

## Chapter 38

# The Contradictory Nature of Vietnamese Society in Relation to Gender Equality

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**Abstract** The inequalities in the status of women in Viet Nam have been addressed in many areas such as education and health and the Vietnamese government has gone further than many other countries within the Region to implement programmes to raise the status of women to promote gender equality. However, despite the progress as noted, traditional behaviour based on Confucianism is clashing with the movement towards gender equality especially in the area of gender selection. The gender selection in favour of the male gender is a main contributor to gender imbalance within Vietnamese society. The research being generated at present and which this paper is based on is, in the main, obtained from secondary sources across many disciplines. However, ongoing up-to-date findings obtained from surveys on youth and gender which is being undertaken by a NGO based in Hanoi will also be a contributory factor in this paper in that it will identify the continuance of the traditional behaviour argument.

### 38.1 Introduction

The inequalities in the status of women in Viet Nam have been addressed in many areas such as education and health and the Vietnamese government has gone further than many other countries within the Region to implement programmes to raise the status of women to promote gender equality.

However, despite the progress as noted, there is contradictory behaviour within Vietnamese society. Traditional behaviour tied to Confucian influence in Vietnamese society is clashing with the movement towards gender equality, especially in the area of gender selection. The availability of gender selection technology in the 1980s is a main contributor to the gender imbalance within Vietnamese society, although it is not the root cause of the gender preference for male offspring. It could be argued that this form of technology has progressed the gender imbalance further in what could be described as a backward step for gender equality in Viet Nam.

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Many countries have taken measures to address the problem of gender selection leading to gender imbalance within the society and Viet Nam is one such country that has instituted programmes and promulgated laws to do so. However, success has not been achieved in eliminating or even halting this practice. The practice of gender selection because the male offspring is more valued than the female offspring is deeply imbedded in Vietnamese society. Without a concerted campaign which involves changing the mindset of the people towards such practice and traditional mores, no programme or law is likely to change the situation.

## 38.2 Origins of Confucian Influence

The Confucian influence in Viet Nam is heaviest in the present day northern Viet Nam as far as the 18th parallel which is the region that the Chinese Han dynasty in 111 B.C.E. integrated into its empire. According to Nguyen Khac Vien in *Viet Nam: A Long History* “the feudal Han carried out a policy of systematic cultural assimilation; the empire having to be unified in all aspects and one aspect was the use of the ideographic script being enforced as a vehicle for the official doctrine, Confucianism”[1].

As Nguyen goes on to state:

A tightly-woven network of obligations and rites bound societal and individual life strictly governing relationships between parents and children, husband and wife, between friends and between subjects and the imperial administration which tried to replace old customs with laws and rites inspired by Confucian doctrine [1].

Huu Ngoc in *Sketches for a portrait of Vietnamese Culture* takes it further to provide an explanation of what Confucianism replaced in Viet Nam in that he states as does Nguyen that

“Chinese ideograms facilitated the entry of the official doctrine, Confucianism, and this doctrine wove a tight web of obligations and rituals that governed individual and social life, a web destined to replace the older ways of life of the Bronze Age” and according to Ngoc, “society was transformed little by little into feudalism and patriarchy gradually replaced matriarchy” [2].

John K Whitmore in *Social Organisation and Confucian Thought in Vietnam* put forward a slightly different point of view:

Writings on Vietnam have portrayed a country moulded by its northern neighbour in the “thousand years of Chinese domination” of the first millennium A.D. to such an extent that all things Vietnamese must needs be seen in a Chinese and indeed a Confucian light. Socially, this means domination by the male and the father, patrilineal succession, and clan organisation, that is, a certain rigidity in social organisation [3].

However, Whitmore does not totally agree with Viet Nam being portrayed in this way. He is of the opinion that:

We need instead to consider the characteristics of Vietnamese social behaviour before we try to place the social order of Vietnam in any category . . . and in the contemporary detail of

the seventeenth century, drawn from law codes and observers, one may argue, can be seen social behaviour more similar to that found elsewhere in Southeast Asia [3].

Whitmore above refers to law codes and one of the most important was the Hong Duc Code which was promulgated in 1483 with the purpose to group in a systematic way the rules and regulations already in force [3].

According to Nguyen in *Viet Nam: a long history*

This was the most complete code to be drawn up in traditional Viet Nam and remained in force until the end of the 18th century. Completed under subsequent reigns, it comprised 721 articles and was divided into six books [1].

Nguyen appears to argue one way that “the rights of the woman were protected” in various ways under this Code, but then makes the point that all the aspects that he mentions as being for the benefit of women “. . . were to be suppressed in its most reactionary form” [1].

