

DOMESTIC GENDER INEQUALITY IN MEKONG DELTA

NGUYEN THI NGAN HOA *

Abstract: Based on findings of previous research works done by many researchers as well as several surveys conducted by the General Statistics Office on residential communities in Mekong Delta, the author analyzes issues relating to gender inequality in family and impacts caused by the gender inequality on women's life. According to the research findings, domestic gender inequality is obviously reflected in three fields, including: access to educational opportunities at higher levels (such as high school or university) among girls; early marriage and transnational marriage; and, acceptance of being beaten by husband. The analyses show that poverty is a common reason for school dropouts among girls and for transnational marriage among women; in the meanwhile, low education, in addition to gender and cultural factors, makes the above-mentioned problems more serious, causing a lot of negative impacts on life of not only women, but also their children. Based on the analyses, the author makes some recommendations that aim at minimizing and gradually eliminating the gender inequality.

Key words: gender, gender equality, gender inequality.

Since the National Assembly of Vietnam ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1982 and the Law on Gender Equality in 2006, institutions of different ministries and sectors as well as international organizations have carried out a lot of projects, aiming at minimizing gender inequality in all aspects of social life. In reality, women have attained significant achievements: the number of women keeping leadership and management positions has been increasingly higher; the proportion of women, who have accessed educational and healthcare service, has

been also improved, moving towards equality with men (Lien Huong, 2011). In family life, however, gender inequality seems to persist for long and it is difficult to change due to many intersecting economic, cultural and social reasons. Therefore, recognition of these issues, based on which recommendations are made to strengthen effectively the Law on Gender Equality and improve public awareness of gender equality, is a really necessary task to be shared by a lot of people.

(*) M.A., Southern Institute of Social Sciences.

Mekong Delta (in Vietnam's territory), which is also called as Southwestern Vietnam, is 39,712 square kilometers in area of land (making up 12% the area of the whole country). It consists of 13 cities and provinces, in which 9 cities are provincial (GSO, 2009). Of all 8 geographical regions of Vietnam, Mekong Delta is one of the two highest population density regions. Its population is nearly 18 million people, of which women account for 50.3% and men account for 49.7% (GSO, 2011). What problems relating to gender inequality in family life should be recognized in this relatively new and dynamic residential community and how do these problems impact on life of women, men and their children as well? This paper describes some problems involved with gender inequality in family life, based on data of surveys conducted by the General Statistics Office as well as findings of previous research works carried out by local and international scientists on the residential community of this region.

In the paper, analyses of some outstanding issues involved with family life in the region, such as access to educational opportunities among girls, the phenomenon of getting married at too young age and getting married with foreigners, and domestic violence, are made from the gender perspective. These analyses are then used to make policy recommendations that aim at minimizing gender inequality and

improving women's position in family.

1. Access to educational opportunities among girls in Mekong Delta

According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010 – 2011 (MICS) conducted by the General Statistics Office, children's access to education at primary school in all areas and regions does not show any gender-based differences at all (GSO, 2011). At the junior secondary school, moreover, schoolgirls make up a higher proportion than schoolboys. Reviewing in more detail data of the National Population and Housing Census in 2009 (Ministry of Planning and Investment and General Statistics Office, 2011), we can realize a remarkable feature of the educational reality in Mekong Delta, in comparison with other areas of Vietnam. It is the rate of school dropouts aged from 15 to 18 in Mekong Delta that is the highest. This rate is especially high in some provinces such as Bac Lieu (26.2%), An Giang (25.9%) and Soc Trang (25.8%). From the gender perspective, it is recognized that 70% of school dropouts are girls (Tran Thi Que and To Xuan Phuc, 2000). At higher levels of education, gender-based differences are shown more obviously in this region as below: of all boys aged 5 or more, the proportion of boys finished the junior secondary school or higher is 12.4%; whereas the corresponding figure for girls aged 5 or more is just 8.9%; the proportion of boys, who graduated university, is 2.5%;

