

The politics of gender and social protection in Viet Nam: opportunities and challenges for a transformative approach

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Viet Nam has undergone far-reaching economic and social transformation since the mid-1980s. This can be seen in the country's rapid progress on income poverty, with the average income rising from just \$200 a year in 1989 to more than \$1,000 in 2009, pushing Viet Nam above the middle-income country threshold. The country has engineered a major economic structural shift from agriculture to industry and services alongside greater integration into the global economy. It has also significantly increased its literacy and education rates and telecommunications connectivity, and is on track or has already achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet despite this impressive progress, significant pockets of poverty and vulnerability remain.

Overall, ethnicity is a key signifier of poverty and vulnerability. While ethnic minority households account for just 15% of the national population, some 55% are in the poorest quintile, compared with just 12% of the Kinh and Chinese population, and an estimated 29% of ethnic minority households in rural areas are classified as food poor, versus just 9% of rural households overall (Joint Donor Group, 2007).¹ Similarly, 2008 Vietnamese Living Standards Survey (VLSS) data found that non-Kinh-Hoa ethnic groups accounted for 51.3% of the poor among male-headed households, and 41% among female-headed households (GSO, 2008).

Gender, however, also plays an important role in the perpetuation of poverty and vulnerability. On the one hand, the country has made remarkable progress in reducing gender disparities in education, employment and health, as reflected in its improved UNDP Gender Inequality Index ratings from the low middle-rank group in 1999 to the upper middle-rank group in 2008. However, significant challenges still remain as highlighted in the World Bank's 2011 Country Gender Assessment, especially with regard to the wage gap between men and women and women's more limited access to formal employment opportunities and in turn limited direct access to formal social protection. Lower land certification rates, women's high time poverty and gender-based violence are also key concerns (Table 1).

Policy momentum around social protection has grown over the past decade, motivated by a desire to reduce residual poverty and vulnerability, and as emphasised in the country's Socio-Economic Development Plans (2001-2005, 2006-2010, 2011-2015). Viet Nam now has an array of social protection programmes in place (Table 2), including social assistance, social insurance and a range of social services and social equity measures.

However, as the country starts to consolidate its middle-income status, there is an urgent need to overhaul its social protection framework. Existing programmes tend to be poorly coordinated across sectors and levels of government, face a number of targeting errors and are, in general, poorly equipped to deal with



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both longstanding and sudden onset disparities (Joint Donor Group, 2007), including the gendered risks and vulnerabilities identified in Table 1. In addition, the recent global food price, fuel and financial crisis underscored the inadequacy of Viet Nam's existing social protection infrastructure in cushioning the poor and vulnerable from the economic and social fallout of significant macro-level shocks (CAF and VERN, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2009).

This Background Note reviews the extent to which Viet Nam's social protection strategies and

programmes are addressing gender inequities, with a particular focus on the political economy dynamics of implementation at the sub-national level. It draws on findings from an Australian Development Research Award-funded policy research project by the Institute of Family and Gender Studies (IFGS), Hanoi, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, including primary research in Ha Giang province in the impoverished Northeast highlands of the country and in An Giang province in the Mekong River Delta region of southern Viet Nam.

