

Constructions of gender in Vietnam: In pursuit of the ‘Three Criteria’

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Abstract

Vietnam has advanced far beyond most other developing countries and, indeed, surpasses many developed countries in adopting a legal framework based on gender equality, and in creating institutions and programmes to support women’s advancement. Inegalitarian gender norms have also persisted, however. The Vietnam Women’s Union promotes women’s educational, political and economic advancement but simultaneously exhorts women to pay attention to their Confucian role of maintaining family hierarchy and harmony. This paper presents findings from qualitative research examining gender relations at the grassroots level in central Vietnam. It argues that the Vietnam Women’s Union could support women more effectively by promoting greater diversity in gender norms and by initiating a public discussion to address the pressures women face in trying to achieve ideals that are often experienced as contradictory and unattainable.

Résumé

En ce qui concerne l’adoption d’un cadre légal basé sur l’égalité des genres et la création d’institutions et de programmes pour soutenir la promotion des femmes, le Viet Nam est allé bien plus loin que la plupart des autres pays en développement et les dépasse vraiment de beaucoup. Cependant, des normes de genre inégalitaires persistent. L’Union des Femmes du Viet Nam soutient la promotion éducative, politique et économique des femmes, mais simultanément, elle exhorte celles-ci à rester sensibles à leur rôle confucéen de maintien de la hiérarchie et de l’harmonie familiales. Cet article présente les résultats d’une étude qualitative qui a examiné les rapports de genre dans des populations locales du centre du Viet Nam. Il avance que l’Union des Femmes du Viet Nam pourrait soutenir les femmes plus efficacement en faisant la promotion d’une plus grande diversité des normes de genre et en lançant un débat public sur les pressions auxquelles les femmes sont confrontées en tentant d’atteindre des idéaux, souvent vécus comme contradictoires et inaccessibles.

Resumen

Vietnam ha progresado mucho más que otros países en desarrollo y sin duda sobrepasa ya a muchos países desarrollados en la adopción de una estructura legal sobre la igualdad de sexos y en crear instituciones y programas para apoyar el progreso de las mujeres. Sin embargo, en las normas aún persisten las desigualdades sexuales. La Unión de Mujeres Vietnamitas fomenta el progreso educativo, político y económico de las mujeres pero a la vez exhorta a las mujeres a seguir el modelo confuciano en el que la mujer se ocupa de mantener la jerarquía y la armonía familiar. En este artículo mostramos los resultados de un estudio cualitativo en el que se examinan las relaciones entre sexos a

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un nivel básico en Vietnam central. Argumentamos que la Unión de Mujeres Vietnamitas podría apoyar mejor a las mujeres fomentando una mayor diversidad en las normas de género e iniciando una discusión pública para abordar las presiones a las que se enfrentan las mujeres para conseguir ideales que muchas veces parecen contradictorios e inalcanzables.

Keywords: *Vietnam, gender, social inequality, policy implementation*

Introduction

Vietnam is one of relatively few countries that has tried, via legislative changes and social programmes, to institutionalize gender equity at the macro, meso and micro levels. In 1995, the government approved the implementation of a Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, based on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Khiet 2000). The National Committee for the Advancement of Women, established in 1993, subsequently consolidated its organizational structures and extended its network to 50 ministries, other central government agencies, and provinces and cities throughout the country (Khiet 2000: 1–2).

Vietnam is far ahead of most other countries with similar levels of income in terms of human development and gender equity. The adult female literacy rate is relatively high, at 91% (UNICEF 2004). Women's participation in the labour force is substantial (70% of women aged 16–55) (UNDP 2000) and strong reproductive health services contribute to a low maternal mortality rate (Asian Development Bank 2002, Hieu *et al.* 1999). Vietnamese women's representation in parliament (27%) is the highest in Asian, and is higher or equal to that in many highly developed countries (Canadian International Development Agency 2001). Based on these and other social and health indicators, Vietnam placed 44th out of 157 countries in a recent ranking of gender equity and women's status (Save the Children 2004).

