

Women's Unpaid Labor in Vietnam

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Abstract: Housework is viewed as “an obligation” of women and “suitable” for women. This labor is neither paid nor recognized by society. The inequality has caused a lot of impacts on the current social progressive goals that aim at achieving social justice for women, executing gender equality and women's liberation. The paper focuses on clarifying opinions on home-based unpaid labor of women in Vietnam at present and suggesting several solutions.

Key words: Female laborer, women's rights, unpaid, Vietnam, gender inequality.

1. Opinions on women's unpaid labor

Unpaid labor can be defined as activities and tasks that require people to spend time and energy, but they are not paid for the work. Furthermore, those non-market activities and tasks are not included in the calculation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the International Labour Organization, services produced by a household and used only within the household are not considered a job and are not included in any measure of GDP as well. As a result, many economic activities are not measured and they are excluded from the GDP. In the meanwhile, productive services made and used within households (such as self-sufficient livelihood activities, housework, caring for the ill, elderly and children etc.) are mainly done by women and considered as a duty of women. *Home-based unpaid labor of women*, therefore, includes activities and work in the home, which aim at human reproduction and labor-force reproduction. This type of labor requires women to spend time and energy, but they get no payment and the labor outcome is not taken into account in estimation of the household income.

Although home-based activities are done without payment and they are not included in the GDP, it does not mean that those activities neither bring any interest nor produce commodity. On the contrary, all unpaid work is very necessary for society. It prepares human resources for daily income-generating activities; it helps to ensure good health for all members of households; and, it undertakes the task of human reproduction as well as labor-force reproduction etc. In industrialized countries, about two thirds of female laborers do unpaid work. In less developed countries, most of women are unpaid laborers; they are not recognized as real laborers or they are considered to make very little value. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), every year the global economy omits about 11 billion US dollars earned from income of women, who do housework without payment. Home-based activities are mainly viewed as a particular

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obligation of women. They have to do “unpaid work” without any wages or salaries and their work is not recognized by society. This inequality happens to all countries, to a lesser or greater extent, without exception.

From the economic perspective, unpaid labor causes influence on economic growth. In the short run, economic growth is determined by consumption. When ones do not earn an income due to the fact that they have to undertake unpaid obligatory tasks, they will spend less. Consequently, economic growth will be lower. In the long run, economic growth is determined by supplies and labor productivity. When ones cannot do a job, as they have to undertake their unpaid obligatory tasks, the supply of labor will reduce in the market (Haroon, A. A 2014: 5).

From the social perspective, unpaid labor cuts off women’s opportunities to access and keep a position in the labor market. It causes a negative impact on women’s education, qualification, health status, psychology, leisure, and entertainment, which are very necessary for them to accomplish well the task of reproduction. One of the far-reaching consequences is that women, who do unpaid work, “gradually lose opportunities to access social services and social safety-net, since they are not recognized as real laborers” (UNDP, 2014). On the other hand, such gender inequality in allocation of labor products partly increases injustice between women and men; women have fewer opportunities to take part in social activities; it is more difficult for them to get a position in society and at home as well. This causes a

considerable influence on the current social progressive goals that aim at achieving social justice for women, executing gender equality and women’s liberation.

2. Feminist viewpoint on women’s unpaid labor

Home-based unpaid labor of women has been mentioned by many schools of feminism. Freedom feminists point out that women undertake the burden of housework, but they just keep a dependent position and they have no or very little freedom. They are responsible for doing housework - an unpaid job. In the publication titled “*The Feminine Mystique*” (1963), Betty Friedan argues that women never want to have a doomy life with men and they do not hate men as well, but they feel sad about doing abundant housework constantly and they therefore want to do something different. The freedom feminists suggest several measures to make social changes by providing favorable conditions for women so that they are no longer forced to do unpaid work. All homework must be seen as paid services; for instance, children should be sent to kindergartens; clothes should be washed at the laundry shops; home cooking and cleaning should be done by housemaids. At that time, women will have favorable conditions to make themselves equal to men (Lê Thị Quý, 2009). This was also mentioned in the classic works of Marxism-Leninism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels analyzed social evolution and pointed out a common actual status: when the matriarchal system was overthrown, women had to comply absolutely with the power of men; men-

women inequality became increasingly greater. At the time of capitalism, together with the increase in the extent and intensity of labor exploitation that was typical for the regime of privatization, women were more and more enslaved and tyrannized. At home, men took the decisive role in the household economy; women were therefore dominated completely by men; "wives became main servants and they were not allowed to take part in activities of production in society" (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1995 Vol. 21: 115).

In fact, development of capitalist industrial production resulted in favorable conditions for women to take part in economic activities. This is a really progressive tendency. Use of female laborers in production, however, led to great contradictions for women that they had to undertake both the home-based functions and social functions. It worsened women's status called "two nooses in one neck" – they were enslaved at home and were oppressed in society at the same time. In factories, women had to "work with all their might to earn necessary living materials" (Marx, K. & Engels, F. 1995 Vol.23: 578). At home, they also had to accomplish all housework and caring activities; they were really enslaved at home. Thus, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed a way and essential conditions to liberate women and perform men-women equality in all aspects in practice: "A real equality between men and women can be realized, only when the capitalist regime of exploitation is abolished for both sexes and housework of families becomes a social industry" (Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1995 Vol.23: 341).

