

THE ROLE OF RURAL VIET WOMEN IN HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

(A Case Study in Thanh Ha Commune, Thanh Liem District, Nam Ha Province) ^(*)

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In the last decade, the agriculture of Vietnam has attained great achievements. The face of rural areas has been renovated more and more. The living conditions of the farmers are better. This article will mention the role of rural Viet women in the household economic development process in Thanh Ha commune, Thanh Liem district, Nam Ha province.

Thanh Ha villagers as well as the others in the Hong river delta live on cultivation, breeding, traditional trade and small commerce. Because of economic development, the living standard of the households in Thanh Ha has been improving. There are 2,551 households in the commune, of which, 1,430 households have flat roof buildings, 100 have motorbikes, 903 have TVs, 30 have dump trucks, and 40 households have a telephone and a fridge. All of the households have used electricity in their daily living and manufacturing. The data of the survey from 100 households shows that the living condition of villagers has been improving: 85% of households have a bicycle, 21% have a motorbike, 65% have a TV, 27% have a vcr, 64% have a cassette player, 73% have an expensive bed or sofa, 8% have a fridge, 20% have a sewing-machine, and 14% have a telephone. Every surveyed household lives in a private house, in which,

58% have concrete-rooves, and 38% have tile-rooves.

Like other localities, the cultivation area/person in this commune is only more than 1 perch (about 360m²). However, the productivity is high (from 170 kg to 250 kg/perch/crop). With this productivity, the rations seem enough for their families. Most of the people who were interviewed said that agriculture is their main occupation; however, it is not their main income. Only 21% of the interviewed people said their main income comes from cultivation and breeding, while 79% number of the people said their main income comes from non-agricultural occupations.

The skillfulness of the laborers in the rural area is limited; therefore, manual labor is important in the labor structure. Among 5,530 people of working age in Thanh Ha, women laborers make up more than a half. The women labor structure is: 65% in agriculture, 80% in production of exported embroidery, 70% in agricultural processes and services.

1. The role of women in agricultural production

Thanh Ha has 780.37 hectares of natural land, in which, there are 501.33 hectares for cultivation. Because of crowding and overpopulation, each person had only 1.2 perch when the Contract 10

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Ha's rice fields can grow two rice crops, and only 250 hectares can plant vegetables. Farm products include: tomato, potato, cucumber, and flowers. Even though the rice fields are limited, the productivity is high thanks to good investments. Therefore, the rations of households are ensured. Noticeably, 33% of interviewed households tender land for cultivation.

The remarkable feature in Thanh Ha is that agricultural products have commodity characteristics. The farmers grow rice to ensure their rations, but they grow vegetables,

flowers, and breed animals mainly for selling. Many households raise poultry and pigs on a large scale.

As in many rural areas, agricultural production needs manual laborers, especially during the harvest. According to the women, the total time for rice cultivation is only 4 months. This means there are 8 months for leisure per year after harvest time, and the farmers do other trades. In Thanh Ha, the main laborers in agricultural production are women. The data from the survey of 100 households confirms this statement.

Table 1: The responsibility for agricultural production (Unit: %)

The main jobs \ Work	Wife	Husband	Both	Hired people	Total
Plough	0	2.08	0	97.92	100
Transplantation	72	0	19.8	8.2	100
Taking care	61.5	3.1	28.1	7.3	100
Spraying chemicals	2.0	11.5	4.2	82.3	100
Harvest works	22.3	2.1	67	10.6	100
Gardening	33.3	41.7	16.7	8.3	100
Breeding	72	7.2	16.9	3.6	100

In Thanh Ha, the farmers are clear-headed in economic calculations. In cultivation, some heavy and dangerous tools have been employed, for instance, 97.92% of households rent ploughs and 82.30% of households rent chemical sprayers. The rest of the agricultural work was mainly the responsibility of the women (see Table 1). Particularly, both wife and husband did the

harvest work with high rates. In Thanh Ha, breeding has become a core economic activity, but the rate of both wife and husband attending to this field is quite low (16.9%). Women have to be responsible for most of the breeding work. Even though men have tended to some of the agricultural work, women are still the main laborers in this field. This statement will be supported by the following data.