The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) has functioned as a primary vehicle both for policy development and for implementation of the country's progressive approach to gender equity. The VWU was originally conceived of as a mass organization broadly representing the rights and interests of women in all strata. Since its establishment in 1930, the VWU has created a vast network at the grassroots level for implementation of a wide variety of programmes to support women's advancement (Khiet 2000). It is now one of the oldest and largest national organizations of women in the world, with branches in every province and village of Vietnam and with a membership comprising about 11 million members, or 60% of all women over 18 years of age (Thu 2000). Through its health, development, educational and cultural activities, the VWU helps to communicate and implement government policies at the local level. Its programmes for women receive support both from the national government and from international organizations. They include health promotion, cultural and educational activities, and a wide range of interventions to support economic development—for example, microcredit, training and access to technology for agriculture, fisheries, handicrafts, mushroom cultivation, brick making and animal husbandry. Most of these economic activities are normally carried out at the household level. A woman must become a member of the VWU to receive training and other support. The programmes are often targeted towards the most economically disadvantaged.

Despite the country's highly evolved institutional and policy framework for the promotion of women's interests, a variety of evidence, including findings from our own research, suggests that women at the grassroots level continue to face a range of health,

economic and social problems. Some of these problems are directly linked with the persistence of gender inequality. For example, Tran and Le (1997) have drawn attention to a decline in women's political participation at the local level, which they link to women's 'double burden' of economic and household maintenance. Several studies have found that women often face domestic violence but are reluctant to seek assistance, and that authorities are also inclined to minimize the problem (Loi *et al.* 1999; Rydstrom 2003). Women with reproductive health problems often fail to seek treatment because they 'normalize' their problems—in other words, view them as normal and therefore not something for which to seek intervention (Minh *et al.* 1999). Women bear most of the costs and risks associated with fertility regulation; the use of contraceptive methods for men is extremely low¹ (ORC Macro 2002).

As part of a larger research project concerned with gender inequality and reproductive health in Vietnam, we conducted interviews in mid-2003 with VWU officials—one at the district level, two at the commune level and four at the village level—and two focus group discussions with community leaders in two of the study sites. The purpose of these interviews was to investigate how gender equity policies were understood and applied at the grassroots level. In 2002–2003, we also conducted open-ended, in-depth interviews with 36 community women (most of them VWU members) and 20 of their husbands, and 16 focus group discussions with community members (10 with women and six with men). These interviews examined gender relations within the home and local community, with particular attention to the influence of gender attitudes on reproductive health. Most individuals were interviewed two or three times.

Subsequently, we presented initial findings from the study in two local 'workshops', one with VWU officials and one with 30 of the study participants, and took notes on the discussions in these workshops. For this paper, we also reviewed formal reports and speeches by representatives of Vietnam Women's Union to obtain a more comprehensive view of its goals and perspectives. We draw on these data here to describe the blending of egalitarian and inegalitarian gender norms in policies, programmes and practice at the grassroots level, and to examine the pressures that modern Vietnamese women face in trying to achieve a variety of norms simultaneously.

In our interpretation of Vietnamese women's failure to cast off inegalitarian ideals of womanhood, we draw upon Bourdieu's (1990) concept of 'habitus', in which a constellation of socio-cultural, political and economic structures is carried through time and reproduced through day-to-day practices. Women's ability to come to terms with their own evolving roles in the family and society comes up against the 'inertia' of the habitus, which entails dispositions to act in certain ways and to envision a limited set of options.

