal education and from disadvantaged rural regions, in particular.

There is consensus by now on the fact that mere access to jobs is not a panacea for women's economic empowerment: whether women really benefit from increased work opportunities depends on the quality and sustainability of the jobs available to them as well the effect that women taking up paid work has on the gender distribution of time and responsibilities in other spheres of life. An important question that this poses for policy-makers relates to the sort of indicators that can best capture gender differences in the quality of paid work and the distribution of unpaid care work, and thus enable monitoring of progress towards the objective of women's economic empowerment. Female labour force participation (FLFP) rates, both in absolute terms and relative to male rates, are inadequate indicators because they are not able to tell us whether women have chosen to enter paid work or have been forced to do so by poverty or by a crisis in their household or community. Employment rates on their own do not say whether the jobs women have access to provide them with adequate working conditions and remuneration either; in short are these jobs decent work (in ILO terms)? Data on employment status by sex and gender patterns in the sectoral distribution of employment can offer better insights into gender differences in the quality of paid work.

As for employment status, in Viet Nam, gender differentials in the employment category of 'contributing family worker' are especially marked. About 27% of employed women and 16% of employed men are in this category, and many of them are found in rural areas working on family farms (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). According to the ILO, a 'contributing family worker' is in the most vulnerable form of employment as his/her status implies no independent access to income. A relevant finding from the UN Women Viet Nam study (2016) is that gender differentials in vulnerable employment increase substantially with age and are highest in the 55-59 age bracket. The fact the official retirement age for women is five years earlier than for men is likely to be a contributing factor and should be redressed. As for other categories, very few self-employed workers are classified as employers, and even fewer women: about 3% of men and 1% of women were in this category in 2014, and the share of women has been declining since 2009.

### **Own-account work**

Most of the self-employed are classified as own-account workers. Similar shares of Vietnamese women and men are classified as own-account workers (42% and 40%, respectively) but women more than men are likely to be found in the informal low end of the

spectrum in this category. For instance, a larger share of female self-employment than male self-employment is in agriculture (VHLSS data, various years). Self-employed women in agriculture earn the least of all - about 65% of what self-employed men in agriculture earn and only 22% of what male wage workers in urban areas (being the highest earning category) earn (UN Women Viet Nam 2016, Table 12 and Table 13). Vulnerability and informality in employment are highest among ethnic minorities, reflecting their strong presence in agriculture. This aspect deserves special attention, particularly for the objective of achieving an accelerated restructuring of the rural economy. Reducing the gender gap in earnings from self-employment in agriculture, and raising such earnings overall, should constitute a policy priority. Recent reports point to promising new developments in the production of high value products such as pork, cut flowers and litchis for export markets as well as increasingly important domestic supermarket networks (UNDP 2016). However, the terms upon which small-scale women farmers are involved in these initiatives, if at all, are not yet well understood.

Outside of agriculture, small and medium enterprises owned by women tend to grow more slowly and generate lower profits than men's and many more women's businesses appear to be at the informal survival-oriented end of the own-account spectrum. According to the ISDS survey (2015, Figure 4.7), for example, 42% of self-employed females belong to the poorest bottom quintile compared with 23% of self-employed males. Explanations for these patterns include greater difficulties that women entrepreneurs face in balancing their work and family responsibilities, and restrictions on their time. Women entrepreneurs also report various forms of discrimination they face in accessing productive resources and networks, and lack of education, which may translate into limited knowledge of legal provisions, or simply less self-confidence (VWCE/ILO 2007). The training available to women entrepreneurs is largely provided by business clubs affiliated to the Viet Nam Women's Union while training services to men tend to be organised by either the government or private business development providers. Women entrepreneurs find VWU business clubs useful at some basic level but express the need for higher level of professional service delivery beyond what these clubs can offer. The more professional and specialized sector-based business associations, however, remain largely male-dominated and have not adapted their operations and service delivery to the needs of women entrepreneurs (VWCE/ILO 2007).