Mai Thi Tu and Le Thi Nham Tuyet in *Women in Viet Nam* do not agree with Nguyen that the rights of women were protected in that they state:

. . . the Hong Duc code remains above all an institution created at the apogee of Vietnamese feudalism . . . it bolstered the supremacy of patriarchy . . . was inevitable that it should contain contradictions with regard to the position of women as it marked the transition from feudalism with markedly national characteristics to a period in which a backward and reactionary policy vis-à-vis women was applied primarily. . . it constituted a manifesto disfavoured women and foreshadowed their enslavement and oppression by the dominant feudal class [4].

Mai and Le argue that the different Codes incorporated from the Ly to the Nguyen dynasty did not protect the rights of women in any way; in fact, they argue the reverse as quoted below.

The Code of the Ly (11th century) the Hong Duc Code (15th century) and the Gia Long (19th century—a code which remained in force under French colonial rule until the 1945 August Revolution) with each Code being more reactionary and anti-national than the last and projecting more and more rigorous discrimination against women [4].

William Turley in *Women in the Communist revolution in Vietnam* analyses the claim by the Lao Dong Party of Vietnam that one of their “great accomplishments is the emancipation of women from oppressive feudal social structures and attitudes and the establishment of equality between the sexes”[5].

Turley states that:

At the time of Party’s founding in 1930, liberalising trends regarding women were present only among urban intellectual elites and that throughout the countryside and among traditionalist aristocratic families the restrictive practices and prejudices typical of patrilocal societies and Confucian ethnics prevailed [5].

Turley provides a footnote which summarises the position of the female gender in Viet Nam succinctly and again, as seen time after time, there is a reference to contradictions in Vietnamese society that have come through the historical context and which are still prevalent in the 21st century Viet Nam.

The role of women in traditional Vietnamese society was determined by a fascinating complex mixture of Confucian ethics, indigenous customs bearing traces of matriarchy, and contradictory legal codes, further complicated by the varying degrees to which different social classes were penetrated by each of these elements [5].

This brief overview of the arguments put forward by various authors assists in gaining a partial understanding into the contradictions associated with gender inequality which in turn is a prime factor leading to the gender imbalance in Viet Nam.

The main argument in this paper is that the practice of gender selection takes place because the male offspring is more valued than the female offspring and that this practice is deeply imbedded in Vietnamese society, but that there are contradictions and it is these contradictions which will be discussed in the following section.

### 38.3 Status/Value of Vietnamese Women in General

As referred to in the introductory section of this paper, apart from the aspect of gender imbalance, Viet Nam has a good track record when looking at other indicators which point towards Viet Nam taking enormous strides in addressing inequalities between gender in other areas such as education, health and infant mortality. The *World Bank Viet Nam Gender Assessment 2011* also points out that the “female labour force participation rate in Viet Nam is among the highest in the region with the gender gap in earnings lower in Viet Nam than many other East Asian countries” [6].

*As the World Bank Viet Nam Gender Assessment 2011 goes on to note:*

The contradictory nature of Viet Nam’s performance in relation to gender equality testifies to a society characterized by cross-cutting historical traditions and contemporary forces. On the one hand, Viet Nam has outperformed many other countries in terms of gender equality with equivalent, or even higher, levels of economic development. Its government has gone further than most to use legislative changes and social programs to institutionalise gender equality. On the other hand, it not only continues to report old forms of gender inequality, such as high levels of gender-based violence, but also new forms such as the rising sex ratios at birth, indicative of the selective abortion of female fetuses.

Viet Nam has not yet fallen completely into the danger zone posed by an imbalance in the population which favours the male gender over the female gender and the following statistics whilst sounding an alarm also indicate that it is not too late for Viet Nam to take the necessary action to address the issue.

The *World Bank Viet Nam Gender Assessment 2011* addresses many of the issues, including concern over the rise of sex ratios at birth and provides valuable up-to-date, as far as possible, data on the issue of gender imbalance within the population in Viet Nam.

One major concern is the rise in sex ratio at birth (SRB) from 106 male births for every 100 female births in 1999 (the approximate biological norm) to 111 in 2009. SRBs are highest for higher income groups with better access to sonograms and sex selected abortions. For example, for higher parity births among the richest quintile, the SRB is 133.1. At the current SRB, the UNFPA predicts a 10 % surplus of men by 2035. This is clearly linked to a culturally based preference for boys [6].