The Three Criteria Campaign and the cultural construction of women in Vietnam

Literature from anthropological studies (e.g. Rydstrom 1998; Gammeltoft 1999) as well as our own research findings suggest that Vietnamese socio-cultural norms hold women to a very high standard. Women are expected to work diligently to better themselves and their families, and to always put the family's (and often the nation's) interests ahead of their own. In identifying themselves so closely with their families, women often feel personally responsible when the family fails to live up to social and cultural norms. Gammeltoft (1999) as well as Zhang and Locke (2002) have discussed two overlapping constructions of gender in Vietnam—a Confucian and Socialist model. Confucianism historically assigned

women the values of hard work, chastity and proper behaviour, and focused on women's roles as daughters, mothers and wives. According to the Confucian moral code of the 'three obediences', a woman must show obedience to father before marriage, to husband when married and to the eldest son when widowed.

Post-1946 Socialist Vietnam brought about a kind of social emancipation for women; 'women's liberation' and participation in social and political life were important elements in the anti-colonial movement, even though the traditional Confucian role of women as caregivers was still very much emphasized. After liberation, women's equal rights with men in both the public and private domains were legally recognized. In this new Socialist Vietnam, women became responsible for both family *and* nation or, in the words of one national slogan used in the 1960s and 1970s, 'good at national tasks, good at household tasks' (as cited in Gammeltoft 1999: 176).

The complex of gender-based values and expectations to which modern Vietnamese women are subject is embodied in a national Women's Union campaign that was being carried out in the research sites during our study. This campaign called upon women to 'Study Actively, Work Creatively, Raise Children Well and Build Happy Families' (*Phu nu tich cuc hoc tap & lao dong sang tao, Nuoï con gioi va Xay dung gia dinh an no hanh phuc*). Some study participants referred to this as the 'Three Criteria Women Campaign'.

Official documents suggest that the Three Criteria Campaign was initiated as part of a set of broader official efforts aimed at discovering and preserving 'fine traditions' in modern Vietnamese families (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999: 1–4). In 1994, the International Year of the Family, the Vietnamese Government set up a National Steering Board to promote activities related to the theme of 'family, responsibilities and resources in a changing world' (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999: 1–4). Previous program efforts to promote gender equality and women's emancipation have also blended in traditional ideas related to women in the family. For example, Circular 35, issued in 1989, on 'Wealth, Equality, Progress and Happiness', called for the building of new 'cultural families'. Two VWU campaigns initiated in 1990 were entitled 'Women Help One Another in Household Economy' and 'Raising Children Well'.²

With encouragement and support from the district level Women's Union, VWU members in each commune are invited to attend a seminar at the beginning of each year, in which district level representatives explain the three criteria and register the women's names. At the end of the year, a special meeting is held, in which officers and members from the community determine which women have succeeded in meeting each of the criteria. Asked to give examples of the indicators commonly used to assess whether women have met the criteria, representatives of district, commune and village VWUs mentioned the following:

- Studying actively: participates in training events and meetings, reads books and other publications, understands well and follows the government's and VWU's policies;
- Working creatively: engages in successful and profitable economic activities, acts as a pioneer in new economic pursuits; and
- Raising children well and building a happy family: children should get good grades in school, are not involved in social evils or street fights; husband and wife maintain a harmonious relationship, have no loud fights, have good relationships with their parents; the family has no quarrels with others in community.

This list encompassed goals that women might achieve through their own industriousness and perseverance, but also goals whose attainment might well be beyond their control. To explore this, one of the researchers asked a VWU official, 'What if a woman works

extremely hard but the outcome is not good—let’s say she works hard at poultry raising but her chickens die, or the house burns down?’ The official responded:

VWU Official: Then she does not get a point for meeting the economic criterion. Let’s say her poultry die from a disease—that would mean she had not applied the proper techniques so it is her own fault. Also, people live close together so the disease could spread to the neighbours’ poultry.

Interviewer: Well then, what about the neighbour who did everything right but the disease spread to her chickens?

VWU Official: She doesn’t meet the criterion. She should have protected her chickens.

Interviewer: What about a woman who does everything right? She takes excellent care of her children—the children are well behaved and get good grades—and the family is exemplary in many ways, but the husband drinks sometimes and beats her. Would you say that this woman had met the third criterion?

