

GENDER EQUITY IN A TRANSFORMING ECONOMY

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*However wise a woman is, she is still a woman
However foolish a man is, he is still a man
(Vietnamese proverb)*

Abstract

Since 1986, Vietnam has embarked on a comprehensive economic reform, known as *Doi Moi*, to liberalise the economy from a socialist centrally planned system to a more market oriented one. With the dismantling of social support provisions for women, the *Doi Moi* has deteriorated gender equality in Vietnam. Yet many trends post *Doi Moi*, such as expanded work opportunities and increased mobility, have been positive. This paper examines gender-based differences in employment for white-collar employees in state owned enterprises in the steel industry. It focuses on two issues: the different social expectations for women and men in relation to family care work and paid employment, and the impact this has on women's workforce participation; and organisational policies and organisational culture that present difficulties for women's employment and career advancement. This study offers evidence that Vietnamese women managers carry a double burden of responsibilities, attempting to combine their role as another breadwinner with the traditional role of daughter, wife and mother. Stereotypical perceptions of women's lack of managerial skills are widely held by both men and women. Even though the Vietnamese Government has successfully created an institutional context for the advancement of women's rights, its ability to influence gender relations and its capacity to promulgate equality has declined in the new economic system. Women's success is heavily reliant on individual will and commitment. Although some women have attained managerial and leadership positions, in general Vietnamese women still encounter challenges at work posed by the culture and traditions of society.

Introduction

In the past two decades Vietnamese society and economy has undergone major changes with the move from a centralised, planned economy to a market-oriented one. These transformations have brought about noticeable changes in gender relations, and, as the National Committee for Advancement of Woman (1999: 5) comments, 'Vietnam is a nation where gender is in transition' (see also Franklin 1999). This chapter focuses on one of the major implications for these changes, that is what is happening in relation to women's employment and career advancement in Vietnam. Some dimensions of diversity management such as race, culture, age, religion and disability, have become increasingly important in the transitional Vietnam, however, gender remains the key one considering the significance of women's contribution to the country's economy. Despite its importance, the issue of gender has often been overlooked in critiques of the economic and social transition in Vietnam (Long et al. 2000). Characteristics of women's work and issues of employment equity have been noticeable by their absence in the literature. This chapter focuses on issues for women workers in one industry sector and discusses the issues women face in managerial and professional positions.

Given its unique political history, Vietnam presents a particular case of change for women's employment. Yet many characteristics of women's position in the labour force in Vietnam are similar to those experienced in other national settings. Women continue to experience

disadvantages in education, economic opportunities, social status and career advancement, and are under-represented in higher status occupations and over-represented in lower status ones. Women's success is heavily reliant on individual will and commitment, and women struggle to achieve a balance between family commitments and paid work. Although some women have attained managerial and leadership positions, in general Vietnamese women still encounter challenges at work posed by the culture and traditions of society.

Immediately after the revolution against the French, a commitment to women's equal rights in Vietnamese society was declared. The first Constitution of Vietnam in 1946 stated that 'All power in the country belongs to the Vietnamese people, irrespective of race, sex, fortune, class, religion...and that women are equal to men in all respects' (Article 9). The Constitutions of 1959, 1980 and 1992 and other legislation has enhanced the rights of women in the context of economic and political equality (United Nations 2000). The goal for gender equality has been integrated in international instruments signed by Vietnam, such as the Millennium Declaration (2000), Beijing Declaration (1985) and the country's long term socio-economic development, such as the *Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2001-2010*, the Strategy for the Advancement of Women to 2010, demonstrating the extensive government efforts in the promotion of gender equality. Gender equality is also a condition for national socio-economic development as Vietnamese women constitute 52 percent of the country's labour force (ILO 2003a: 11).

Formal gender equality is widely regarded as one of the legacies of the socialist revolution and communist ideology. Although Vietnamese society has been influenced greatly by Confucianism, which emphasised the supremacy of men over women, Vietnamese women historically enjoyed greater freedom compared to Chinese women (United Nations 2000). A major reason for this is that for several centuries Vietnam's history has been characterised by popular patriotic wars against foreign aggressors, and these long-lasting campaigns always called for women's contribution and participation outside their households. Women's public contribution during the French War from 1946 to 1954 and the American War from 1964 to 1975 led to an improvement in their social status and validated the equality of sexes that was won in the revolution. However, the ideological legacies of Confucianism, the lack of law enforcement, and organisational inertia make for an enormous gap between what is written on paper and achieving the reality of gender equality in the workplace.

