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Gender at Work:

Increased participation requires institutional change

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations

Abstract

This paper addresses employment issues in globalisation in Vietnam, highlighting persistent gender gaps and emerging concerns in urban and rural areas. Several core gender issues in employment are reviewed with specific reference to the effectiveness of national level initiatives, which have attempted to reduce the gaps. Drawing on the work of Rao and Kelleher's (2005) thought provoking paper and recent work on gender and parliaments in Vietnam, I argue that policy initiatives in gender and employment must be supported by a focus on institutional change at both the workplace and the national level. The type of reform that I suggest includes changing how the functions, organisation and culture of traditional institutions operate. Examples of possible changes within parliaments include introducing gender responsive budgets, gender analysis in legislation and the adoption of operational changes in the workplace are discussed as necessary steps towards gender equality.

OVERVIEW OF GENDER AND WORK IN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented debate on globalisation, particularly in countries like Vietnam where a rapid opening up of the market is occurring. The impact of economic integration is obvious in the increased mobility of people moving in and between countries, the diverse modes and speed with which information and communication is shared and, the lowering cross-border barriers which facilitates the flow of goods, services, people and ideas between nations (Mekong Economics 2004).

While it is true that some gender issues in employment are a direct consequence of economic integration, the process of globalisation has also illuminated existing, or persistent, gender gaps. In this paper, I want to explore gender issues in employment that have come to the fore in rural and urban areas of Vietnam during globalisation. For example, the increase in export oriented production and cash cropping are impacting on rural areas, while the formalisation of the labour force is having a profound effect in cities or urban areas.

Rather than drawing a *causal* relationship between globalisation, gender inequities and work, I discuss the different ways that gender and employment issues have been addressed at the policy level during an era of "gender mainstreaming". Drawing on the work of Rao and Kelleher (2005), I propose institutional change, or reform, as the next step in tackling gender issues in employment, but also in other sectors such as health and education. To demonstrate this point I refer to work that is being carried out in Vietnam to promote gender considerations in parliament.

Persistent gender gaps in employment

Today gender gaps in employment prevail. In particular, women are still spending more time working, there is a low value attached to women's work and the division of labour is gender in both private and public spheres therefore limiting the opportunities available for women. For example, in Vietnam, despite similar rates of employment for men and women there is still a definite segmentation of the labour force according to gender. In rural areas, 80 per cent of jobs are in agriculture, leading to limited occupational choice and thus fewer gender-oriented discrepancies. In urban areas, however, there is a marked divergence between male

and female employment patterns. Men tend to dominate industries such as mining, metal work and heavy industry. Conversely, women are overwhelmingly represented in light industry, such as garment and textile manufacturing, social services and sales. Even within these female dominated industries, however, men still fill a disproportionate number of higher positions. Even when women manage to move into more traditionally male dominated industries, such as information and communication, they tend to find themselves in 'electronic sweatshops': working highly stressful, low paid jobs (Elias 2003).

In Vietnam, economic integration has left its mark on the manufacturing and export trade, the informal sector, agriculture, entrepreneur development and employment levels. I will briefly describe the key gender issues in each of these sectors and how they are being resolved in Vietnam.

Manufacturing and export

As globalisation and free trade occur, an increasing number of companies from industrialised countries are relocating manufacturing factories to less developed countries. Globalisation has meant that women are obtaining more jobs, particularly in factories, as the export production expands. However, there is also a "feminisation of unemployment" (Ghosh 1999) because women have flexible contracts and can be easily let go. With a large, unskilled female labour supply, there is always someone else willing to replace a factory worker. The volatility of globalisation and economic integration can have negative impacts on low-skilled male and female employees.

The increase in the establishment of factories in the city has resulted in changes to the rural landscape of Viet Nam - families, farms and life choices. While young women and men from ethnic minority groups may choose to migrate to the city as labourers, young women in particular, are also migrating hundreds of kilometres away from home to work in garment and footwear factories where 80 per cent of the workers are female (Mekong Economics 2004). Because the demand for export and manufacturing has been so rapid, these newly established economic centres lack infrastructure and services, such as housing, water, schools or medical centres.