whereas the corresponding figure for girls is 1.6% (Ministry of Planning and Investment, and General Statistics Office, 2011). Management officials as well as scientists have pointed out a number of reasons why children drop out school; for example, because of poverty, children have to drop out school during the harvest time in order to help their parents; or, because school is far from their home and transportation is not convenient, children do not like to go to school much; or, because parents think it is not necessary for children to go to school, provided that they have farmland to live on (Quoc Dung, 2012). In addition to the above-mentioned reasons, it is necessary to make analyses from the cultural and gender perspectives, in order to understand fully and precisely reasons for the high rate of school dropouts.

Professor Tran Ngoc Them gave a very noticeable explanation about this phenomenon, from the cultural perspective. According to him, since natural conditions in this region are very preferential for agricultural production, local people always earn enough to live on, although they neither have to learn a lot nor work hard. They, therefore, think that it is not necessary to get high education and they do not need graduation (Tran Ngoc Them, 2007). The question here is why the rate of dropouts among girls is higher than that among boys. From the gender perspective, we are now describing some reasons, based on which

we can explain why more girls drop out school than boys.

- Parents often think that a daughter will get married and then she will move away from home to live with her husband's family. Thus, she will not provide them with much help, although she gets high education. Consequently, they often force daughters to stop schooling first, when they encounter such financial difficulties that they cannot cover all schooling expenses for their children. Besides, traditional gender stereotypes still remain common at present among people in different areas and regions, particularly in Southern Vietnam (B.Teerawichitchainan, J.Knodel, V.M.Loi and V.T.Huy, 2008). According to these stereotypes, daughters need to undertake some activities at home such as taking care of younger siblings, doing housework, and doing cooking, when parents are busy working outside.

- Enterprises, especially those of textile-garment, shoe-making and foodstuff processing industries in export processing and industrial zones, which are often located in big cities, need a lot of unskilled female laborers. Thus, female laborers, who come from rural areas and have low education, can get a job easily in these enterprises. In addition, rural female laborers can go to cities to do some kinds of jobs, such as restaurant waitresses, street vendors, street collectors of unused things, or doing a small business. This attraction partly encourages rural schoolgirls to drop

out school and go to the cities to get a job, because they think they can provide their family with some support at that time and additionally they no longer need to cover schooling expenses (Tran Han Giang, 2004).

Thus, both girls and boys get equality in the access to education at school, especially at primary school. At higher levels of education, however, gender-based differences start to be visible. On the one hand, poverty, transportation difficulties, and shortages of schools or classrooms are the common reasons why both boys and girls drop out of school. On the other hand, traditional conceptions of gender-based roles as well as opportunities to get jobs, which require neither qualifications nor skills in big cities, increase further the school-dropout rate among girls in Mekong Delta.

Many research works demonstrate that the impact of educational attainment is closely related to income. It is obvious that ones will get a low income and have disadvantages in accessing promotion opportunities, when they have low education and have no working skills (Tran Han Giang, 2004). It not only causes an impact on income and promotion opportunities of the very women, but it also causes an impact on the health status and access to education of their children. Data of “the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey” show a relation between the educational attainment of mothers and the schooling of their children: the proportion of children going to

the kindergarten is the highest in the group of mothers, who have the educational attainment of professional high school, and the lowest in the group of mothers, who have no educational attainment. In addition, the educational level of mothers also correlates with the educational accomplishment of their children at the primary school (GSO, 2011). In sciences of health, education is also considered the basis of health status for the entire life. Provision and dissemination of education for children at the kindergarten age as well as interventions to reduce the school dropout rate are viewed as necessary investments for improvement of health in future periods of life. An appropriate educational system of good quality will play a decisive intervention, from which people will benefit for the whole life, after they go through social experiences or situations that result in the decline of health in the next periods of life (B.Marshall, 2002).