Vietnam exhibits a high degree of political stability and social cohesion with, since the unification of the country in 1975, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) as the sole political party. However, major economic changes have been introduced in the past two decades, significantly the introduction in 1986 of a comprehensive reform programme known as *Doi Moi* which aimed to liberalise and deregulate the economy. Since this time the Vietnamese economy has shown firm signs of recovery and accelerated development. In 2007, growth accelerated to an 8.48 percent, which marked the seven consecutive year of increase (GSO 2008). Although the results of the economic reforms were very encouraging, the fact remains that Vietnam is a very poor country. In 2007, Vietnamese GNI per capita (gross national income divided by midyear population) is USD 690. With this level of income, the World Bank classified Vietnam as a low-income economy (World Bank 2007). *Doi Moi* has created more work opportunities for women, especially within the newly developed non-state sectors. However, some studies argue that, since the early days of economic reform in 1986, relations between men and women within households and in society are increasingly becoming unequal (Beresford 1994; Beaulieu 1994; Croll 1998; Tran et al 1997; Lofman 1998).

This chapter offers an overview of women's employment in general, and those in white collar and professional employment in particular, in transitional Vietnam. It provides an overview of major

labour market issues arising in the process of economic reform and their impact on women's employment. The chapter then reports on some findings of a project on gender equity in Vietnam undertaken in the steel industry.

Women and employment

In 2005 there were 21.7 million women of working age (15 to 55) in the labour force, representing 49 per cent of the labour force (MOLISA 2006: 19). Seventy per cent of women of working age participate in the labour force (ILO 2003a: 11), a situation supported ideologically by equal employment opportunity law, and bolstered by the country's poor economic situation. Women's labour force participation rates are higher than those in many other parts of Asia. In 2000, the ILO reported that 64 per cent of women were economically active in Asia and by 2010 it is estimated that women's labour market share internationally will be just over 41 per cent (Wirth 2001: 2-3). Participation rates figures reveal the important role of Vietnamese women in the economy, but high levels of participation do not mean equal participation or an absence of employment disadvantage. While gender equality in education, particularly primary and secondary schooling, has improved over the years, women's participation in all levels of education (except professional secondary education), and the highest level of education achieved, is still lower than that for men. Overall, only 2.7 per cent of women went to colleges/universities, compared to 4.2 per cent of men. In her research on intellectual women in Vietnam, Le (2005) points out that the development of Vietnamese intellectual women can be described as a tower-shaped chart which has no high summit. This is due to women's responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers — burdens that leave them with little time to further their education. Furthermore, with most families' limited financial resources, it is only considered natural that male family members be given priority for further education.

In employment, women are concentrated in agriculture and forestry, light industry (especially textiles and garments), hotels and restaurants, banking and finance, education and training, social affairs and as housemaids (GSO 2002; MOLISA 2006). Women are less mobile than men in the labour market and are frequently restricted to employment within close commuting distance of their households. Domestic demands, such as childcare and housework, pose further restrictions with the result that women are more inclined to accept jobs that are below their skills and/or are low paid. Vietnam has strong gender pay differentials. According to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, women in Vietnam receive less remuneration for their work. Their average hourly salary is only around 80 per cent that of their male counterparts (MOLISA 2003). Women face a higher risk of unemployment than men: the overall unemployment rate in 2005 was 2.14 per cent, however the rate for men was 1.99 per cent, while women had a 2.29 per cent rate (MOLISA, 2006: 60).

While women with higher levels of education are able to secure employment in white collar occupations, they generally do not hold decision making positions. For example, only four per cent of the general directors and deputy-general directors in Vietnam are women (NCFAW and GSO 2005: 69). Like women in other countries, they struggle to break through the 'glass ceiling' to advance their careers and achieve managerial and senior positions (Wirth 20001). These issues are compounded by the Confucian belief which still pervades Vietnamese society, where women are thought to deserve little authority, show less commitment, have less intelligence and are less experienced than males. Opportunities for securing senior positions have been hampered further by women's lower retirement age: women are obligated to retire at 55, while men can work until 60. This effectively puts an early hold on women's advancement to senior positions.