While economic integration in Vietnam has also been a catalyst for changes to the labour code and compliance with international laws regulating employment, little is being achieved on the ground. Not only is there growing evidence from research among female factory workers that policies are not being implemented, debates abound regarding whose responsibility it is to provide services; the government, trade unions or the employers. Further, institutions such as the trade unions or the women's union are not able to meet the needs of workers due to their broad mandates, poor resources and non-existence of a tripartite dialogue.

Informal sector

While in many countries the informal sector is viewed as an economic stopgap, providing a transitional or supplementary form of income, economic integration legitimates trade activities (Pettus 2003). Due to the formalisation of trade relations and the labour market both locally and internationally, the informal sector may thrive as an alternative option for the unemployed, underemployed or small business owner / operator. Internationally, an expansion of the informal sector has been forecast for China as they join the WTO (UNDP China 2003: 51). Women will be directly affected because they comprise the majority of workers in the informal sector, vulnerable to poor working conditions and little job security (ibid.).

Women working in the informal sector, who have been widowed, divorced, abandoned, or the wives of veterans or unemployed men are often the primary wage earners in their households (Pettus 2003:144). The uncertain nature of their income and the endurance required to continue working in the informal sector places them in a disadvantaged position during economic integration. However, although the informal sector can be analysed in terms of gender issues, the men, women and children who work as merchant traders all comprise a disadvantaged group. Workers in the informal sector currently experience poor working conditions, receive no support from unions or associations and no workplace benefits or leave (Standing 1997:59).

With economic integration the situation facing informal workers could be worsened by the increasing economic burden placed on families who can not compete with large private companies providing additional services and quality goods at competitive and fixed prices. Problems in the informal sector are difficult to address due to the nature of the sector and the lack of civil society groups in Vietnam working with them. Without representation the informal sector cannot voice their needs, access information on their rights or advocate for improved services or policy changes necessary to conduct business.

Agriculture

The interrelationship between gender and cash cropping and economic integration is complex. The old issues related to women in agriculture remain, such as the triple work burden and poor access to training and extensions services, however, new issues such as women's lack of access to technology and market information worsen the situation. On a positive note, economic integration has meant that in many cases women are earning more money. For some coffee producing families in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, coffee contributes as much as 80 or 95 per cent of the household income (ICARD and Oxfam 2002). Being a net coffee producer since the 1990s increased the probability of a household moving out of poverty by over eight hundred per cent (Thoburn and Jones 2002). However, these statistics were collected during a high in global coffee prices.

Although increased income may be a benefit of cash cropping, lessons learned from China would indicate that industrialisation has meant more work for women (UNDP China 2003). Women, who continue to work longer hours than men, and in rural areas economic integration does not necessarily lead to women enjoying the benefits of increased incomes or have more decision making power. It is also not clear how well families are adapting to their entry into a consumer society and if all families have access to food markets and a variety of food. International examples from Zimbabwe, Malaysia and Malawi all show that a correlation can be made between the shift to cash cropping and lower levels of nutrition due to families having to purchase food stuffs as opposed to growing it.

Further, cash cropping has linked households to the global market, which has been experienced by farmers through the fluctuating market prices. The recent drop in coffee prices has caused negative consequences for a large number of coffee farmers the world over. The situation highlights the risk of increased vulnerability from trade liberalisation and globalisation as well as the benefits (Thoburn and Jones 2002). What is not clear is how well families cope with the dramatic drop in income and the stress associated with finding markets for their coffee. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some male farmers in communes in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam turn to alcohol consumption during times of financial hardship while others may leave their homes in search of alternative incomes as construction workers in nearby towns. Other gender issues, which may arise as a response to the economic

crisis include women's isolation, related stress and at worst, breakdowns within the family unit.

In some cases improved services and development in cash cropping areas are curbing the negative consequences of cash cropping. The domestic focus on cash cropping has attracted the interest of international corporations seeking to meet their corporate social responsibility or "triple bottom line". Non-government organisations have also been active in responding to changing situations in rural areas. For example, Vietnam has seen the construction of childcare centres, roads and bridges, medical centres and the provision of safe and clean water. However, farmers in isolated areas are less likely to benefit from such projects further isolating them from services and opportunities.