For the most disadvantaged and poor women who are self-employed, the chances to shift to the formal/accumulation-enhancing end of the spectrum are very unlikely and would require several integrated measures rather than better access to land or credit only. As some of the micro-credit literature shows, very poor women have some chance of succeeding only when access to credit is accompanied by intensive mentoring and measures aimed at strengthening their financial management skills or actively integrating them in marketing networks and value chains. An alternative might be that poor women may be better off in wage work. In relation to this latter point, a study from Viet Nam seems to suggest that many of the informal female enterprises that closed over the period of the recent crisis did not close for reasons of business failure, but because of better opportunities in waged jobs (Cling *et al.* 2011).

#### Wage work

On a positive note, in recent years, there has been an upward trend in the share of women in wage work in relation to both contributing family work and own-account work, mostly driven by increased employment opportunities specifically for women in foreign-owned export oriented factories. It is interesting to note that in Viet Nam the proportion of wage workers

without social insurance (i.e. those wage workers who are informal workers according to the ILO definition) is higher among men than among women. This is mostly due to male workers' higher representation in the domestic private sector. In 2014, women constituted more than 65% of the total labour force employed by the foreign-owned sector while their share in both public and private domestic sectors was less than 50% (GSO, LFS 2014). The available evidence therefore seems to suggest that wage employment offers better opportunities and comparatively more favourable conditions to women workers because labour conditions tend to be more 'decent' (in ILO terms) in public or foreign-owned enterprises relative to domestic private firms. The policy challenge in this context is thus how to extend best practices and higher compliance with labour regulations to the domestic private sector. Improving labour standards is an important pathway to both higher labour productivity and firm competitiveness. Achieving these two objectives simultaneously is at the core of the ILO Better Work programme's philosophy. The Better Work programme has been successfully operating in a number of garment factories both in Viet Nam and elsewhere in the region and offers a promising model for the objective of improving factories' compliance with Viet Nam's labour laws and strengthening women's rights at work (World Bank *Interwoven* 2015).

#### Gender patterns in the sectoral distribution of employment

As for gender differences in the sectoral distribution of employment, the shares of women and men in agriculture have been both declining. But it is important to keep in mind that agriculture remains the principal source of employment for about half of the labour force and is by far the main source of livelihoods for ethnic minorities. This contrasts with many of Viet Nam's South-East Asian neighbours including Thailand and even Indonesia, where the share of the female (and male) labour force in agriculture is now smaller. Official statistics indicate that women who stay behind in agriculture tend to be older than other female workers. Almost none of them has received any technical or vocational training, about 26% of them have no formal education at all, and another 30% have only completed primary school (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). This is significantly lower than the educational attainment of female workers in other sectors, where about 70% of the female labour force have attained secondary education or higher; it raises the important policy question of what special measures may be needed to facilitate the movement of this group of women away from low productivity agriculture to higher income-generating activities, either on the farm or off-farm. Evidence suggests that those women farmers who did receive vocational training at agricultural schools not only reported higher productivity than those who did not, but the impact of training was more significant than for male farmers.

Female employment in manufacturing has been growing at a faster pace than male employment while the share of employed women who work in services (about 33%) seems to have remained stable over the last few years. Gender segregation tends to be marked in both manufacturing and services, with modest variation over the years. Women cluster in garments and footwear in manufacturing; and trade, hotel and restaurants, education, and paid domestic work in services. The increase in the share of manufacturing in employment without a commensurate increase in the share of manufacturing in GDP suggests, however, limited improvements in labour productivity in this sector. Many garment factories, for example, produce at the 'cut-make-trim' end of the value chain, a simple assembly process with low value-added for the producer, and rely heavily on imported raw materials. This is a drawback and constitutes a serious obstacle for upgrading and economic development in the long term. As already noted, employment in the more formal segments of the garment industry appears to provide some women with the opportunity for decent working conditions and relatively

stable earnings. However these jobs so far have offered limited opportunities to gain and consolidate skills, or obtain promotion.