Regarding to labor division between men and women, Lenin V.I. also argued that women constituted a half of society and this half was the most oppressed and exploited. He pointed out: "Millions and millions women are experiencing a life of servants (more precisely, they are condemned to hell) in such families; they have to make every effort to take care of meals and clothes for the whole family, for which they have to spend extraordinary energy every day as well as try to save everything and every penny except for their own labor" (Lenin, V.I,1980: 173). He therefore argued that the most fundamental measure to eliminate the women's inequality was to build an appropriate economy, in which labor division would be so proper that women could take part in social production activities like men; women would be provided with favorable conditions to accomplish well their social assignments; at the same time, they would have also good conditions to undertake the motherhood and child-caring work.

According to V.I Lenin, housework is a difficult problem in the family labor division. Even in the context of complete equality, women still suffer from a lot of constraints and they have to shoulder the burden of all housework. Although the law on women's liberation and men-women equality is promulgated and executed, women cannot escape from the "slavery" status at home. They still have to undertake a lot of housework and do other home-based activities, which make them feel suffocated and exhausted; they are tied in cooking and child-caring; their energy is

wasted in petty activities with extremely low productivity... V.I. Lenin assumes that it is necessary to promulgate comprehensive laws that ensure equality between men and women, enabling women to take part in positions of the state management and reducing the burden of housework. In the meanwhile, women should try their best to better themselves and improve their social status. He believed that if all those measures were performed synchronously, "women would have learned fast and keep pace with men" (Lenin, V.I. 1977: 182-183).

Marxist feminists applies thoroughly the viewpoint of Karl Marx on the origin of oppression and exploitation in capitalism, according to which exploitation is understood as the appropriation of surplus value of male and female laborers. They also point out that Marxism focuses on studying social labor division and treasuring hired laborers, but it has not yet mentioned labor division in family, which is involved with unpaid labor. Being different from K. Marx in this aspect, Marxist feminists argue that women are not only deprived of surplus value when doing work in society, but they are also exploited at home when they do unpaid work. At home, they have to undertake housework without payment or they just get very little as a part of their husbands' wage in form of expenses for meals, clothes, personal belongings, and dwelling etc. According to the Marxist feminism, it is necessary to take into account of women's status and role in both hired labor in society and unpaid labor at home.

While studying gender-based labor division in the labor market and the family as well,

aiming at getting further understanding of the gender and sex relationship structure, socialist feminists realize that domination of men is shown in the fact that they take control over the process of reproduction of women (in terms of both biological reproduction and labor-force reproduction). Women's labor is not paid with a proper income, as they are considered cheap laborers. Oppression over women must be studied in both sex-based and gender-based labor division in the family as well as in society. They have analyzed non-market labor of women as a part of the socio-economic foundation. The reproductive role of women is inherently viewed as a non-economic activity and they are not paid for the activity. Men get more power than women, although women are the very source of labor-force supply for commodity production. Dependence of women is also expressed through the fact that they have very limited opportunities to access market economy and their labor is exploited via non-economic relations" (Lê Thị Quý, 2009: 163-164). Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1945), a feminist theorist, made an "attack" on traditional family. She did not view traditional family as a nice and snug world with human love, as it was the very place where women were regarded as unpaid slaves and they were confined unnaturally. According to her, housework such as cooking, cleaning, washing and child-caring etc. requires professional skills and knowledge; therefore, it is necessary to specialize housework to liberate women and make society better" (Trần Hàn Giang, 2004: 15).

3. Unpaid labor in Vietnam at present: Actual state and some solutions

For the past years, home-based unpaid labor of women still remained as a common phenomenon in Vietnam. Sociological surveys conducted in both urban and rural areas show that women have to work hard in society and at home as well. In society, they have to work the same as men. In addition, they have to undertake the roles as a wife, a mother and a housewife at home. They are attached with many functions: they have to do everything as a wife, a mother, a cook, a supplier, a carer of the elderly, a carer of children, a teacher, and a physician etc. They work hurriedly from early morning till late night, which exhausts almost all their strength and time and makes them have no or very little time for rest or entertainment.