Although the government of Vietnam has initiated policies focused on increasing women's access to resources including land, technology and credit, some issues have tended to become sidelined as "women's" issues, which are the responsibility of the women's union. But without expertise in a range of issues, ranging from the law, business, economics and welfare, this organisation is not equipped to deal with all things related to women. The outcome of this approach can be seen in the proliferation of "activity" based interventions such as credit programmes or training courses, which are removed from the macro level issues, such as the need for reform within the Women's union itself and especially, in approaches to planning or budgeting.

Entrepreneur development

Despite the high number of women engaged in business, women in business around the world still face disadvantages in terms of access to credit, technology and business networks (UNIFEM 1996, D'Cunha 2001, Boonchuey 2002, Giles 2003). However, in countries like Vietnam, policies for women entrepreneurs are also underdeveloped or non-existent. The new Gender Equality law in Vietnam seeks to include a section on women entrepreneurs. A survey of 483 successful women entrepreneurs in Vietnam was recently conducted by the Mekong Private sector Development Facility (a project of the International Finance Corporation) to facilitate the writing of the law. The research has highlighted that in addition to policies on women in business there is a need for support for women entrepreneurs in areas, such as managing human resources, understanding laws and procedures related to financial management and balancing their time between family and work commitments. Without this support women entrepreneurs are still operating on the fringe, on the periphery of the institutions and associations for entrepreneurs that are perpetuate the notion that business is a male domain.

GENDER RESPONSIVE INITIATIVES AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The examples highlighted in the emerging gender issues in employment demonstrate that policy changes have not been as successful as anticipated due to a lack of change within institutions such as government, non-government organisations, unions and workplaces in general. To date, the success of gender initiatives or gender mainstreaming has been measured by an increase in the representation of women in employment, politics or education, raising the awareness of gender issues within the population and the establishment of committees for the advancement of women. While each of these initiatives incorporates policy change at some level, these changes are not being supported by other changes within institutions. Future initiatives, which aim to address gender inequalities in employment,

should seek to couple policy level changes with organisational changes that seek to reform the traditional and often patriarchal culture of workplaces.

Rao and Kelleher (2005) have also addressed this observation in their paper on life after gender mainstreaming. They call for an international movement, which accelerate change in formal institutions such as trade unions, non-government organisations, parliaments and business associations.

For Rao and Kelleher institutional change is about, 'changing the rules of the game' (2005:59). The rules they refer to include informal and formal laws, policies and cultural norms and decision-making processes. The authors have clustered the areas requiring change into four groups including:

- 1) Women's and men's individual conscious (knowledge, skills, political conscious and commitment);
- 2) Women's objective condition (rights and resources, access to health services and safety, opportunities for a voice;
- 3) Informal norms such as inequitable ideologies, and cultural and religious practices; and
- 4) Formal institutions such as laws and policies (Rao and Kelleher 2005:60).

Further consideration needs to be given to the approach most likely to succeed in reforming institutions. Gender mainstreaming has often been characterised within the workplace by the development of a gender policy and gender awareness training programmes, however, this will not be enough to motivate attitudinal and behavioural change among leaders. Garnering the support of leaders will ensure that all policies are supported and implemented across the organisation and encourage debate and discussion among staff regarding rights for men and women.

Because institutional change is about challenging power and traditional practice, there is a need for gender initiatives to work within the walls of power to expedite reform. Parliaments are an opportune site for instigating institutional and culture change to promote gender equality. After all, if national level policies are not understood or implemented by the decision-makers themselves there will be little hope that real institutional change is possible.

Understanding and working towards gender equality is central to the work of parliamentarians for a number of reasons:

1. Parliament, like any other institution, is comprised of both men and women;
2. Laws affect men and women differently;
3. Several international standards uphold gender equality, for example the MDGs, Beijing Platform for Action and the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*;
4. Gender rights are human rights;
5. Budgets and other national policies impact on the lives of ordinary men and women; and
6. Parliamentarians act as the voice for all men and women in society, especially vulnerable groups.

Seizing the opportunity to bring about institutional change within parliaments is significant for the employment sector. First, parliaments are workplaces and should act as a model for

workplaces in the nation that they represent. Second, through the legislative and representative functions of parliament, institutional change can be extended to sectors such as employment, health and education. For example, institutional change will mean strengthening the understanding and importance of gender analysis, increased transparency in operations and spending and the implementation and monitoring of policies.