According to research findings of some international scholars, the health indicators are better in the places, where the proportion of women, who have high education, is higher. Women of high education usually get a higher income and better access to health messages; they therefore have a higher demand for healthcare. All of these factors bring interests to the very women and their children as well (M.Rowson, 2009). An example, which a lot of researchers use to illustrate the impact caused by educational

attainment on health status, is the longer lifespan of people in Kerala State of India, China, and Sri Lanka, compared with the lifespan of people in other richer countries such as Brazil, Republic of South Africa, and Gabon. In their opinion, the health indicators in those poor countries are better due to some reasons, of which one is the higher education of women (A.Sen, 1999).

2. Early marriage and transnational marriage among women in Mekong Delta

The Law on Marriage and Family of Vietnam regulates the age of consent, at which ones can get married, is 20 and 18, for men and women respectively. The rate of women, who get married for the first time before the age of 15 (or the so-called phenomenon of child-marriage) is not high (GSO, 2011). In Central Highlands, this rate is the highest in comparison with the rest of the country, but it is just 1.7% of all women aged from 15 to 49. Next is the rate in Northern midlands and mountains (1.2%) and Mekong Delta (1.1%). Remarkably, the rate of women, who get married for the first time before the 18th birthday, rapidly increases in Mekong Delta. This rate in Mekong Delta is higher than that in Central Highlands, although the highest rate is in Northern midlands and mountains. Specifically, it is 16.3%, 15.1% and 18.8% of all women from 15-49 years of age, for Mekong Delta, Central Highlands, and Northern midlands and mountains respectively.

From the gender perspective, women

who get married early usually encounter disadvantages involved with physical and mental health as well as social consequences in the long term. To get pregnant at the early age is one of the reasons for deaths related to obstetric accidents. Women of early marriage also tend to have more children than women, who get married later. For women, to get married early also means to end all educational opportunities that will help them to get a stable and better career in future.

Girls, who get married early, suffer from greater pressure to take care of children than boys, while they haven't been mature yet. Furthermore, as they violate the legal regulations on marriageable age, they do not get the marriage certificate. Although they live together as husband and wife, their marriage is not acknowledged by the law, resulting in a lot of problems concerning the right of inheritance and the citizen rights of both mothers and children of the marriages.

Since the 1990s, the number of Vietnamese women getting married with foreign men has been increasingly higher by year (D.Belanger and T.G.Linh, 2011). International economic integration has been taking place in Vietnam, accelerating more cross-border marriages. Yet, researchers and authorities pay attention to this phenomenon of marriage, as it looks like a "trade in brides". Young girls in Mekong Delta make up a significant proportion of all marriages of this type. A lot of research projects have

been carried out by Vietnamese as well as international scholars, aiming at analyzing and finding out reasons why those Vietnamese women decide to get married with foreigners, including mainly Taiwanese and South Korean men (Tran Hong Van, 2011; D.Belanger and T.G.Linh, 2011). All the research projects point out some common reasons for marriages of young Vietnamese women with Taiwanese or South Korean men, such as poor economic conditions of the family and low education etc...

Covered aspects of marriages between Vietnamese women and Taiwanese or South Korean men have been pointed out in a lot of research papers as well as articles in domestic and international newspapers. From the gender perspective, we have realized following issues, to which more attention should be paid:

- Firstly, it is the type of “trade-like” marriages, in which a foreign groom pays a certain amount of money and selects one of the girls taken to him; whereas, the girls have no right to make a choice, but they have to “accept the trade implicitly”. This raises more worries about violation of the law on women’s rights to choose who to marry. Apart from the reason related to attraction of money, young girls also have low education and little knowledge, so they do not pay attention to it.
- As girls in some rural areas of Mekong Delta seek for marriages with foreigners, it is getting more difficult for young men,

especially those who do not have well-off conditions, to find appropriate girls to marry.