Table 1: Overview of some key gendered economic and social vulnerabilities

Vulnerability domain	Gender differences
Wage rates	Women's wages are approx. 75% of men's (2009). While the gender wage gap is about 12% nationally, it rises to around 50% in the informal sector (VDR, 2011). In the case of migrant workers, although working hours and days are very similar for men and women, female migrants earned about 22 Million VND a year (1128 USD), while male migrants made 32 Million VND (1644USD). These differences remain even after factors such as age, education and occupation are taken into account.
Employment opportunities	Women have more vulnerable jobs (self-employed, unpaid family labour), which increased during recent global economic crisis (11.7% for men compared to 13.9% women in 2007, remaining static for men but 22.2% for women in 2009). 42.9% of women are classified as unskilled workers compared to 36.2% of men.
Technical and vocational training and education	Gender gaps in access to technical education within the labour force are significant: 70.9% of women workers had no technical education in 2007, compared to 60% of men, putting women at a significant disadvantage in the labour market, especially in terms of the ability to access newly created jobs in higher-tech industries that demand scientific, engineering and technical skills. Existing vocational training also tends to favour male-dominated areas of the labour market.
Time spent on unpaid domestic work	Women spend approximately half as much time again as men a week on housework. 2008 VLSS data revealed that urban women spent on average 17.5 hours a week compared to 11.2 hours in the case of men; while rural women spent on average 15.4 hours compared to men's 10.2 hours. The same survey also found that 44% of men did not contribute to housework at all compared to just 21% of women. Gender differences start early: 58% of boys aged 11 to 14 do not contribute cf. to 41% of girls.
Land certification	Despite the 2003 Land Law, most Land Tenure Certificates as of 2008 did not include women's names. The percentage of male-only holders has fallen from 66% to 62%, while percentage of female-only holders and joint holders has increased from 19% to 20% and 15% to 18% respectively.
Access to direct formal social protection	Because of lower formal sector employment rates, women have lower coverage in social protection programmes. For example, 58% of women have health insurance cf. 62% of men. While informal workers can buy voluntary health insurance, few do so unless they are sick (VDR, 2011). Non-permanent and unregistered migrants typically lack access to social services and social protection. They are also concentrated in vulnerable employment with low wages, often no formal labour contract (and especially in the case of women) and therefore typically lack access to labour protection.
Maternal mortality	Considerable progress has been made on maternal mortality in recent decades: declining from 233 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 69 in 2009.
Gender-based violence	The National Study on the Family conducted in 2006 found that 21% of couples had experienced at least one type of domestic violence in the preceding 12 months (including verbal, emotional, sexual and physical). The Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2006 found that 64% of women aged 15-49 accepted violent treatment from husbands as normal. A 2010 General Statistics Office study using the global WHO methodology on domestic violence found that 31.5% of women have experienced physical violence at some time, but more than 50% have experienced emotional violence.
Sex ratio at birth	111 males are born for every 100 females as of 2009, up from 106 male births for every 100 female births in 1999 – the result of a culturally-based preference for boys.
Educational attainment	More girls than boys attend secondary school among the Kinh group (82.6% versus 80%), whereas fewer ethnic minority girls than boys attend school (61.6% versus 67.8%) (UNICEF and SRVN, 2010).
Health seeking behaviour (i.e. breastfeeding, immunisation, visits to health providers, etc.)	Health seeking behaviour for girls versus boys is mixed: The immunisation rate for girls is a little higher than for boys (68% versus 64%). However, boys are more likely to be exclusively breastfed until the age of six months than girls. Boys also access health services at twice the rate of girls, partly the result of their greater susceptibility to injuries.
Access to adequate care	More girls (20%) than boys (17%) were found to be left with inadequate care, as were children in rural areas (22%) than in urban areas (10%).
Participation in public life	There is significant resistance to women taking up leadership positions in public life. On the positive side, there has been steady improvements in the case of representation of women in the subnational legislative bodies (People's Councils) – from approximately 12/13% at provincial, district and commune levels in the 1989-1994 period to between 22 and 25% period. ² Progress has been less consistent, however, in the case of Communist Party Executive Committees (e.g. 8.6% at central level in 2001-6 and 8.13% in 2006-10; 11.32% and 11.75% respectively at the provincial level; and 11.88% and 15.08% at the commune level).

The politics of mainstreaming gender into social protection: a conceptual framework

The effective mainstreaming of gender into social protection requires careful consideration of the politics that underpin diverse social protection strategy and programme approaches across country contexts. The steps involved in embedding a gender-sensitive approach in social protection policy and programming are relatively straightforward (on Viet Nam see e.g. Jones and Tran, 2010). But mainstreaming gender into any policy sector is as much a political issue as it is a technical one. This is perhaps particularly the case with social protection as discussions on social safety nets are very often underpinned by polarised views on gender roles and responsibilities the world over – as highlighted, for example, by debates about the ‘nanny state’, a ‘family wage’ and ‘the costs of care’ (Folbre, 2008).

When it comes to social protection in the developing world, there is a growing body of work that looks at the politics of social protection, including the ways in which programme choices are shaped in response to elite and public buy-in, as well as the reasons that underlie varying implementation practices at the grassroots level (de Britto, 2008; Hickey, 2007; Zucco, 2008). Interest in the gender dynamics of social protection in general (e.g. Kabeer, 2010; Molyneux, 2006) and in political economy dimensions in particular is more recent (Jones and Holmes, 2011). To explore the political economy of gender and social protection in Viet Nam, we draw on a framework developed by Holmes and Jones (2012, forthcoming) that explores the effect of gender relations on shaping the institutions, interests and ideas behind social protection policy and programming in developing countries.