Gender mainstreaming in parliaments requires an analysis of the different impacts that parliamentary institution, functions, organisation and members have on men and women. Essentially, what this means is the need to focus on the whole of parliament, to ensure the success of women parliamentarians once they have been elected, and to make parliament a gender responsive workplace that benefits both men and women.

Over the last few months I have been working on a publication which seeks to showcase practices of "gender mainstreaming" in parliaments around the world. The examples have been collected from the work of non-government organisations, governments, international and local agencies working towards gender equality in developed and developing countries.

The manual promotes the integration of gender considerations into the institution, function, organisation and representation of parliaments, through initiatives such as gender responsive budgets, affirmative action policies and changes to the formal and informal culture of patriarchal institutions. This research has revealed that few parliaments in the world are making systematic changes to the way they work, and in many instances parliaments are lagging behind other workplaces in terms of gender responsive policies and practices. Further, most examples of "gender mainstreaming initiatives" were isolated examples, such as the implementation of quotas for women's participation in Rwanda or the adoption of a gender-neutral discourse in parliamentary rules and procedures in Central American countries.

Rather than providing international examples from the research, I will mention the significance of making these, often subtle, changes to institutions, whether they are parliaments or other powerful institutions. In particular I want to mention the value of changing the organisational culture, institutionalising gender budgeting and ensuring that policies and laws are gender responsive.

Culture of parliament

To date the government of Vietnam, like many other countries in the world is focussing its attention on increasing the number of female representatives in parliament, and in politics in general. Without undermining the importance of achieving a critical mass in parliament or other institutions, I want to emphasise the need to employ strategies, which bring about changes within the culture of an organisation (Grey 2001). After all, we can all cite examples where having a policy that insists on a number of women representatives did not automatically lead to the increased participation of women. Further, women in parliament are even less likely to want to participate if the male patriarchal environment discriminates, excludes or restricts their participation.

Avoiding intended or unintended gender bias is possible if changes are made to the way in which organisations operate. So, instead of changing what an institution does, it is necessary to change how it is done. This shift in thinking has grown out of an uneasiness I have experienced while working as a gender consultant where gender equity initiatives have required a few people - often women - to do additional work. In particular I am thinking of the many cases where a policy has stated the need for gender focal points to be appointed

within workplaces. While in principle this is a good idea, often gender focal points are not supported institutionally and therefore have limited resources, limited time and are expected to take on the responsibility for conducting gender awareness training or implement other gender initiatives for an entire organisation.

Changing how the culture of parliament works include a balance of policy changes and advocacy by individuals in leadership positions:

- 1) changing the standing orders of parliament to better meet the practical and strategic needs of men and women;
- 2) professionalising the culture of parliament through socially inclusive policies, resources and infrastructure that meet men's and women's needs; or
- 3) mobilising change agents within leadership positions in the organisation. The change agents will play a key role in changing the informal culture of an institution, which is often a breeding ground for patriarchy and tradition, and unfortunately, in some cases is where decisions are made, and power lies.

Legislative function

The legislative function of parliament can be described as law making, debating laws and policies. The integration of gender issues into law making protects the rights and responsibilities of the men and women that parliamentarians represent, and promotes a national message of gender equality. Economic integration has the potential to create an environment in which there is greater awareness of legal rights and of men's and women's needs (UNDP China 2003:55). The forthcoming Gender Equality Laws in Vietnam intends to level the playing field for men and women by redressing persistent gender based inequalities, and by providing support for women at work during globalisation by including provisions for women in business, women in education and women's reproductive role.

While many countries are signatories to international conventions or have adopted new laws on gender equality, parliament is a venue where these laws can be scrutinised and their implementation monitored. The process of debating the implications of laws for men and women in parliament increases the profile of laws and the key gender issues emerging during globalisation which may increase the likelihood that gender issues will be resolved.

Parliamentarians are also in a prime position to publicise the international commitments of government and advocate for signing other international conventions that may further gender equality in that country. Parliamentarians can also use their right to submit a member's bill encouraging parliament to ratify particular agreements.