Table 2: Agricultural product makers of the households (Unit: %)

Agricultural product makers Products	Wife	Husband	Both	Others	Total
Rations for consumption	51.04	4.16	40.16	4.06	100
Rations for selling	46.42	4.38	48.80	2.38	100

The self-sufficient rations are very important for the farmers, but only 25% of interviewed households confirmed this statement. About 12% of 100 interviewed households said that they are prosperous from cultivation on tender land and breeding

for selling. Clearly, the development of agriculture with a diversity of crop plants and breeding is one of the methods to get rich in the rural areas. Table 3 shows the income of 100 households from agriculture in 1996.

Table 3: Income from agriculture of interviewed households (Unit: %)

Sources of income Levels	Rice	Vegetables	Breeding
Under 1 million VND	5.1	14.3	15.8
1-2 million VND	21.4	71.4	28.9
2-4 million VND	39.8	14.3	43.4
4-6 million VND	23.5	0	6.6
6-10 million VND	9.2	0	1.3

The data indicates that agricultural products bring considerable income for these households. Agricultural products do not only ensure the ration for the households but also have can accumulate. For many households, the money from this resource has become capital for investing in other trades.

In summary, women are the main agricultural laborers in Thanh Ha. They are not only the laborers but also the decision makers for production. It means that women in Thanh Ha have principal roles in agricultural

production. They have produced the source of income from agriculture.

2. The role of women in business and services

Although Thanh Ha is not near the national road and social economic center, business and services in Thanh Ha have diversified, including long distance business, regional business, and internal commune business. Business and services attract a number of laborers in Thanh Ha, of which

70% are women. The main commodities are agricultural products, food, agricultural materials, handicraft materials, building materials, and consumer goods.

The rate of households having specialized business and services is not high. Almost all of these households work in agriculture and business, or breeding and business, making handicrafts and business, and other similar fields. These combinations lead to 88% of the households having income generated from mixed economic sources.

The amount of household income coming from business and services in Thanh Ha is higher than other fields. Most of these households do not leave agriculture to pursue specialized business and services even though they know that business and services will bring higher income.

Business and services here can be divided into two types: large-scale (with large amounts of capital and trading from afar), and small-scale (with small amounts of capital and local trading around their commune). Men are usually responsible for the large-scale business. Businessmen have to go far from home, to be mobile, to work hard, to accept risks. Sometimes they make a large profit, but sometimes they have a complete loss. Women are usually responsible for the small-scale business together with doing cultivation, breeding, and embroidery. Doing this kind of business, they need small amounts of capital, have permanent work, and do not go far from home; their profit is small but their capital is safe.

The business sector participation of husbands and wives of 43 households among 100 surveyed households is shown in the following table:

Table 4: The main responders in business and services of households (Unit: %)

Business and services	Wife	Husband	Both	Others	Total
	55.8	28.9	14	1,3	100

Clearly, women are mainly responsible for the business and services of the households. The rate of wives who are the main income generators in business and services is double the rate of husbands (wives: 55.8%, husbands: 28.9%). The rate of both husbands and wives being responsible for this work is low (14%). Because the wives are responsible for business and services, they are the decision makers in these fields (wives: 40%; husbands: 32.72%).

But business requires brainpower, knowledge about the market and capital. Therefore, the rate of wife and husband having discussion and decisions together in business affairs is rather high (21.8%), others only 5.5%.

Business does not draw a great number of laborers in Thanh Ha but it brings the highest income for the villagers. Cash income of 43 households doing business among 100 surveyed households in 1996 is presented in table 5.

Table 5: Cash income from business (Unit: %)

1-2 million VND	22.5
2-4 million VND	25.0
4-6 million VND	17.5
6-10 million VND	27.5
More than 10 million VND	2.5

Among the households having multiple sources of income, business income is highest compared with other sources.

Table 6: Sources of income (Unit: %)

Business and service	30
Hired labor	26
Handicraft production	23
Rice planting	10.2
Breeding	7.9

Business and service are forming and developing in Thanh Ha. Business and service are in small scale and closely connected to agriculture and handicraft production, but they become catalyst to encourage development in a rural area; and women are the main economic force (70%). It improves the role of women in generating income for their families.

3. The role of women in handicraft production

Exported embroidery is one of the main handicraft products in Thanh Ha. Exported embroidery helps Thanh Ha to become one of the top communes in economic development in Thanh Liem district. Embroidery in Thanh Ha has a tradition of more than 300 years, however, it

has developed rapidly during the Doi Moi period. In the last 7-8 years, Thanh Ha established 24 production groups with 20 owners and 1 limited company. Exported embroidery draws more than 3,000 laborers year round. Thanh Ha is also the provider of subcontracted goods for 20 communes.