The Impact of the Social and Economic Transformation on Women's Employment

Much of the recent literature on gender in Vietnam speculates on the negative effects of the transition to a market economy on women (see for example, Beresford 1994; Brugemann et al. 1995; Lofman 1998; Le 2001). With the overnight dismantling of social and support provisions for women, the withdrawal of state subsidies, the downsizing of state-owned enterprise, the privatisation of health and education and so on, the *Doi Moi* has in general deteriorated gender equality in Vietnam. Women are losing some of their rights, because these are regarded by companies as too expensive to maintain. For example, in 1983, paid maternity leave in Vietnam was extended from 60 days to 75 days and in 1984 further extended to 180 days. However, even in state-owned enterprises, women are forced to go back to work earlier, normally after 120 days, due to pressure from their companies, added to which women themselves fear that they might lose their job or be moved to a worse position in the same company after a full maternity leave term.

The impact of the restructuring process of the state sector in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not gender neutral. Men and women were affected differently by the public sector's massive downsizing programme. The number of employees in the state sector reduced from 3.86 million (about 15 percent of the labour force) in 1985 to 2.92 million in 1993 (or 9 percent). Downsizing was not gender neutral, and women with fewer years' experience, less education and training and mandated early retirement ages were often the first laid off. Approximately 70 per cent of redundant workers were female (Rama 2001: 7). A year after layoffs, only 14 per cent of these women had found new jobs, compared to 22 per cent of men (World Bank 2004: 2).

Since the early 1990s, women and men have had to compete for the same jobs in the public and private sectors, in contrast to the previous centrally planned economic system when people were placed into jobs by the government. The restructuring of state enterprises towards profit-based entities has led managers to question the benefits of employing women. Employers, including those in state-owned enterprises, do not like hiring women, due to their negative beliefs about women's skills and the potential financial loss associated with child bearing, mother's leave to care for sick children and so on. Although prohibited by labour laws and other regulations, recruitment advertisements frequently specify 'male candidates only', even when the jobs can clearly be done by both sexes, for example, accountancy, marketing or human resource jobs. So far this practice has not been subjected to any reprimand or penalty from local authorities.

At the household level, because state services have declined and there has been less social support for both the elderly and small children, the burden of their care falls more heavily on female family members (Population Council 1997). According to the 2002 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey, the average hours spent per day on housework by women aged 15 and over is 2.5 times more than men in urban areas and 2.3 times in rural areas. As state subsidies diminish, families have had to pay the increasing costs of medical care and educational expenses. When faced with pressure to earn money, there is concern about women's conflicting roles. Their role as caretakers of children is seen to conflict with their role as wage earners, whereas men do not experience this same tension (Le 2001).

Yet many trends post *Doi Moi* are quite positive for women and gender relations. The expanding economy creates more work opportunities for women, especially within the newly developed non-state sectors. A majority of the jobs created through the reforms are held by women. In 2005 the highest proportion of female workers were in foreign-held firms (59 per cent), followed by collective enterprises (53 per cent) and private firms (49 per cent), while the lowest proportion (46.5 per cent) were employed in SOEs (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs 2005). However, not all newly created jobs are highly skilled or well paid. The informal economic sector attracts labourers who have low educational standards, lack professional skills and have little

capital. However, this sector still offers women an opportunity for upward mobility and economic growth (Liu 1995).

Economic reform has also increased labour force mobility with many women migrating from rural to urban areas (VLSS 1992 and DHS 1997, cited in Long et al. 2000: 37). The recent trend for women to enter the wage-labour market has narrowed the earnings gap between men and women, and thus altered the traditional gender division of labour. In their in-depth research of gender relations at the household level in Go Vap (an urban community) in Vietnam, Long et al. (2000) argue that women's entry into the labour market has increased their autonomy and improved gender equality in the home. The reasons for these changes include the increased labour market opportunities for younger women, while older women may be the major wage earners of the household income, particularly if their husbands have retired from the public sector. Women's financial contribution is becoming increasingly critical to meeting the rising expectations of higher standards of living. Working women also have an opportunity to expand their own knowledge, skills and experience. These lead to improvements in equality and result in empowerment of women, giving them more voice vis-à-vis men in their home.

Aims and methodology

This study examines the gender-based differences for white-collar employees in state owned enterprises (SOEs) and the causes of any inequalities. In particular, it focuses on two issues: the different social expectations for women and men in relation to family care work and paid employment, and the impact this has for women's participation in paid work; and organisational policies and organisational culture that present difficulties for women's employment and career advancement.