Although increasingly at risk of becoming a catch-all phrase adopted by a wide variety of actors and disciplines, the concept ‘political economy’ generally refers to an analytical approach whereby development policy and programme outcomes involve a process of bargaining between state and society actors, mediated by interactions between formal and informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Importantly, it differs markedly from an approach based on the external imposition of normative ideals about ‘good governance’ and instead seeks to assess and engage with existing power structures and ways of working (Booth, 2011; Grindle, 2011). Accordingly, our research focuses on what Rosendorff (2005) dubs the ‘3 Is’ of political economy and their role in shaping social protection policies and programmes.

1. **Institutions:** institutional arenas (such as elections and party politics, the legislature, policy frameworks on decentralisation, and informal politics) and the opportunities or constraints they present for negotiation on the development of social protection policies and programmes.
2. **Interests** of the key actors who are likely to win or lose as a result of policy shifts (e.g. political elites, bureaucratic agencies, donors and civil society champions) and the relative balance of power between them (e.g. power imbalances between ministries of finance/economics and of social welfare).
3. **Ideas** held by political elites and the public on poverty, vulnerability, inequity and its causes, the nature of the social contract between state and citizens, and the merits of particular forms of state support. This may include, for instance, notions of the ‘deserving poor’, concerns about ‘dependency’ and entrenched attitudes towards inequality.

Integrating a gender lens into this framework adds another layer of complexity. A gendered political economy approach explores how ‘households, markets and states as gendered institutions are created and regulated in part by socially constructed norms at local, national and international levels’ (Roberts and Waylen, 1998: 184). As such, a gendered political economy approach has important implications for understanding women’s participation in the formal economy and public sphere in that it underscores the need to complement efforts to promote women’s individual human capital development with an acknowledgement and factoring in of women’s care and domestic work roles and responsibilities, and the effects these have on, for instance, their time, capacity-strengthening opportunities and self-identity. It also necessitates a re-conceptualisation and re-valuing of the private-public divide whereby the domestic sector is recognised as playing ‘a foundational role in the production of people who possess not only the capacity to work but also to acquire other more intangible social assets—a sense of ethical behaviour, a sense of citizenship, a sense of what it is to communicate—all of which permit the forming and sustaining of social norms’ (Elson, 1998: 197).

The three ‘Is’ of gender and social protection in decentralising Viet Nam

As shown in Table 2, Viet Nam’s gender policy infrastructure is relatively comprehensive, including recognition in the 2007 Gender Equality Law as to the importance of integrating gender into key poverty