- Owing to the money that women, who got married with Taiwanese or Korean men, sent back to home families, their position in the family is improved; and at the same time other girls also become more valuable in the local marriage market (D.Belanger and T.G.Linh, 2011). To get this, however, they have to face discrimination from members of their husband family as well as others in the society of destination, because of differences in culture, language and partly because of the thinking that they were “bought” by their husband (Yi-Han Wang, 2010).

3. Domestic violence in Mekong Delta

There have been relatively many research works conducted on domestic violence in Vietnam. However, they were often done with small-sized samplings, so research findings cannot reflect fully the reality as well as tendencies of domestic violence in Vietnam (Nguyen Huu Minh, Le Ngoc Lan and Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, 2009). Besides, those research works were carried out in different areas and regions of Vietnam, but regional differences were not yet taken into account due to some reasons. The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2011 (GSO, 2011) is the only one that provides some information on differences between regions of the country, in terms of the opinion about husband’s use of violence against wife/lover among women from 15-49 years of age. A third of female respondents in the

survey state that husband/lover has the right to beat his wife/lover due to following causes: (1) Her going out without asking permission; (2) Neglecting her duty to taking care of children; (3) Making retorts towards her husband; (4) Refusing to have sex with her husband; and (5) Spoiling

food. Regional differences in acceptance of being beaten by husband/lover show that the rate of women, who accept domestic violence, in Northern midlands and mountains, Northern central Vietnam, coastal central Vietnam, and Mekong Delta, is higher than that in the rest regions.

Table 1: Rate of Women from 15-45 Years of Age Thinking that a Husband has the Right to Beat his Wife/Lover in Following Situations

Region	Going out without asking permission from husband	Neglecting her duty to taking care of children	Making a retort towards her husband	Refusing to have sex with her husband	Spoiling food	Any of the mentioned causes	Number of women aged 15-49
Red River Delta	7.3	19.3	16.4	2.7	0.7	27.4	2368
Northern Midlands and Mountains	18.0	33.1	27.3	11.0	5.0	43.5	1896
Northern Central and Coastal Central Vietnam	15.0	30.3	27.7	5.9	4.5	44.4	2429
Central Highlands	15.0	23.9	26.0	6.5	3.0	36.3	671
Southeastern Vietnam	5.4	16.5	9.6	2.4	0.6	21.9	2080
Mekong Delta	22.3	35.9	20.0	7.3	5.3	41.8	2220

Source: Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2011 (GSO, 2011).

The above-mentioned information is indirect evidence to show that domestic violence still remains relatively common in many areas of the country. This finding on regional differences in the women's opinion

about acceptance of being beaten by husband is also similar to observations and assessments of scholars on this phenomenon. According to assessment of Prof. Tran Ngoc Them, a cultural researcher, women

in Southwestern Vietnam know well how to pamper husband and they easily accept the fact that their husband get drunk and even beat them (Tran Ngoc Them, 2008).

The phenomenon that husband beat wife takes place rather often in daily life. Mr. Le Viet Hung, Vice Director of Can Tho Provincial Department of Police revealed that in 2008 alone, there were about 600 cases, in which husband beat wife and even sometimes beat to death (Le Trung, 2008). Some researchers highlight that victims of this phenomenon “often silently suffer from it” because of the above-mentioned reasons. This not only makes the problem become more serious, but also makes it more difficult to collect relevant information as well as deal with the problem.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The phenomena of gender inequality, which were described and analyzed above, come from two common causes: poverty and low education. Poverty deprives women of educational opportunities. Since they have low education, they usually accept the risks of early marriage, “trade-like marriage”, and domestic violence. To enhance educational levels of women is, therefore, one of necessary targets, which all sectors, institutions, and mass organizations have to make every effort to achieve. To reduce the school dropout rate among girls, authorities of the educational sector should

consider preferential policies for schoolgirls, who have high risk of dropout; they should get the same supports as those of children of ethnic minorities.