VWU Official: No. She could be a two criteria woman but not three criteria woman. She should have the skills to persuade [influence] her husband and make the family harmonious.

Three underlying themes are evident in this description of the Three Criteria Campaign. First, women are expected to learn about and follow government mandates such as the application of scientific techniques in animal husbandry to improve their families’ economic positions. In other words, specialized knowledge and full economic participation are not reserved for men, and the VWU plays a key role in disseminating knowledge to women and supporting their economic and social advancement. But, second, women must also conform to Confucian gender norms regarding filial piety and obedience to male family members. Women are responsible for preserving family harmony, which in this society often requires giving in, keeping quiet, and making sacrifices for the family. Maintaining a happy and harmonious home environment also typically means doing most or all of the housework (Santillán *et al.* 2002). Third, women are responsible not only for their own behaviour but also for things that may be outside their control, such as economic success and their children’s good grades. Women are expected not only to behave well themselves, but also to persuade their children, their husbands and perhaps even others in the community to behave well (Rydstrom 1998). Thus, the configuration of gender roles embodied in the Three Criteria puts tremendous pressure on women.

Despite, or even because of, the pressures of Three Criteria womanhood, commune and village-level Women’s Union officials regarded the Three Criteria Campaign as very helpful for women. Several reported that it set out clear objectives for women, provided recognition for their achievements, and reduced the ‘social evils’ prevalent within local communities. Economic prosperity was seen as one way to reduce these ‘social evils’. Women in the workshop held at the end of the study said that they were eager to be named as Three Criteria Women because this would demonstrate their abilities and their value.

It was not clear how many women typically signed up for the programme, but a report prepared in one of the communes indicated that 64% of the commune’s population of about 1100 women were members of VWU and had registered for the campaign in the previous year, and all but two had met all three criteria. Many women we spoke with did not register because they lacked confidence that they could achieve all three sets of objectives, or did not have adequate time to pursue all three. Both men said that the third criterion—good children and happy family—was the most difficult to achieve. ‘I will be very proud if my wife can

achieve this [the Three Criteria]', said one of the men at the end-of-study workshop, 'But in fact there is no such woman. This woman exists only in our dreams'.

Asked about women who did not register for the campaign, one commune-level official said that these typically were women in difficult situations who knew they could not study actively, work creatively, raise children well and have happy families. For example, women were unlikely to register if they were ill or extremely poor, had stubborn or drug-addicted children, had husbands who were violent and/or alcoholic, or had been abandoned by their husbands.

But there is no discrimination against women who failed to register, or who failed to achieve the three criteria, the officials maintained, and VWU members confirmed this. As the statements in the following section suggest, it seems that the significance of the Three Criteria is really on the symbolic level, and that women have internalized the pressure to achieve both inegalitarian and egalitarian gender ideals.

The struggle to balance civic participation with income generation, housework and family

Interview findings suggest that many women aspire to be more than simple homemakers, as the following exchange from a focus group discussion with eight women illustrates:

Q: Would you prefer to remain at your own level, or would you prefer to be like some of the more successful businesswomen even if that meant more work for you?

A: We would like to but we ... can't keep up with them ... They are more knowledgeable and have a larger circle of relationships. In business, they have better tactics and are much more dynamic than we are ... There are many of them, for example, Mrs X, Mrs Y. They are women but they are excellent ones—they are called 'triple excellent' women. They have even become managers of business and stock companies (processing sea foods). They have money to buy shares in those firms, so they can take part in controlling such businesses. Most of them began as ordinary workers in these firms and worked their way up. The key thing is their knowledge. They have a lot of money, but in order to manage those businesses well, they must possess good knowledge. They are excellent people. They are better than us.