The fieldwork was conducted from November 2006 until February 2007. It utilised several methods of data collection, including questionnaires to white-collar employees, interviews with key informants, focus groups and documentary analysis. The strength of a combination of quantitative and qualitative method of research is a higher level of applicability of findings generated. Interviews and surveys were conducted at seven state owned steel producing companies in the South of Vietnam. The companies are coded as follows: S1, S2, S3, S3, S4, S5, S6 and S7.

Employment in SOEs has declined over the past 15 years. In the early 1980s, the combination of adverse external conditions, namely the collapse of Soviet Union and its regime, and the consequent changed domestic environment put SOEs under severe strain. Extensive reform was undertaken to maintain the role of SOEs as 'the engine for economic growth'. Since 1993, with three rounds of SOE reforms, the number of SOEs has been reduced by 55 per cent from 12,297 in 1991 to 5,655 in 2000. Steel companies strongly encouraged voluntary retirement and early retirement. Consequently, the total number of employees has fallen from 3.86 million in 1985 (about 15 per cent of the total labour force) to 2.92 million in 1993 (or 9 per cent) (GSO 1994 cited in Beresford 1995). Companies' management is aware of the fact that the workforce can be further reduced. However, rather than being forced out, employees have been gradually moved into newly established companies. For example, S6 is a newly established company and the vast majority of its workforce was drawn from other steel companies, such as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5 and S7).

Table 1: Steel Companies: Employment Details.

Investigated company	Year of establishment	Total			Male employees				Female employees			
		Number	White collar	Blue collar	Number	%	White collar	Blue collar	Number	%	White collar	Blue collar
S1	1967	635	78	557	529	83.31	52	477	106	16.69	26	80
S2	1981	334	34	300	288	86.23	31	257	46	13.77	3	45
S3	1978	586	56	530	509	86.86	47	462	77	13.14	9	68
S4	1977	569	57	512	503	88.40	43	460	66	11.60	14	52
S5	1975	274	26	248	235	85.77	21	214	39	14.23	5	34
S6	2004	487	46	441	424	87.06	38	386	63	12.94	8	55
S7	1975	320	34	286	273	85.31	30	243	47	14.69	4	43

In total, 331 questionnaires were sent out to all office-based employees of the investigated companies. 293 completed questionnaires were returned (see Table 1). The high response rate (89 per cent) was achieved because of the strong support of the companies' managing directors. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 34 individuals. Nine focus group discussions of five or six employees were held. Three types of focus groups were arranged: all female, all male and mixed groups. Two groups of all males, five of all female and two of mixed sexes were conducted.

Table 2: Survey participants.

Company	Survey participants	
	Male	Female
S1	48	20
S2	29	3
S3	42	8
S4	37	11
S5	18	4
S6	35	7
S7	27	4
Total	236	57

Characteristics of Steel Industry White Collar Employees

The steel industry is male dominated with men constituting more than 80 per cent of the labour force (see Table 2). The majority of participants were aged 36-55 years. The age profile of SOEs is normally older than foreign and private firms as SOEs' main attraction is life time employment. The education level of the interviewees was very high, with 81 per cent of male employees and 79 per cent of female employees possessing at least one university degree, compared to national rate of 4.2 per cent of men and 2.7 per cent of women (GSO 2006: 37). However, more women had attended a vocational school (19 per cent women and 15 per cent men) and more than twice as many men had a post graduate degree (3.8 per cent men and 1.75 per cent women) (see Table 3). Women were more likely than men to have degrees in the social sciences (37 per cent women compared to 20 per cent men). This reflects the stereotyped gender roles in society and the educational system where women are concentrated mainly in social disciplines, such as education and social sciences, and men dominate in technical disciplines, such as engineering and agriculture (MOET 2000). These educational pathways limit women's access to employment opportunities and career advancement in the male-dominated steel industry.

Table 3: Qualification of the questionnaire participants

Qualification	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
High school	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vocational school	36	15	11	19	47	16
University degree	191	81	45	79	236	81
Post graduate degree	9	4	1	2	10	3
Total	236	100	57	100	293	100.00

The organisational positions held by the survey participants exhibited stark gender differences (see Table 4). No women hold executive level positions in the companies investigated. Only seven per cent of the departmental managers are women and 18 per cent of the lower division

level managers are women. Conversely, women hold a much higher percentage of staff level jobs (89 per cent) compared to 66 per cent of men.

Table 4: Organisation Position of Survey Participant.