### Gender gaps in earnings

A consequence of the fact that women tend to cluster in both lower-paying sectors (such as agriculture, hotel and restaurants and paid domestic work) and lower-paying occupations within a sector, while men can more easily reach higher paying positions, is that gender gaps in economy-wide earnings in Viet Nam have remained significant, and widened in recent years. Overall, female earnings have declined from 87% of male earning in 2004 to 80% in 2012.

In light of these trends, it is of particular concern that women's share of the working population participating in technical and vocational education (TVET) has fallen while that of men has risen since 2004 (UN Women Viet Nam 2016). Also troubling is the fact that fields of study remain highly gender stratified. Among students enrolled in tertiary education, men are considerably more likely to specialize in engineering, manufacturing, construction and services, while women are more likely to specialize in social sciences, education, humanities and the arts. No significant change can be observed between 2008 and 2013 (UNESCO 2015) thereby reproducing the gender segregation of the occupational structure. Promoting training of women in non-traditional skills would help them to enter new emerging sectors, and preferably in more skilled occupations. It may also help to overcome employers' and the wider public's prejudices, which have been shown to be still widespread. For instance, it was already noted in Part Two that views that men are better than women at jobs requiring technical skills and management jobs are particularly strong and widely held.

Another cause for concern is that gender-based discrimination in recruitment and promotion practices are still widespread despite contravening the law which stipulates that job advertisements should avoid any mention of gender (ILO Viet Nam 2015). The ILO review finds that up to 83% of management job postings indicating a gender preference required male applicants. All the director posts were exclusively for men but a similar bias was found across other management positions such as 'managers' and 'supervisors' where 78% and 87% of job advertisements respectively only accepted male candidates.

### **Part Five: Women's collective voice and representation**

Political participation is another important area where gender differences emerge. Even though representation of women in the National Assembly is high by regional standards, there are indications that women do not have an equal voice in the public sphere.

Information on women's participation in local community affairs is limited but what exists suggests slow progress. The Ordinance on Grassroots Democracy Decree, passed by the National Assembly in 2007, provided a framework to promote greater democratic participation at the local level with also greater emphasis on decentralizing decision-making. A participatory poverty monitoring exercise by Oxfam and ActionAid during the period 2008-09 (reported in World Bank 2011) points out that many of the barriers that women face higher up in the public sector are also encountered by women taking up leadership positions at the village level. It reports that member participation often occurs on clearly gendered lines. Women participate primarily in meetings organized by the Viet Nam Women's Union or associated with family planning and population, while men participate on a wider range of issues, including law, security, and agriculture/forestry extension. Men tend to be registered

as household heads and, in some mountainous communes, participate in meetings on behalf of women, giving the latter no opportunity to express their views in public. Women generally attend when male family members are absent or cannot attend. The report also notes the long hours of work, largely unpaid, undertaken by women in remote mountainous communes and extremely low levels of education as additional barriers to their participation.

As noted in Part One, the Viet Nam Women's Union certainly remains the most active among mass organizations with significant outreach capacity. VWU holds periodical meetings in most villages and support frequent organized activities. However, a recent independent evaluation (Waibel and Glück 2013) confirms the view that while helping poor women to meet their practical needs, VWU does little to challenge traditional gender norms. Their study finds that few of the activities or instruments in place are aimed at genuinely collecting women's voices or channelling women's views to higher levels. VWU is especially effective at addressing practical aspects of women's daily lives, with an emphasis on the most deprived women and on forms of training and income-generation activities that are typically female, such as hair dressing and sewing. Moreover, many of the activities supported by VWU are household-based and remain in the informal sector. VWU does not focus on gender relations and unequal power, and does not seek to challenge gendered divisions of labour regarding reproductive work. Waibel and Glück report that they found not a single club focusing on issues like sharing household chores and childcare with men. Another major constraint on VWU's effectiveness is their uneven levels of capacity in ethnic minority areas.