Table 2: Selected social protection instruments in Viet Nam

Type of social protection instrument	Programme examples	Programme details
Social assistance programmes (offering regular transfers in cash or in kind, including fee waivers)	National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTP-PR)	<p>The NTP-PR that was launched in 2006 aimed to halve poverty between 2005 and 2010. Its new targeting approach has moved beyond the official poverty line to identify households that are 'certainly poor', those that are 'certainly non-poor' and those who need to be means-tested, using a combination of surveys and community discussions. Overall, this programme targets the poor, poor households, poor communes and extremely disadvantaged communes with priority given to specific types of households such as female-headed, those of ethnic minority, and those with elders, members with disabilities and those with children 'with special circumstances'.</p> <p>The NTP-PR has nationwide coverage and offers access to credit and concessional loans; access to basic services, such as housing, water supply, healthcare, education, vocational training and legal aid; poverty reduction capacity building; and infrastructure development such as hospitals, health clinics and schools. Over a five year period, 43.5 trillion VND has been allocated to the programme with 60% earmarked for 'preferential credit'. Most of the resources have come from existing programmes managed by several ministries such as the Ministry of Health responsible for the provision of free health insurance cards, or the Ministry of Education and Training responsible for exemptions and reductions of education fees under the NTP-PR.</p>
	Socio-Economic Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (P-135)	P-135, launched in 1998, has used geographic targeting to allocate 700 million VND per year to 2,362 disadvantaged communes for infrastructure development and livelihood support during its first phase. Its second phase (2006-2010) aims to improve the targeting criteria and reach the poorest villages, requiring the inclusion of both poorer villages within the poorest zone (zone III) communes and the poorest villages in the less poor zone (zone II) communes. With around one billion dollars for disbursement before 2010, the programme has included activities in four main areas: production development support, infrastructure development (roads, bridges, irrigation systems, schools and health clinics), capacity building for village officials and community, service and legal support.
	Rapid and Sustainable Poverty Reduction Programme for the 62 Poorest Districts (62 Districts)	This programme, launched in 2009, aims to reduce regional average poverty by 2020. It targets the poorest 62 districts with 2.4 million people, most of them from ethnic minorities. It offers complete housing support, cash and tuition fees exemption, vocational training opportunities for the poor, forestry protection support, family planning support and infrastructure development (irrigation systems, schools, hospitals and health clinics).
	Programme 134, Support land, housing and access to water (P-134)	P-134 started in 2004 and targeted poor ethnic minority households involved in agriculture, but without land and access to adequate housing and water services. P-134 supports land provision for production, housing construction and access to safe water supplies. It is considered to be the most comprehensive programme offering poor ethnic minority people financial support to access land as well as loans to build or renovate their homes.
	Policy on housing assistance for the poor (Decision 167/2008/QĐ-TTg)	Programme 167/2008 provides VND 6 million per household (VND 7 million for households living in hardship areas...). Households can also borrow to VND 8 million from the Bank for Social Policies to build their house. It is estimated that up to 500,000 households are benefiting from this programme.
	Support for boarding schools for ethnic minority students, 2009	These programmes target ethnic minority students in boarding schools and kindergartens and offer them support for food, textbooks and notebooks up to VND 140,000 per month.
	Scholarship and social aid for ethnic minority students, 2007	
	Resolution No. 80/ND-CP Orientation on Sustainable Poverty Reduction 2011-2020	Resolution No. 80 (2011) is part of the Vietnamese Government's latest efforts for rapid and sustainable poverty reduction by 2020. Its particular targets are the poor, poor households, ethnic minorities, the elderly, those with disabilities and women and children living in poor districts or in poor communes in disadvantaged ethnic minority and mountainous areas, border areas, difficult coastal areas and islands, or in ethnic minority mountainous hamlets. Poverty reduction policies are organised into six main areas: production support, vocational training, job creation, and improved incomes for the poor; education and training support; health and nutrition support; housing support; support to enable the poor to access legal aid services; and support to enable the poor to access information and cultural programmes. This Resolution actually introduces a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction by bringing together all Ministries and Committees involved to improve the effectiveness of current poverty reduction programmes and to channel resources efficiently to the neediest communes and households.

Table 2: Selected social protection instruments in Viet Nam (continued)