Position	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Executive level	20	8	0	0	20	7
Department level	51	22	4	7	55	19
Division level	9	4	2	4	11	4
Staff (no managerial position)	156	66	51	89	207	71
Total	236	100.00	57	100.00	293	100.00

Combining Paid Work and Family Responsibilities

Despite the high levels of women's workforce participation, the responsibilities of housework and childcare are still undertaken mostly by women. Societal expectations for women to take the major role in care of family members and the home is widespread internationally (for example, ILO 2003b: 73-77; Pocock 2003; Wirth 2001: 16-20) and this pattern is clear in this study in the Vietnamese steel industry. Patterns of time allocation for unpaid housework clearly indicate a differentiation of gender roles. While hours worked at the office are similar for women and men (8.2 hours for men and 8.1 hours for women), women spend almost double the hours doing housework. On average, female respondents reported that they spent 3.1 hours per day on this, compared with an average of 1.6 hours for men. Traditionally, Vietnamese women do all the housework, including preparing food for the family, cleaning, taking care of children and, in many cases, of their parents. The central feature of the sexual division of labour is captured by one of the principles of Confucius: 'Men are primarily outside the home, and women are primarily inside the home'. Confucianism has left imprints that, even in the present day, are difficult to remove. Some men saw women's roles as distinctly gendered: 'A wife should do all housework to enable her husband to go further in his career... A wife is responsible for the home front to make her family happy' [Male interviewee, S7]. Another male interviewee noted, 'I do not do women's jobs' [Male interviewee, focus group, S1]. The concept that housework is a woman's duty was not only acknowledged by men but also by women. Even though they have their own careers, most women were willing to sacrifice for their husband's career without question: 'Husband's success is wife's merit' [Female interviewee S5]. Another interviewee said that 'Apart from my office work, I undertake housework, taking care of my children. It is my responsibilities.'

Complex families are the norm in Vietnam. With the vast majority of households were two-generation nuclear households, the burden of family care on women can be very significant. A male interviewee said that 'I come from a peasant family of five brothers and sisters. My parents were very poor but worked very hard and sacrificed everything to put me through university. Now it is my turn to support them...My parents live with us and so does my younger brother, for whom we pay the university fee and living expenses.'

The combined work and family load necessitated a certain family attitude: 'A woman who has both a good career and a happy family must have a very sympathetic and supportive husband and in-laws.' Most women and men had partners in full-time work, although a higher proportion of men (20 per cent) enjoyed the direct support of their partners, who devoted their time to taking care of the housework, children and parents. Only seven per cent of their female colleagues had a similar family situation (see Table 5). The reasons that the husbands stayed at home were very different to that of wives at home. One husband had a work related accident; two had just retired and another was changing jobs. With 82 per cent of

the women in a dual career household, they experienced additional stress compared to many of the male workers. One woman expressed it this way:

Women who have made more success in their career are less happy in their family. In contrast, those men who are successful in their career have happier families. They have a stay at home wives who make sure that they have a happy and supportive family [Female interviewee, S7].

Table 5: Characteristics of Partners of Survey Participants.

Career of partner	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Stay at home	47	20	4	7	51	18
Work part time	0	0	0	0	0	0
Work full time	162	70	47	82	209	72
Others	24	10	6	11	30	10
Total	233	100.00	57	100.00	290	100.00

Gender stereotypes not only defined women's roles but also those of men as the family's bread winners. This translates into an expectation that they will have career success. Ideas of career choice or any conflict between the careers of wives and husbands privileged the husband's career. Female interviewees gave the following assessments of the situation:

Women's success is measured by her husband's and her children's. If there is an alternative of career advancement either for a wife or for a husband, I'd rather choose the one for my husband's advancement and I will to look after the family [Female interviewee, S5].

In Vietnam, it is believed that a husband has to reach a higher social status than his wife and a wife is not encouraged to reach a higher social status. Psychologically, it is hard for men and women and it is disadvantaged for both sexes but it could not be changed overnight [Female interviewee, S7].

Thus wives expected their husbands to be successful and helped them to achieve this. They believed that if they were more successful, their husbands would feel less confident which could result in family problems. They preferred to be wives of successful husbands than to be successful themselves.