Exported embroidery draws a great number of laborers. It provides employment to surplus laborers of agriculture as well as child and elderly laborers. Embroidery production is implemented within the family and does not require intensive capital, therefore, many households in Thanh Ha do this work.

In embroidery production, the contractors need intensive capital. They

sign contracts with the export companies in Ha Noi, Nam Ha, Hai Phong, Ho Chi Minh City, and other large municipalities, and then they hire laborers in the village. Most of the contractors are men. They are the undersigned and manage the works, but their wives manage the materials, the designs, income and expenses. The husbands are only responsible for commercial transactions and signing the contracts. Obviously, the wives are the co-contractors. The contractors have become rapidly rich in recent years. Most of the three or four floor houses with modern conveniences belong to the embroidery contractors.

The hired laborers receive the materials and do outsource work at home. Most of them are women and children; women make up 80%. The embroidery can be done at home, but the workers have to work hard. The interviewees said that they sleep 5 hours/day or 3-4 hours/day during urgent time, and nobody sleeps at noon. Sometimes, they have to work all night.

Embroidery requires keen eyes, but the working conditions are very poor. Many

have to work in darkness. We saw the parents and the children glue their eyes to the frame and sit on the floor. The payments for them are very low: they receive 5,000-6,000 VND/person/day for high-grade embroidery and only 3,000-4,000 VND/person/day for common goods.

Embroidery is very important to these households. According to them, they can do this work in the periods of low agricultural engagement, especially after the harvest. It helps them have money for daily expenses; therefore they do not need to sell their rice.

Among 100 surveyed households, the rates of people with the main responsibility in doing side work are: 34.5% wives, 10.3% husbands, 40.2% both husbands and wives, and 14.9% children. Even though most of the members of the household take part in the side work, the rate of wives having the main responsibility is the highest.

The income from the side work is cash and occupies the highest amount of their incomes. The income from embroidery of 100 surveyed households in 1996 is:

Table 8: Income of surveyed households from the embroidery per year (Unit: %)

Under 1 million VND	6.8
1-2 million VND	20.5
2-4 million VND	27.3
4-6 million VND	21.9
6-10 million VND	12.3
More than 10 million VND	10.9

The contractors have an income of more than 10 million VND per year. The hired laborers have income under 10 million VND. This amount of money is important to the households in rural areas. They use the money for daily expenses and for building houses as well as investing in cultivation, breeding, and extending business and production. For the female youth, the income from the embroidery is very important because they can earn money as their dowry.

The side work, especially the embroidery, supplies the main income for the households in Thanh Ha. It helps to improve the living standards for them in recent times. 40.3% of interviewed households said that their economic situation has developed thanks to the side work. Embroidery together with business and breeding brings income for them; and

this amount of money makes up 79% of their income.

Women together with other members of their families have an important role in developing the side work in Thanh Ha as well as the income of their households. The income was not equal to their amount of their labor, however, 80% of laborers who tend to side work make up the main income of these households.

4. The role of women in house works

Rural women not only earn money together with their husbands to support their families, but are also responsible for most of the housework. Social studies on rural areas in Vietnam consistently conclude likewise. Women in Thanh Ha have an important role in their households' income, but they are still responsible for the housework (see Table 9)

Table 9: The main responders for the house works (Unit: %)

Responders	Wife	Husband	Both	Others	Total
Household chores					
1. Clean house	69	6	6	19	100
2. Tidy up the house	78	2	5	15	100
3. Wash clothes	93	1	1	5	100
4. Buy food	65	4	6	25	100
5. Look after the children	58	5.5	35.4	1.1	100
6. Educating the children	33.3	22.6	42.0	1.1	100
7. Take care of the elderly, sick people	46	4.5	43.2	6.3	100
8. Family business	22	55	23	0	100
9. Meeting	28	54	17	1	100
10. Manage the family budget	63	7	30	0	100