Type of social protection instrument	Programme examples	Programme details
Social insurance schemes (aiming to protect people's health, livelihoods and well-being against risks and shocks)	Social health insurance	The Health Care Fund for the Poor was created in 2003 to provide healthcare to the poor, ethnic minorities and the disadvantaged. In 2005 free health services in public facilities were offered to all children under the age of six. In accordance with the new National Health Insurance Law in 2008, all these services have been incorporated into the social health insurance scheme. This scheme offers free or subsidised health insurance to specific groups such as all children under six, poor people, pensioners and veterans. The 2008 VHLSS data shows that only 21% received free health insurance.
	Voluntary health insurance	The voluntary health insurance scheme was first introduced in 1992 and now covers those who are not eligible for the previous two programmes such as farmers, informal workers and students. Most of those with this type of insurance are students. Payments are on a flat rate, and the current cost of voluntary insurance is 4.5% to 6% of the minimum wage. Financial incentives are offered to the near poor to join. Yet coverage is still limited: according to the 2008 VHLSS data only 16% of those with health insurance are covered by student insurance and 6% by voluntary insurance.
	Compulsory social insurance	The compulsory insurance scheme was first introduced in 1992 and covers mainly civil servants, workers in state-owned enterprises, and those in the private sector. The contribution rate is low, set at 3% of the salary with 2% paid by the employer; and the package offered is generous with maternity and sickness benefits, workplace accident and disability insurance, and unemployment and pension benefits. It does not, however, cover dependents. The 2008 VHLSS data shows that only 10% of those with health insurance, are covered by compulsory insurance.
Social welfare services (targeting members of marginalised groups in need of special care or those who would otherwise be denied access to basic services due to their particular social characteristics)	Initiatives and services for children and women who are victims of trafficking, domestic violence and abuse	The National Legal Aid Agency has carried out several projects to improve the capacity of legal aid providers and the access to legal aid for victims of such violence. With international assistance counselling centres have been established at health facilities with projects supporting domestic violence victims, while there are also few counselling centres at community level; counselling is also offered through self-help groups consisting of domestic violence victims, migrants and trafficked women. There are only a few shelters for victims: in 2010 Viet Nam Women's Union operated eight shelters for trafficked women, and there were two other 'clubs' specifically for children and victims of domestic violence, run by a local NGO
	Construction of boarding accommodation near schools for ethnic minority students or students from remote areas	Given that not all communes have schools, there are some programmes, as part of education support policies, to construct much-needed accommodation for students studying away from home.
Social equity measures (legal and policy measures to protect people against social risks such as discrimination and abuse by offering them access to property, credit or services along with affirmative action measures to redress past patterns of discrimination)	2004 Law on the Protection, Care and Education of Children	This law incorporates the basic principles and aims of the Convention on the Rights of the Child to protect child rights and to inform best policies. It includes the child's obligations in accordance with Vietnamese culture and to promote responsible child behaviour.
	National Plan of Action Against Trafficking of Women and Children 2004-2010. Law on Anti-Trafficking 2012	This NAP aimed to prevent and combat trafficking through action against traffickers, border control, strengthening of the legal framework, advocacy and education (particularly at community level) and support services for victims.
	2006 Law on Gender Equality	This law aims to ensure gender equality in all fields, to protect and support mothers, to abolish customs impeding gender equality, and to support activities promoting gender equality in remote and ethnic minority areas with difficult socio-economic conditions. It calls for gender mainstreaming in all areas, sets targets and suggests measures to facilitate implementation.
	2006 Law on Legal Aid	According to this law the poor, ethnic minorities, single elderly, the disabled, children with no form of support and people with 'meritorious services to the Revolution', are eligible for legal aid; yet it does not explicitly include the victims of gender-based violence as eligible for free legal aid.
	2006 Law on Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS	This law aims to offer HIV/AIDS prevention and control measures, arrange for the treatment and support of HIV-infected people, and create conditions for the effective implementation of these measures; yet gender issues are not adequately included, let alone addressed.
	2007 Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control	This law is the main framework for state policies and strategies for the prevention and control of domestic violence, and for the protection of its victims. It provides a broad definition of domestic violence, including all acts causing physical, spiritual and financial damage.
	Plan of Action on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control 2008-2015	Led by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MOCST), this PoA aims to strengthen and promote the effective implementation of the 2007 law on domestic violence prevention and control.
	National Strategy for Gender Equality 2011-2020	This strategy aims to narrow the gender gaps in all areas as part of national efforts for economic growth and sustainable development. It aims to: increase female participation in politics and leadership positions; promote poor rural and ethnic minority women's access to economic resources and labour markets; improve women's education and training opportunities; ensure gender equality in healthcare; promote gender equality in culture; ensure gender equality in family and eliminate domestic violence; and promote government involvement in managing issues of gender equality.

Sources: Joint Donor Group (2007); UNDP (2011); UNDP Viet Nam (2009); UNICEF (2010); UN Viet Nam (2010)

Box 1: Decentralisation in Viet Nam: progress and challenges since *Doi Moi*

Decentralisation in Viet Nam is both an on-going process, slowly unfolding since 1986's *Doi Moi* (meaning renovation, or reconstruction), and a product that has been deliberately sculpted through policy reform over the last decade (Painter, 2008). With broad impacts on all arenas – fiscal, administrative and political – the country's decentralisation has been driven by its transition to a market economy (ibid.; Painter, 2005).

There are four layers of government in Viet Nam: central, provincial, district, and commune – each with an executive and a legislative branch. As Fritzen (2006) notes, there is a fundamental tension in Vietnam between centralising and decentralising forces. On the one hand, the expansion of the private sector, the increasing ease with which citizens may access information and rapid urbanisation are pulling the country towards a devolution of power. On the other hand, Viet Nam remains a unitary state with a powerful executive branch and weak inter-sectoral coordination (ibid.).