Obstacles for Women in the Steel Industry

Recruitment, Selection and Promotion

The expectations of social roles influence issues for women in the companies in which they work. Gender segregation of work is a common feature of labour markets (for example, Alvesson and Due Billing 1997: 54-82) and the steel industry is historically a male domain. In this study there is a clear preference for recruiting men in the steel industry. Employers do not like hiring women for several reasons. One reason is the potential financial loss associated with childbearing discussed earlier, but employers also show a lack of recognition of women's skills. Although prohibited by labour laws and other regulations, recruitment advertisements frequently specify 'male candidates only', and companies S2, S5 and S7 followed this practice. Interviewees reported on this overt discrimination: one female employee asked 'How could I change to another company, if in there advertisement, they state clearly that they only want male candidates? And that is for an accountant job!' [focus group S3].

A typical selection process in Vietnamese SOEs in general, and steel companies in particular, is very simple and consists of reading a written application to make the first cut, then interviews, health checks, and a probation period for the newly recruited employee. No

company investigated had selection tests. One male interviewee noted that ‘Recent appointments are somewhat not transparent and selection criteria have not been established’ [Male interviewee, S1]. An illustrative example of the simple selection process is given by S2. After the stipulated time period for the applicants to send in their CVs, initial screening and short-listing starts based on job description and job specification. Interviews are then conducted by a board comprising a HR manager, senior line managers and a vice director or general director (who is also a representative of trade union). After the interview stage, the HR department asks the desired candidate to submit a medical certificate as evidence of them being in a healthy enough state to do their job. The process ends when the candidate presents the medical certificate and the labour contract is signed. Probation period is three to six months, depending on the position. There has not been any case reported where the candidate failed probation.

HR managers have revealed that superficial examination of candidates occurs most of the time with selection decisions based on unstructured interviews. Before the interview, a summary of the educational and other qualities of candidates extracted from their CVs is given to each member of the interview panel. The majority of HR managers have revealed the existence of a pre-interview discussion with the interview panel before commencing the interviews, in which not only the qualifications, skills and abilities of the candidates are discussed but also their relationship with their sponsors (who either work in the company or have connections with those in power in the company). In many cases, the selection decision is made before the interview is even conducted. It is noted that managing directors, vice managing directors, and in some cases, senior managers are appointed directly by a higher authority, namely the General Corporation management or the relevant ministry. The selection criteria in this case focuses on political reliability, education qualifications, previous working performance and technical competence and attitude.

Furthermore, selection and promotion decisions are not made on the basis of qualifications and abilities but, more often than not, on the basis of relationships. In the mass media there have been many cases of high profile public servants and SOEs’ top executives who do not have degrees or who have used fake certificates. Therefore appointment and promotion are highly subjective. For promotion, most interviewees agreed that a good relationship with supervisors was critical: ‘Good relationship with supervisors are a primary factor for promotion and also suitable with Vietnamese culture’ [Male interviewee, S5]; ‘Relations with supervisors are even more important than having the right training and degree because you can be structured into management positions and get a degree later’ [Male interviewee, S3].

Some managers were clearly prejudiced against female candidates. Others found it uncomfortable to work with women and do not want to appoint women to high ranking positions simply because they think ‘it is easier to work with men’.

Combining Paid Employment and Family Care

Family responsibilities in general were seen a big obstacle for women to overcome in order to succeed in their career. A male employee recognised that ‘Women are not promoted because their family responsibilities prevent them from devoting their time and efforts to their jobs’ [Male interviewee S2]. Female employees suffer from disadvantages resulting from their maternity leave. The current stipulation of four months childcare leave after birth is only extended to women rather than being shared between men and women.

Women then face disadvantages when returning to work: ‘After a period of maternity leave, women cannot be voted as A class workers’ [Focus group S1, S2, S3]. Therefore, their well deserved maternity leave curbs their opportunities for promotion.

The needs of being able to accommodate family events or emergencies could bind women to their current employer:

I must admit that I myself am afraid of changes. I have young kids. Sometimes I need to take leave. If I stay in the same company, I know my managers and they know me. It is a lot easier to ask for leave ...Some of my male colleagues here have changed to other firms in the same industry for higher positions. However, it is not that simple for females. They do not have that flexibility. If I'm a loyal employee, it's much easier for the management to accept that [leave]. Working relationship here is 'softer' compared to that in foreign invested companies. Personal relationships, loyalty and seniority still play a big role [Focus group S3].