Yet both men and women often criticized those who let their household duties slide to pursue economic and social or political ends. One 37-year-old male focus group participant commented,

A successful woman is one who makes few mistakes in her family. Women who are good at doing business often make many mistakes in family affairs. Only a few are good at managing both business and family work ... If they are good at doing business they often have less time for family ... When women get involved in community affairs activities they often put their family aside.

A mother of one expressed similar sentiments, but in her view there were many women who could 'do it all'— this was the expectation:

A good woman is one who can manage both business and housework. For instance, they can do housework after the work day, and also help their children with school. There are many women of that kind here. They go out to work but love their husband and children. They take part in communist party and Youth Union activities. I mean they participate in all activities and they are good at it.

Later in the same interview she emphasized that whatever a woman accomplished in her economic and civic pursuits, she should remain deferent and avoid challenging the traditional family hierarchy:

High positions and power are good but not for women. The man always is the master of the family, not the woman. An independent woman, as far as I'm concerned, is not a real woman. It is fine for a woman to do better than the husband [economically]. She can be better than her husband in terms of professional knowledge but should not be a decision-maker in family matters such as rearing children and other family concerns. The woman should ask her husband for advice in all family matters, I think.

Most husbands encouraged, or at least allowed, their wives to participate in community activities such as festivals and meetings of the Women's Union, and many married women were involved in loan programmes, but in most cases they were expected to finish their housework first. One husband said that participation in the Women's Union and in other social activities was most common among those women whose husbands were away working on commercial fishing boats for long periods. Women also were more able to get involved after their children had grown up, he explained. He noted that women who completed all their housework and prepared meals before attending meetings should be emulated, adding that there were many good role models in mass media showing that women could participate in civic affairs and also manage their housework efficiently.

Another husband reiterated the idea that women's civic participation was very important—those who did not participate would be backwards or 'rustic'—but that such participation should be limited so that household work would not be compromised:

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| Interviewer: | If a married woman has to take care of her family, is it also necessary for her to take part in community affairs? |
| Male study participant: | Yes, it's necessary. Besides taking care of her husband and children, they should participate in those activities. If they don't, they will be rustic ... They should learn about the society and do something ... |
| Interviewer: | What about the time required to take part in Women's Union activities? |
| Male study participant: | They shouldn't get too involved in Women's Union activities—they should do this in moderation ... Usually the union organizes activities for them at night. They shouldn't participate more because they have a lot of work to do in the family. |

In some cases, it was the husband who determined what priority could be given to their wives' social participation, but in many cases the constraints were self-imposed. One woman who left school after seventh grade to support her parents explained,

My husband communicates with others and takes part in the community activities more than I do ... I rarely go out because I am shy but also because I am busy. It is usually impossible for me to go out for a day because I cannot leave things behind ... I really love to go out and do things in the community, to communicate with other people, to broaden my mind. I have to stay at home because I am so busy and no one can help me do the housework.

One of the husbands discussed the constraints that women faced:

For example, if I want to go somewhere then I can go, but wives cannot ... If they go, they will feel conscience-stricken. Because of their female natures, they will feel they are doing something

wrong. Men can go anywhere, for example, to the house next door. If I go to your house and we watch football together, it isn't acceptable, but not for women.

Many others said that their attendance at VWU meetings and other community events was curtailed because of household duties. As one woman, who sold fish [and who had been beaten by her husband a short time before the interview], explained, 'Even if they call me to attend these meetings I will not go. Actually, I also want to attend these meetings and hear what they say, but I'm too tired after working. So I always go to bed at 8 p.m. in order to wake up early the next morning'.

The importance of family, traditionally conceived

The above passages illustrate the gender ideals that many ordinary women aspire to, and some of the pressures they face in trying to attain them. The following case study of Ms Lan (a pseudonym) suggests that even women who occupy important public positions are not exempt from traditional demands. Ms Lan struggles to balance her private and public lives. Even though her husband holds relatively egalitarian ideas and places few demands on her, she feels psychological pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, in which the man is the household head. Thus, women's empowerment in the public sphere does not necessarily bring about gender equality at home.