Political decentralisation entails ‘transferring powers to legally constituted local governments that have autonomous spheres of authority’ (Wells-Dan, 2010). In Vietnam there have been some recent shifts that have opened more political space. The 2002 State Budget Law, for example, has ensured more legislative authority; furthermore ‘Grassroots Democracy’ has been building respect for procedural democracy. While these steps are limited, and subsumed in the notion of a single-party state, they are edging towards a more democratic political process.

Administrative decentralisation is driven fundamentally by a need for greater efficiency; it is ‘broadly defined as the transfer of responsibilities to lower administrative levels at the discretion of upper levels in order to facilitate more effective implementation’ (Fritzen, 2006). In Viet Nam, much of this grew out of the ‘fence breaking’ that surrounded *Doi Moi* (Malesky, 2004; Fritzen, 2006). Provinces throughout the country took initiative on policies ranging from land reform, to home sales, to administrative code (Malesky, 2004). This experimentation resulted in a substantial increase in provincial authority, but did little to mitigate the already disadvantaged position of poorer provinces.

Fiscal decentralisation refers to the ability of sub-national governments to raise and spend a growing share of the state budget. Almost half of all budget expenditures are channelled through local governments (Martinez-Vazquez and Gomez, 2006; Painter, 2008), and provinces are given block-grants to spend as they will, necessary given the increasing devolution of service delivery. However, sub-national governments still have no capacity to create or alter taxes. This has critical implications for whether services at the local level become regressively funded (Nguyen-Hoang, 2008; Beresford, 2008; Fritzen, 2006; World Bank, 2005). Furthermore, lower level budgets can be altered at the sole discretion of higher levels of government – meaning that even decentralised budgets remain remarkably centralised (UNDP, 2010; Vo, 2009; Martinez-Vazquez and Gomes, 2006).

reduction and social protection instruments. There is, however, a considerable disconnect between these policy frameworks and their implementation at the provincial, district and commune levels. Drawing on 32 key informant interviews and four participatory workshops with subnational officials, our research identified a number of key challenges that need to be reflected and addressed in social protection strategy documents and their roll out. We discuss these here, clustered according to the three Is as follows:

Institutions

First, although Viet Nam has seen significant political decentralisation in recent years (Box 1), it is still limited. Thayer notes that ‘pressures from below could prompt some Party elites to initiate further political change’ in coming years, but that Viet Nam still remains a primarily ‘top down’, mono-organisational political system for the foreseeable future (2009:22). Diversification of authority in key decision-making processes remains limited, and although civil society is expanding at the community level, government-affiliated mass organisations remain dominant players, especially in terms of supporting service delivery (Fford, 2011).

While a strong state has clearly played an important role in shaping rapid poverty reduction in recent years (e.g. CPRC, 2009), limited political decentralisation constrains the capacity of programme implementers to effectively tailor programmes to address locale-specific vulnerabilities. As the People's Committee Vice Chair of the Co To commune in An Giang noted: ‘*The central government has defined the criteria of ‘poor’ and ‘near poor’ households, we only follow.*’ While key informants recognise that this top-down approach is, in part, driven by a recognition of the relatively weak capacities of lower governance structures (especially at the commune level) and a desire to meet ambitious poverty reduction targets, more recent capacity improvements do not appear to have been met with corresponding increases in the scope for decision-making.

These constraints are, in turn, compounded by limited fiscal decentralisation and budget autonomy.

‘In terms of gender equality, we have considerable and varied programming needs whereas the scope of central government planning is much more limited. If we were to get a block grant, we could take the initiative and balance competing priorities better.’ (Vice-head of Social Division, Department of Planning and Investment [DPI], An Giang).

A second key institutional challenge concerns limited coordination mechanisms between government agencies. Social protection and gender equality are, in essence, cross-cutting policy issues, which makes inter-sectoral coordination especially important. In practice, however, despite clear guidance in the form of Decree 70./2008 on the responsibility of the Provincial People's Committees to integrate gender into local socio-economic development strategy design and implementation, government agencies engaged in social protection programming remain highly siloed. Underpinning this problem is the fact that the Ministry of Planning and Investment has considerable financial and, by extension, decision-making clout, while actual expertise in the area of social protection lies with the considerably weaker Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs.