An article “*Assessing the Quality of Data for Analysing the Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet Nam*” goes much deeper into the issue by establishing a comprehensive framework that undertakes a detailed assessment of all collection points of SRB data in Viet Nam; argues that the three chosen datasets applied in the report are the only sources found to be reliable even though there is some inconsistency between the three and reaches the conclusion that “despite the differences, the three datasets point consistently to a high SRB in eight provinces in the north of Viet Nam”[7].

The identification of a connecting hub where the high SRB is sited is crucial because this may go some considerable way in the decision that the Vietnamese government needs to make in order to address the gender imbalance in Viet Nam. The reasons for this cluster are quite simply the Confucian influence emanating from the times of the Chinese tenure in Viet Nam.

Many scholars maintain that Viet Nam has more egalitarian gender relations similar to those of South East Asia where gender imbalance in favour of the male gender is not an issue and this viewpoint cannot be lightly dismissed.

However, the reality is that this point of view does not stand up to scrutiny when you look at what is happening with the gender selection taking place in Viet Nam; the general perception within society and the still heavy Confucian influences which impact on day to day life in Viet Nam or to be more precise, in the regions of Viet Nam where the influence of Confucianism has not faded. The influence of the Confucian belief systems and a culture of son preference which values sons not only for their economic contributions and support to parents in old age, but also on symbolic grounds to maintain the ancestral line is still overwhelming. While several decades of socialist government in Viet Nam have promoted a more egalitarian legal and policy framework, Confucian values about gender propriety, including essentialist constructions of women’s nature have not disappeared from official discourse [6].

### **38.4 Countering the Confucian Influence in Gender Issues**

Even if the Vietnamese government brings in the full range of measures that other countries such as South Korea have implemented in its efforts to successfully re-balance the SRB, it does not guarantee in any way that the mindset of people will change and the changing of the mindset is the only permanent solution to the problem of gender imbalance.

Perhaps the solution lies in the female gender claiming or re-claiming full control over their bodies and this would involve all females from grandmother to mother to daughter to the female members of the husband’s/partner’s family so that pressure to conform to patriarchal notions of the inferiority of the female gender over the male gender is broken and that full value is given to both genders equally. The female gender is to a large extent complicit in the practice of gender selection; they are following what has gone before and what in the main, has been dictated by so-called social and cultural norms.

Viet Nam is an economically and socially transitional society and as such many of the cultural norms as a matter of course through the impact of globalisation may well undergo change which in turn could impact on such practices as gender selection. But, as has been seen in other countries within the region, apart from South Korea which was only successful because of massive intervention from the Korean government, it is unlikely to get at the core issue. Interim findings that are emanating from a survey currently underway with youth in Viet Nam do not bode well for successful intervention.

Although the research being generated at present and which this paper is based on is, in the main, obtained from secondary sources across many disciplines, ongoing primary research currently being undertaken by NGOs based in Hanoi is incorporated into this paper [7].

The initial findings from this research project are disturbing in that there appears to be a persistent gender bias among young people, and that women are often the primary enforcers of gender roles. This particular project took place online with 2,206 young people between the ages of 14–30 from 64 cities and provinces throughout Viet Nam taking part. One of the criticisms could be that since this was, and is an ongoing online survey and debate, that it does not have the validity of a face-to-face survey. However, since the generation/s that is being surveyed is one that has grown up in a social media sphere and they are used to discussing/exposing all online, the counter argument could be made that this type of survey has more validity than a face-to-face encounter.

If the findings which need more extensive research are verified, to a certain extent this goes against the notion that as a developing country such as Viet Nam becomes more urbanised; standards of living rise and in general the population has more time and money for recreation, that along with these changes the mindset of the female gender would change. This does not, as far as can be established at this point in time, appear to be the situation and that is the aspect, as referred to above, that is disturbing. It is disturbing primarily because Viet Nam as already noted could be seen to be at a tipping point with its gender imbalance. If appropriate actions were put into place; it may go some way towards ameliorating the situation before it finds itself falling completely into the danger zone.

## 38.5 Conclusion

It has been argued by many authors including John K Whitmore that in order “to analyse Vietnamese social organisation, we must put aside our image of it as similar to that of China, with its patrilineal clans” and that we should not be looking at Vietnamese society through a Confucian lens but place it more in the range of the social behavior that is prevalent in the so-called Southeast Asian sphere [3].

However, what is presently occurring within Vietnamese society in relation to various forms of gender inequality especially of that which is related to gender selection does not substantiate this argument. To reiterate what is stated in the introductory

section of this paper; the practice of gender selection because the male offspring is more valued than the female offspring is deeply imbedded in Vietnamese society and the only permanent solution in order to address this issue is to somehow bring about a change of mindset in Vietnamese society.

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