Organisational Culture

Vietnamese people are bound in social networks which provide them with social capital. There are official and unofficial networks inside and outside an organisation. Men's unofficial networks give them additional social capital which provides them with influence and support amongst and for male employees (Burke, Bristor and Rothstein 1995; Burke, Rothstein and Bristor 1995; Brass 1985). Men tend to have wider social circles than women, so they can find more training and promotion opportunities. Often, key executives are in these social networks, and thus men have more chance to be known by managers with the result that they have greater chances to be considered for promotion. Women may not be able to build these relationships because they are either not welcomed into these networks or do not have time for after hours activities:

It seems that women can hardly join men's circles...It is rare to see married women who have time to join in our sports circles, and even rarer to find them at restaurants and food shops, eating and drinking after work. That is why women update information much later than men...Men have faster and informal approaches to information, for example, during drinking session with mates [Male interviewee, S4].

Even an independent young woman with a focus on her work rather than on her family cannot join this 'men's club' simply because she is a woman. Added to this, the additional burden of housework and family care can preclude women from participating in after work activities.

Women find it hard to integrate into an organisational culture of male-dominated values. Leaders are selected in line with masculine skills such as technical knowledge, communication skills (in the male-dominated environment of steel industry), and self confidence. Abilities that women frequently exhibit, 'soft' skills such as listening, providing encouragement, flexibility, and elaboration are generally overlooked. A female divisional manager, who has stayed in her position for six years, said:

Being a woman, I tend to listen and am soft spoken. Feminine charm and sensitiveness won me some favour at the workplace, however, they can be perceived as being weak and indecisive. When our head of department was promoted to higher position, the board of direction chose one of my male colleagues to fill his position...At that time, I was the more senior, in terms of tenure and thus more experienced. The rumour was that I was not promoted as I am 'indecisive'.

After being overlooked for promotion a couple of time, women are apparently considered as 'out of the game' and there is a high chance that they will stay at their low level permanently.

In addition, the tasks assigned to women and men as part of their job are different. At work, women are expected to cover more odd jobs such as cleaning and paperwork than men do. In one of the case studies, women had a rota to clean common areas including the kitchen and meeting room. When asked why there no male names appeared on this list, the reply came that 'this is women's job'. Another woman commented that

Having the same qualifications, men are given professional jobs while women have to do both their professional and odd jobs such as photocopying, cleaning,

etc. It is an unwritten rule....We are distracted from our work [Female interviewee, S2].

The masculine nature of the steel industry provides the perfect excuse for the very high rate of male managers: 'This is the steel industry. This is the play ground for men! Who forced them to work here?...they must be alright, if not, they have left!' [Male interviewee S2]. Women are not seen as able to interact with male customers in the same way that men can:

Frankly speaking, in this industry, companies do not want to appoint female staff to the tasks requiring frequent meetings and communication with customers. They [customers] are all males! There also is this business practice which widely exists in Vietnam: contracts are signed on the restaurant tables, not office tables. How can a woman cope?...Naturally, they try to prevent this by appointing a male staff [Male interviewee S1].

The small percentage of women in the steel industry is an obstacle to women's equal participation in decision making processes. Views of women's role in society and their ability to interact with men on business issues restrict their access to certain types of jobs and to managerial positions.

Women as Managers

The 'bamboo ceiling' clearly exists in all the investigated companies. This is no surprise as it mirrors the case internationally where few women are among the ranks of senior managers (see for example Broadbridge and Hearn 2008; Gatrell and Swan 2008). Studies in many countries have discussed the disapproving attitudes towards women managers from colleagues and managers, and from outside the organisation from clients. The issues are complex and encompass negative attitudes to women in managerial positions, and organisational practices that deter or do not encourage women's appointment to senior positions or enhance their skill base (for example, Catalyst 2005; Powell and Graves 2003; Wirth 2001; Wajcman 1999). Women's perception of life 'at the top' may diminish career goals, while many find the culture of the organisation to be unattractive (Beck and Davis 2005). This study of Vietnamese firms found deep-seated prejudice against women in managerial positions, in large part because this means that women would be in a position of power over men. It was clear from the interviews that men do not like to be a subordinate to a female boss: 'Men get promoted because they do not want to have a female boss' [Male interviewee S7]. In addition to this view of the inappropriateness of women in positions of power, stereotypes of women's managerial abilities are particularly strong. One male interviewee reflected on this:

In terms of promotion, there is no official barrier to women. However, some the general perception is that women should not be promoted to top level positions because they do not have strategic thinking as men, despite of their true ability, it is difficult for them to succeed [Male interviewee S5].