Ms Lan's relationship with her husband began on an equal footing. They joined the army together and had gone back to the commune at the same time. According to her, the army had an important influence in inculcating the idea of gender equity among recruits. Because of their time together in the army, she said, she and her husband can now talk freely and discuss a variety of family and community issues.

Besides her official duties for the Women's Union, Ms Lan ran a rice shop in front of her house. The shop was small but, according to her, income from it enabled her to cover most of the family's expenses. She did all the housework. Her husband held the position of village head. He never interfered in his wife's work and, on the contrary, let her make decisions on her own. She tended to experience this freedom as a burden:

I have to take care of all the housework. He (her husband) is an easy man. I can sleep, or go to the market or go anywhere I want or I can work the whole day, it is just fine with him. He does not care. I feel this is very good because there is no pressure. But it is also a burden for me. He wants to let me to be the leader. For example, when I wanted to open the rice shop, I tried to discuss it with him and he said 'It depends on you'. I am the woman in the family, but because of the way he is I have to think about a lot of things like how to generate enough income and how to spend money wisely. It forces me to have an additional job.

Among the longstanding roles of the Women's Union at the local level is to support women in distress, and to intervene when conflicts arise. Our interviews suggest that when such interventions occur the idea of promoting gender equality often falls by the wayside, and the ideal of family harmony takes precedence. All four VWU representatives who described their actions on behalf of women who had been mistreated by their husbands made it clear that their main objective was to preserve the marriage. When asked why, they said that women with husbands are always in a better position, and children should be raised with a father present. Ms Lan explained,

In many cases [of abused women] that I worked with, I found the men's behaviour unacceptable. But I thought of the long-term future of the women and of the children and I had to try my best to

bring them back together ... There was a case where the woman was asking for divorce because her husband beat her badly. I reconciled them but she was scared of him and still wanted to get divorced. I told her, 'If you ask me to sign a paper that can bring you together I will do it immediately. But if you ask me to sign a paper for you to divorce your husband, I cannot. Please calm down. If anything happens in your house, I will come at once.'

Ms Lan viewed subservient behaviour as a good strategy for women to follow in order to preserve family harmony, and in this respect she was quite typical of the Women's Union representatives with whom we spoke. She told us, for example, that,

In health education sessions, I have often instructed women to be gentle with their husbands to keep the happiness in their families. There were many women who used to talk back to their husbands. The husband would make a [provocative] remark and the wife would respond in kind. But these women have made great progress. They now know how to give in to their husbands.

Although she discussed a wide range of topics with us, Ms Lan was most animated when speaking of her two teenage sons, both of whom were still in school and living at home. Customers came to Ms Lan's shop to purchase rice several times during our interview with her, and she had to interrupt the conversation. By way of apology she said repeatedly, 'I am sorry. I have to earn money for my sons'—implying that concern for her family was an acceptable reason for the interruption, whereas income generation in itself was not.

Conclusions

The Three Criteria Campaign, and the attitudes expressed by Ms Lan, illustrate some of the unresolved contradictions in contemporary Vietnamese society's cultural construction of womanhood, in which concepts of gender equality and gender hierarchy are intermingled. This blending of opposing ideas is reflected in national-level policy statements, in local-level social relations, and in women's psyches. The Vietnam Women's Union plays a dual role. On the one hand, it promotes women's advancement and gender equity through a variety of programmes, which provide economic opportunities and support, as well as contributing to health and other social programmes. On the other, it encourages women to demonstrate obedience to husbands, fathers and sons, and to be self-sacrificing in order to maintain harmony in the family. Thus, the Union actively tries to help its members to balance socially-valued traditions based on social inequality between men and women with the many post-liberation opportunities that now exist for greater economic, social and political participation alongside men—and to provide such opportunities without threatening the *status quo*.