Gender Budgeting

Parliamentarians also play a key role in approving and monitoring the effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and transparency in government spending. Gender budgeting considers the different implications that budgets have for men and women; taxation, allocations for sectors or infrastructure projects, trade and even privatisation. A gender responsive budget seeks to reduce gender gaps and inequalities by disaggregating government spending and revenue according to its impact on different groups of women and men with consideration of the gender relations, roles and opportunities to access and control

resources in society. The budget is also a blue print for socio-economic priorities (Budlender et al 2003).

The desire to make budgets more participatory and transparent is part of a larger agenda to 'democratise' the formulation of macroeconomic policy frameworks.

"A burgeoning 'global' civil society, which globalisation helped create, has been making demands for democratic participation not only at the local and national levels, but also at the international level." (Cagatay et al 2000:9)

However, macroeconomic policy-making often remains sheltered from broad public scrutiny and debate. This is due in part to the belief that macroeconomics is both a neutral subject, devoid of social content, and a technical subject best left to experts (ibid.). As a consequence, gender budgeting initiatives in Vietnam reside within the executive level, and remain a mystery to the general population, and unfortunately to most parliamentarians.

The manual for parliamentarians advocates for the inclusion of a gender based analysis within the budget approval and monitoring processes. I am not suggesting that parliamentarians need to prioritise gender analysis above other salient issues when scrutinising laws and the budget, nor am I implying that all parliamentarians need to become gender experts overnight. Instead, placing gender analysis on the parliamentary agenda encourages inter-institutional communication and linkages. For example, parliaments around the world are increasingly cooperating with non-government organisations, academia, trade unions and sectoral experts to provide valuable skills and information.

In Vietnam, this process of consultation would also help to clarify the roles and day to day routines of other institutions, such as the women's union, trade unions and the national committee for the advancement of women. All of these institutions are currently following ambitious mandates, provide the full spectrum of social and welfare services, oversight functions and programming in the area of gender. However, parliaments and other powerful institutions are not supporting gender issues, which means that non-governmental organisations and unions are not being called upon to assert their oversight functions, the outcome is that gender issues remain low on the list of priorities for leaders.

Future challenges

Drawing on the lessons learned from the experience of gender mainstreaming, Rao and Kelleher (2005) flag possible challenges raised by institutional change. Four of the challenges highlighted include: the difficulty of implementing attitudinal change on the ground, the ideological split between gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment, a lack of skills and support at the leadership level and the difficulty in measuring the success of changes due to a lack of tracking mechanisms.

Considering that parliaments are often patriarchal, conservative and slow to change, these challenges will require some careful consideration. In particular, it is the ideological split between gender mainstreaming and women's rights that I find interesting. If changes are going to occur in institutions it is necessary to re-politicise gender initiatives. I believe that working within parliaments, who are often comprised of elected representatives, provides an excellent opportunity to make this happen. Gender issues or women's issues can easily be, and should be, aligned with discussions on social inclusion both within parliament; the workplace and parliamentary debates.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted emerging gender issues in employment at a time of economic integration and has touched on one direction for resolving gender issues in employment during globalisation. Using the work of Rao and Kelleher (2005) and practical examples from Vietnam I have demonstrated how achieving targets for women's representation and increasing services have not always brought about sustainable changes. I suggest that the next step in gender mainstreaming, or beyond, is working within institutions on core issues such as patriarchy, advocacy, women's rights and generally putting gender back on the agenda.

I have provided several brief examples of how this may be achieved in institutions like parliaments. In particular I have made suggestions such as changing traditional rules and procedures within established traditional hierarchies, conducting gender analyses of laws and budgets and supporting the work of change agents at leadership levels. I have not had the opportunity to discuss the other opportunities that exist within organisations such as parliaments to mainstream gender considerations or initiatives, which will successfully increase women's participation in development.

Although this paper has focused on work and in particular bringing about institutional changes, making changes to institutions such as parliaments has broader impacts for other sectors such as health and education. Particular institutional changes, such as gender responsive planning and budgeting or policy changes will directly impact the health and education sectors because they will provide additional support to existing services and programmes ensuring that they better meet the needs of women. Policy and institutional changes will also ensure that gender is put back on the development agenda, and that the implications for women will be better understood and designed with consideration of the broader framework of institutional reform.

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