According to data of the survey on gender equality conducted by Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in 2007, the proportion of people going to the market to buy food is 88.6% and 5.5% for women and men respectively. Corresponding figures in cooking are 79.9% and 3.3%; and in washing are 77.3% and 2.8% (CIEM, 2014: 16). The proportion of the families which both husband and wife equally take part in doing housework is very small. Thus, most of housework still remains undertaken by wives. Apart from 8 hours spent on doing main jobs, such as farming, animal raising, cultivating and harvesting crops, and even some poisonous and harmful activities like insecticide spraying etc... (for women who do agricultural work) or doing work at the enterprises or offices (for women who do non-agricultural work), women have to

spend from 4 to 6 hours a day on housework. In all age groups, women have to do more housework than men. For the group of those aged from 25 to 55, each woman has to spend about 700 hours a year doing housework; whereas a man just spends about 300 hours (NCAWV, 2002). The national gender report in 2011 reveals that 79% of women in Vietnam spend averagely 2.2 hours a day doing housework (excluding the child-caring time) (Haroon, A. A, 2014: 7). According to the Vietnam employment trends report of UNDP, 53% of all women have to do unpaid work at home; in the meanwhile, the corresponding figure of men is 32%.

In reality, housework consumes a lot of time and strength. Yet, there are still non-objective shortcomings in measuring the economic effectiveness of housework. Family-caring and housework of women are undervalued by men as petty, nameless, insignificant, unworthy and unpaid; no one considers paying for such work, because it does not generate income; and, it is often named as “an obligation of women” and “suitable” for women.

In a survey conducted in Vietnam, over 80% of respondents think that women are mainly responsible for housework, since it is a “feminine job” or “a job of women”. Regarding to the social opinion about men’s participation in doing housework, a quarter of all respondents argue that men should not take part in doing housework.

Obviously, home-based unpaid work of women and recognition of unpaid work are still considered relatively unfamiliar issues in Vietnam. The concept of “home-based unpaid work of women” has not been yet

mentioned in the Constitution and laws as well. However, the legal articles and regulations relating to gender equality and justice for women have already implied that it is necessary to perform justice for women in home-based labor division and men have responsibility for sharing the burden of housework with women. The Article No.24 of the 1946 Constitution affirms: "Women in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of political, economic, cultural, social, and domestic life". The Article No.63 of the 1980 Constitution regulates: "Women and men have equal rights in all political, economic, cultural, social respects and in family life. The State and society create favorable conditions for women to improve their knowledge and competence in all respects". In the 1992 Constitution, the Article No.63 states: "Male and female citizens have equal rights in all fields of politics, economy, culture, society and family. All acts of discrimination against women and all acts damaging women's dignity are strictly banned". Article No.10 of the 1986 Law on Marriage and Family states: "Husband and wife shall be obliged to be loyal, to care for and respect each other and to assist each other in all social aspects, and to practice family planning. The husband shall have the duty to create conditions for the wife to fulfill her mother's role". The 1995 Civil Code also determines the role of women in family as well as their right of inheritance etc. Especially, the promulgation of the Law on Gender Equality (November 2006) sets a target of elimination of gender-based discrimination and execution of gender

equality in all fields of social and family life. It regulates that men and women have equal rights and responsibilities in all spheres, in which: "women also get favorable conditions to take part in social work like men"; "men also undertake housework. It should not be considered as women's work"... The fact that Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 29 July 1980 marked a new step forward in performing gender equality in Vietnam. The Convention raises specific articles involved with elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in all spheres of social life, such as: politics, economy, society, employment, education, marriage, family, labor division, opportunities, occupations, wage and salary, and healthcare. Yet, it will take a lot of time to fulfill such legal regulations in practice. In reality, if this is more concerned and properly dealt with, there will be more favorable conditions and opportunities for women's liberation; it is one of the targets we expect to achieve. It takes time to realize this in practice however, and we should encourage active participation of all social groups; at the same time, many measures must be taken synchronously, as below:

Firstly, it is necessary to reduce and restructure unpaid work by providing proper infrastructural composition and basic services, of which the cost is appropriate for family income, so that women can access the services easily and the burden of housework therefore will lessen. For instance, clean water and other facilities are supplied indoors; more prestigious child-caring services with an appropriate fee are built; technological

products for housework are more improved, aiming at enabling households to have modern, user-friendly, and multi-functional household equipment with a reasonable cost.

Secondly, it is essential to intensify activities of propaganda in order to enhance people's awareness of gender equality and gender justice. Gender-related knowledge, especially those involved with women's rights, labor division in the home, and men's responsibility to share housework with women, should be disseminated widely, aiming at improving understanding in community and society. The disseminating activities are carried out to mobilize social support for division of unpaid work for both men and women and to eliminate gradually the gender stereotypes that were inherently kept in mind of Vietnamese people.

Thirdly, it is necessary to enhance the role of women in family and society as well. Favorable conditions are created, enabling women to take part in production and trading investment in order to improve their income and make their voice more important at home. As a result, they will depend on men less. We need to diversify jobs that women can do inside and outside their main professions. In addition, we have to build particular programs that help women take new occupations such as civil servants, hired workers and business owners. It is also important to provide women with favorable conditions so that they can access credit funds and improve professional skills. At that time, they will get more opportunities in labor markets etc.

In the long term, it is essential to change social awareness widely and deeply by disseminating knowledge that will make

people respect and realize the value of home-based work. The targets for recognition, adjustment and division of unpaid labor must be shown in the Party guidelines as well as the State policy.

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