On a more abstract level, the Women's Union is encouraging women to follow 'beaten tracks', which provide the most 'thinkable' possibilities for action (Bourdieu 1990: 35). Seen in this light, making gender equality a reality in Vietnam would depend on women's (and men's) ability to modify practices that reproduce structures of gender inequality. Bourdieu proposes that, 'The specific efficacy of subversive action consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought which help orient individual and collective practices' (1990: 141).

In trying to guide women to achieve a delicate balance between equality and inequality, the Women's Union has, in effect, contributed to a construction of gender that puts tremendous demands on women. Women are responsible not only for their own behaviour but also for things that may be outside of their control, such as their children's grades in school and their husbands' sometimes violent behaviour. They are supposed both to lead

exemplary lives themselves and to influence their husbands and children to think rationally and behave well. The public image of the family rests upon women's shoulders and, as a result, they are often reluctant to seek support when they experience problems such as domestic violence.

Recent national level data show increases in the number of women in parliament, increasing literacy rates among women, increasing gender equity in educational enrolment, and improvements in maternal health care (Khiet 2000: 1–2, Thu 2000, Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999: 1–4). There are no official policies or data, however, regarding men's participation in housework and child care, nor on communication between husband and wife, or women's access to leisure time. And it is evident both from this study and from our previous research (Santillan *et al.* 2002) that women are often disinclined to ask their husbands to help with housework so that they can more easily attend meetings and participate in educational and economic activities.

In channelling its messages about women's advancement, gender equality, and the need to preserve (inegalitarian) cultural traditions from the national to the local level, the Vietnam Women's Union advocates certain roles for women in the society and the family without addressing men's roles. The Union exhorts women to constantly improve themselves, while taking men's natures more or less for granted—an approach solidly rooted in traditional belief systems which conceptualize male morality and men's personal qualities as in-born, in contrast to female virtues which must be acquired through training beginning in early childhood (Rydstrom 1998). The Women's Union may be missing opportunities to bring about fundamental improvements in gender equity by failing to involve men and to address their roles.

The blending of Confucian and Socialist traditions in the Union's messages about gender probably contributes to their acceptance. But the ways in which the principles of gender hierarchy and gender equity embodied in these traditions are translated through policies and programmes may be creating barriers to women's participation in the organization. For example, the tendency to assign women more public responsibilities without easing the burden of their traditional familial roles creates time constraints. The public classification of women as 'three-criteria women' and 'non three-criteria women' may also discourage some from becoming involved. In Ms Lan's commune, some 40% of women had not registered for the three criteria campaign. According to officials these were the women that the Union is most concerned about reaching: the least healthy, the poorest and the most desperate—those who believed they would not be able to meet the three criteria. Even though the exclusion of these women was apparently self-imposed, and the officials we interviewed said these women who failed to register faced no stigma, but the Union might want to investigate further to be certain that this is the case.

The Women's Union is a unique and important organization in Vietnam. As economic liberalization and globalization proceeds, its role in promoting gender equity and advancing women's interests becomes increasingly complex. The findings from this study suggest that the Union's continued relevance as the country's social and economic context continues to evolve could be enhanced through a public discourse regarding the contradictory gender ideals that pervade the society. The Women's Union is strategically positioned to lead such a discourse, which clearly should involve men as well as women. A collaborative campaign with the Farmer's Union, a mass organization whose members are mainly male, could be one mechanism for engaging men, and men and women together, in discussions about gender equity.

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Notes

1. Among the 78.5% of couples currently using any contraceptive method, condoms account for only 5.8%, and male sterilization for only 0.5%; another 14.3% practice withdrawal.
2. The Three Criteria Campaign was inaugurated at the 8th Congress of the Women's Union in 1997, together with a campaign among female public employees led by the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour on 'Good and State Work and Housework' and a campaign called 'Grandparents Live Exemplary [lives] and Grandchildren Live Dutifully' run by the Fatherland Front (Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999: 1–4).

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