In addition to providing education and improving educational levels of women, it is also necessary to enhance knowledge related to the Law on Marriage and Family and the Law on Gender Equality through extracurricular activities as well as activities of local mass organizations such as the Youth Union and Teenager Vanguard Union. The knowledge will help young women realize their rights in marriage and family life in future.

The Government should promulgate appropriate measures to correct and take control over transnational marital matchmaking. It is necessary to supervise matchmaking activities, issue marital certificates, and provide pre-marriage training service for girls, who want to get married with foreigners.

References

1. D. Belanger and T.G. Linh, "The Impact of Transnational Migration on Gender and Marriage in Sending Communities of Vietnam". *Current Sociology*, Vol. 59 (1), pp. 59-77. http://viet-studies.info/kinhte/Transnational_marriage.pdf
2. Ministry of Investment and Planning, General Statistics Office (2011), *National Population and Housing Census 2009*. "Education

- in Vietnam: Analyses of Major Indicators". <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=512&idmid=6>
3. General Statistic Office (GSO) (2009), *Statistical Yearbook 2009*.
4. GSO (2011), *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010 – 2011 (MICS)*. <http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=512&idmid=5&ItemID=12490>
5. Le Hung (2008). 'Culture of Silence' Aids Domestic Violence in Vietnam, <http://en.baomoi.com/Info/Culture-of-silence-aids-domestic-violence-in-Vietnam/3/8410.epi>
6. Lien Huong (2011), *Vietnam's Gender Inequality Index Ranks the 58th out of 138 Nations*. <http://www.hoilhpn.org.vn/NewsDetail.asp?Catid=112&NewsId=16076&lang=VN>
7. B. Marshall (2002), *Health Promotion Study Guide*, Melbourne: Deakin University.
8. Nguyen Huu Minh, Le Ngoc Lan and Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa (2009), "Actual State of Domestic Violence", in *Domestic Violence against Women in Vietnam: Actual State, Progress and Causes*, Editors: Nguyen Huu Minh and Tran Thi Van Anh, Hanoi, Social Science Publishing House.
9. Quoc Dung (2012), "Reducing the School Dropout Rate in Mekong Delta". *Newspaper "The People"*, 6 July 2012.
10. M. Rowson (2009), *Poverty and Health*.
11. A. Sen (1999), *Development as Freedom*, New York: Oxford University Press.
12. B. Teerawichitchainan, J. Knodel, V.M. Loi and V.T. Huy (2008), *Gender Division of Household Labor in Vietnam: Cohort Trend and Regional Variations*, <http://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/pdf/r08-658.pdf>
13. Tran Han Giang (2004), *Women in Education, Healthcare and Social Welfare in Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, Editors: L. Drummont and H. Rydstom. Singapore: Niaspress.
14. Tran Hong Van (2011), "Support Provision for Vietnamese Marriage Migrants before Migrating to South Korea", in *Women and some Gender Issues in the Decade 2001-2010 in Vietnam* Editor: Nguyen Thi Ngan Hoa. Hanoi, Social Science Publishing House.
15. Tran Ngoc Them (2007), *To Look for Causes of Getting Married with Korean Men among Women in Southwestern Vietnam*, <http://www.vanhoahoc.edu.vn/ngghien-cuu/van-hoa-viet-nam/van-hoa-nam-bo/425-tran-ngoc-them-di-tim-nguyen-nhan-viec-lay-chong-han-quoc.html>
16. Tran Thi Que and To Xuan Phuc (2000), *Social Development is a Priority*, <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/apcity/unpan007058.pdf>
17. Yi-Han Wang (2010), "Being a Mother in Foreign Land: Perspectives of Immigrant Wives on Mothering Experiences", *Taiwanese Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 7 (1), p.3-40. http://www.cseas.ncnu.edu.tw/journal/v07_no1/1.pp3-40%20TJSEAS990701B-%E5%AE%9A%E7%A8%BF.pdf