The perception of a 'macho steel industry' is widespread. There is only one female managing director in this industry in the South of Vietnam where she is the Managing director of a joint venture, and therefore not included in this study. All other senior (male) executive managers openly refer to her as 'Miss Steel Industry', thus making links to winners of beauty contests.

Some of the particular characteristics associated with managerial positions in the steel industry present extra barriers for women. These jobs often involve considerable out of hours and out of office work, and this can be problematic for women. Social expectations, and indeed personal choice, can make this aspect of the work prohibitive for women. As one male interviewee said,

People think nothing about men coming home late or drinking with their friends, but it is absolutely not acceptable for women to do the same thing, leaving early in the morning and coming back home late at night, avoiding their housework [Male interviewee S7].

One woman echoed these views:

To be recognised, one needs to socialise a lot. In the majority of cases, that happens outside the working hour. Women cannot drink and they cannot go out after working hours! That alone could reduce their chances [of promotion] significantly. And if they do [go out drinking with mates after hours], they are looked down and their virtues are questioned by the society [female interviewee S4].

The lower retirement age for women has created another barrier for women advancing in their careers. In Vietnam, women are obligated to retire at 55, while men can work until 60. This effectively puts an early hold on women's advancement to senior positions, often at a stage in their lives when family responsibilities may have lessened:

When their children are small, women spend time on family and cannot succeed. When children are grown up they can spend time on work but do not have any opportunities to study. A woman is qualified but not in the target list for appointment selection, and when her turn comes, she is older than the required age [Male interviewee, S1].

Older women may not be considered for promotion and this in turn may lower women's goals and aspirations. One woman felt this keenly:

According to the unspoken policy, women at the age of 45-50 are not considered for promotion. Therefore, we do not want to try as early as 40. This is very unfortunate, as at this age, family work has been stabilised and we have more time to devote to their career. The policy indeed kills our motivation [Female interviewee, S2].

Conclusions

Despite initiatives by the government at the national level to promote equality for women, and the reform of SOEs, the results of this research show that female employees still confront considerable barriers in their employment and careers. In general, women are still at a disadvantage in terms of educational level, participation in the workforce, earnings and participation in leadership and managerial positions. The development of the market economy has reduced the state's ability to influence gender relations and its capacity to promulgate equality. In practice, public administration is primarily concerned with the formal and legal aspects, rather than the actual implementation, of these gender policies. However, the *Doi Moi* has had some positive influences on gender relations. With the opening up of the economy, creation of new labour markets, the increase of labour mobility and the establishment of new economic sectors, *Doi Moi* has created new challenges and opportunities for women in Vietnam. Entering the wage-labour market, women have narrowed the earnings gap between the sexes, thereby altering the traditional gender division of labour and affecting individual lives and relationships. Despite these advances, organisational barriers which obstruct women's employment and careers remain and take many forms: some are obvious, such as job advertisements that specify male applicants only; some are subtle and hard to detect and are reflected in organisational cultures that, for example, see women as unsuitable for managerial positions. Exacerbating this is the masculine employment profile and culture within the steel industry.

This study offers evidence that Vietnamese women managers carry a double burden of responsibilities: for society and family. They are attempting to combine their role as (another) breadwinner with the traditional role of daughter, wife and mother. The study also reveals that stereotypical perceptions of women's low managerial skills and qualities, alongside the devaluing of feminine traits, are widely held not just by men, but also by women themselves. These are the main challenges that career women must overcome in order to achieve recognition and advancement.

The study points out that even though the Vietnamese government has successfully created an institutional context for the advancement of women's rights, together with the development of the market economy, its ability to influence gender relations has declined in the new economic system, and so has its capacity to promulgate equality. While *Doi Moi* has provided a strong impetus for the advancement of women, and has given them more favourable conditions and opportunities to contribute actively to the national political, economic and social development, many women who wish to develop their careers encounter challenges in the family, at the workplace and in society. Male dominance has been 'shaped and reinforced over so many generations that is deeply rooted in people's minds and exists as a social stronghold resistant to opposition' (Nguyen 1997), and this is reflected both within the division of labour in the home and in expectations at the workplace. The old system of labour division based on gender is still maintained in the majority of Vietnamese families. Men's primary role as breadwinners, and women's primary role for family care, is reflected in attitudes to women, especially women managers, in the workplace. Despite legislative advances towards gender equality in employment, limited educational opportunities for girls, and social expectations hinder women from taking up jobs and higher-level positions outside their family.

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