Table 9 does not show all the housework that is done by the women, however, with these types of work we can see that the rate of wives having to do housework is much higher than the husbands, especially washing clothes (93%), tidying up the house (78%), and cleaning the house (69%) (While the rate of husbands doing this work following the above order is: 1%, 2%, and 6% respectively; both husbands and wives do: 1%, 5%, and 6% of these types of work respectively). The type of housework that is also done by women with high rates are: buying food (65%), managing the family budget (63%), and looking after children (58%) (Husband does these works with the rates: 4%, 7%, and 5.5% respectively). Both husband and wife have high rates of doing the household chore of educating the children (42%), and taking care of the elderly and sick people (43.2%)

The above data indicates that the household chores such as washing clothes, cleaning the house, tidying up the house, and buying food are considered women’s work. Husbands do not care fore these chores. The highest rate of both husbands and wives

doing the housework is only 6%. Some household chores that are shared by the husbands include: managing the family budget, looking after the children, educating the children, and taking care of the elderly and sick people. Why do husbands share these chores with their wives? The explanation is that these chores are considered housework but they are not errands in rural areas. Managing the family budget, looking after the children, educating the children, and taking care of the elderly and sick people are important affairs. It requires the efforts and time of family members. Therefore, to do these chores best, both husbands and wives join in this housework. The rate of both husbands and wives doing these chores is not high, however, it indicates the attitude and responsibility of both genders.

The heavy burden of housework is placed on the women’s shoulders. To get an image of the quantity of work done by women, it is necessary to consider the number of members in each family. The quantity of housework depends on the number of family numbers.

Table 10: Number of members in the surveyed households (Unit: %)

1-2 persons	3
3-4 persons	30
5-6 persons	52
7-8 persons	12
More than 8 persons	3

In the surveyed households, 67% of households have more than 5 persons, in which, 12% of households have more than 7-8 persons and 3 households have more than 8 persons. With the number of members in a household like this, women have to work hard to do the housework. Therefore, the role of women in doing housework is very important.

From an economic point of view, women in rural areas are the main contributors to their households' income. Besides, they also have to do most of housework. Obviously, they are exhausted with these chores, and they are also obstructed in doing business. Hence, in these households, most husbands earn more money than their wives (Table 11).

Table 11: The main contributors for the household's income (Unit: %)

Wives	26.26
Husbands	32.32
Both	41.41
Others	1.11

In the above table, the rate of both husbands and wives contributing together is highest (41%); the rate of husbands who are the main contributors is higher than the rate of main contributors among wives (6%). There are two things that should be considered:

1. Husbands seem focused on only the jobs that have an income, but their role in this field is not yet different compared with wives.

2. Wives have an important role in their household's economy. In addition, they also have to carry the main responsibility for the housework.

By considering the role of rural Viet women in Thanh Ha, the following conclusions are given:

1. Women are the principal income providers in the agricultural production. Rice productivity is high and breeding follows

commodity production. The agriculture is limited, however, and in general agriculture is not the main source of income for the households.

2. Business and services are developing and bringing high income for some households. Women participate on a small scale in business and services with a small amount of capital, and they have low interest. For most of women, they do business together with doing cultivation and breeding after the harvest. Therefore, women do business but this income can not completely support their households in a comfortable life.

3. Embroidery draws the women laborers but their income is not high. The embroidery in Thanh Ha is irregular, especially when the contractors are in bankruptcy and a lot of women have difficulty in receiving their wages.

4. The main obstacle for women in rural areas is that they have to spend their time and their effort in housework. They are limited in improving their education, gaining social awareness, improving their occupation skills and enjoying cultural activities.

5. This situation limits the role of women in providing their households' income, compared with the role and economic status of their husbands. Why do most women highly appreciate their husbands' economic role? From studies, we know that the men do not attend to agricultural production. Different from the women, when they do business, they usually do so on a large scale or are the owners of constructional material stores. When they do side work they choose a career having the highest income, such as building worker, brick production, driver, woodworker, and

other similar jobs. Moreover, they do not have to do the housework, and they can concentrate on earning money. Therefore, the men's incomes are usually higher than the women's incomes.

Of course, the evaluation of women and the local people on the role and status of wives and husbands is their opinion. In general, the role of women in the economic development of the households is very important, and it is suitable with the socio-economic conditions in rural areas at present.

To get out of poverty, all of the members of the families spend their time and their effort and accept the assignments that are suitable with the interest of the families. By looking at this situation, we will see the present role and the status of women in their families in rural areas.



Weaving fabric (Cam Thuy District, Thanh Hoa Province)

Photo: Nguyen Trung