### **Part Six: Summary of key barriers and strategies to address them**

The contextual analysis presented in the five Parts of this Paper highlights several barriers to women's economic empowerment which require policy attention if gender equality is to become a reality in Viet Nam. Policies to address key barriers to WEE need to be prioritized along two main criteria:

#### **A. Interventions that address underlying causes of women's economic disempowerment**

One criterion is to prioritize interventions that will bring about the greatest possible impact in terms of gender equality, such as interventions that can simultaneously support women's productive and reproductive roles, and also interventions that are likely to address underlying causes rather than outward manifestations of gender inequality.

Policies to promote skills and training fall under this criterion. As noted in earlier sections, marked gender differences in technical skills are one of the main causes of persistent gender occupational segregation, low productivity and gender wage gaps. In the rural economy, the fact that agricultural extension services tend to be biased towards better-off male farmers, reinforce female farmers' disadvantage in terms of access to technology and new crops. Interventions for skill development will need to be tailored to the needs of specific groups of women and may include: initiatives to promote greater participation of women in TVET (with follow-up measures such as a monitoring system to track cohorts of women and men in the labour market after they have completed training); initiatives to encourage more women to specialize in non-traditionally female skills such as engineering and other technical subjects (with attention not just to participation rates, but also adequacy of curricula and effectiveness); incentives for employers to offer on-the-job training to their female workforce; agricultural extension services designed in more gender-sensitive ways (for example, by ensuring that the teaching approaches meet the needs of farmers without formal

education and training is organised at times compatible with women's caring responsibilities); capacity building of female government officials and gender-aware training for both male and female officials.

Care policies such as greater public provision of early childhood education (ECE), or institutional changes to better address the care needs of the ageing population, also fall under this criterion. Expanding ECE for instance could simultaneously address the objectives of reducing unpaid care burdens and creating more and better jobs for women, since many workers in the social sectors are females. It has been stressed throughout the Paper that reducing women's unpaid work is not only likely to enable women to access more remunerative forms of paid work, but also could facilitate their greater participation in social dialogue, politics and decision-making, thus generating virtuous circles.

#### B. Interventions that address the needs of those who tend to be excluded

The other criterion is to prioritize interventions ensuring that no one is left behind, in the spirit of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This would involve first of all a focus on improving the productivity of female self-employment in agriculture through an integrated package of services, and with special attention to the plight of ethnic minority women. It would also involve guaranteeing stronger rights and entitlements for internal migrant female workers. Secondly, this would cover the challenge of equalizing the pension ages for women and men, which currently leave women behind on several scores.

An overarching policy recommendation, which cuts across all sectors and policy areas, is the need for better and more systematic sex-disaggregated data collection and gender-aware economic analysis. Quality detailed data is the foundation for both good planning and effective monitoring. Gender statistics need to be improved with special focus on better documenting different categories of work, both paid and unpaid, as well as women's individual access to productive resources and services. Time-use surveys as well as more detailed sex-disaggregated data on self-employment in the non-agricultural informal sector are particularly important in this regard.

In short, reflecting the analysis in this Country Context Paper, the suggested priority areas are:

- (1) skills, and in particular technical and vocational training, and any other measure to encourage more women to study technical subjects to enable them to access well-paid jobs in sectors previously precluded to them;
- (2) inclusive care policies to reduce and redistribute unpaid domestic work and care-- ranging from basic infrastructural investment in the most deprived rural areas, to greater involvement of the State in providing equitable quality childcare and elderly care, to parental leave policies and better implementation of legislative provisions to this effect for both men and women;
- (3) an integrated package of measures to increase female farmers' productivity and their access to profitable agricultural value chains, financial services and technology, with special attention to ethnic minorities women;
- (4) equalizing the pension ages of women and men in the law;
- (5) improving gender statistics, by both promoting collection of new data and building government officials' capacity to use them.



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