Greater investments in effective coordination are further undermined by limited human and budget resources for social protection programming, highlighted by two key informant comments:

'My main challenge is overwork and loss of concentration... If I had time, I would study more [to familiarise myself with] gender equality targets and consider how I could promote these. But as it is, I only deal with such targets when I am asked to, I can't be active.' (Head of the Child Care Division, Department of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs [DOLISA], An Giang)

'We have requested the government to increase support for communal-level programme staff several times but haven't got the response. Therefore, poverty reduction staff often quit their jobs. As a result, poverty reduction work is not implemented continuously.' (Vice-head of Social Division, DPI, An Giang).

Capacity strengthening initiatives to support the integration of gender – and its intersection with the vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities – into social protection programming are also of poor quality. What urgently needed, existing initiatives tend to be tokenistic and generic rather than tailored to specific policy needs:

'Our cadres don't know how to include gender in poverty reduction plan. For me at the moment for example, it is difficult to get information about gender inequality and gender bias or how to identify gender inequality and gender bias in a certain case. Training is needed, so that we know how to identify gender inequality and gender bias and how to mainstream gender.' (Head of the Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

As highlighted by the recent evaluation by the UN Joint Programme on Gender Equality on efforts to support capacity strengthening to implement gender equality legislation, this is a complex task that requires significant resourcing. It will require a strong strategy, shared vision and long-term action plan (estimates suggest that it will need at least 10-15 years).³

The challenges are even more complex and multi-layered when it comes to addressing the specific vulnerabilities of ethnic minority women who often remain isolated from income-generating and public decision-making opportunities as a result of linguistic and cultural barriers. And indeed even when such barriers are recognised by policy actors, they are often addressed in a top-down way as the following quote highlights:

'Training is needed for almost all aspects so that the officers can have skills and solutions to organise their work. (...) At least they must know the usage, custom and language of ethnic minority communities. With these skills, they can make the local people understand clearer and faster....[Women] (H'mong) are disadvantaged because they can't speak Vietnamese. They can't address their needs (at the meetings) and have to lean on the local officials.' (Chair of the People's Committee, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

These issues are compounded by broader governance and public administration capacity deficits, highlighted by citizen responses in the 2010 *Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index* (PAPI). The PAPI identifies ongoing gaps in transparency, vertical accountability, and public service delivery, with many Vietnamese citizens still unaware, for instance, of community accountability mechanisms such as People's Inspection Boards (PIB) and Community Investment Supervision Boards (CISB) (UNDP et al., 2010).

Interests

A second set of political economy challenges relates to the interests and incentive structures of key actors. Perhaps of most concern is the, at best, mixed level of commitment to the promotion of gender-sensitive social protection among political leaders. Some key informants noted some improvement in at least acknowledging the role of gender in shaping development outcomes as reflected in more gender-disaggregated development targets. However, they also emphasised that many leaders have limited gender awareness and still more limited access to gender expertise.

‘The first difficulty is the awareness of the leader. In Viet Nam the leader decides everything. If he doesn’t agree, all the stuff of mainstreaming or implementation will never succeed. Let’s change the awareness of the leader and let him know the key issues.’ (Head of Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

‘Gender issues should be strengthened in state management. Specialists should help the Provincial People’s Committee and the DOLISA in proposing gender policies in state management or put gender policies into life.’ (Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs Vice-Director, Ha Giang).

These limitations are reinforced by the generally hierarchical nature of both formal and informal politics in Viet Nam. Despite the rapid growth of Vietnamese civil society, the country’s political system remains largely dominated by the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). As Gainsborough (2006) notes: ‘The idea of an oppositional sphere simply does not fit with the philosophical underpinnings in which the Communist Party of Vietnam is rooted and still draws... Given Vietnam’s extensive engagement with the outside world over the last twenty years, it is testament to the deep-rooted nature of such ideas that they have remained largely unchanged [since *Doi Moi*].’ (37).

Limited interest in tackling gender inequalities is further perpetuated by a general perception that ‘women’s issues’ are dealt with by the Women’s Union and are not, therefore, the professional responsibility of other government agencies. In order to address this quasi-ghettoisation of gender issues, key informants emphasised the importance of clear, detailed and tailored guidance at all levels – beyond top-line national legislation and policies.

‘Gender equality needs to be inserted into every poverty reduction programs and every national target programme.’ (Vice-Director, Department of Ethnic Minority Affairs [DEMA], Ha Giang).

In particular, there is some anxiety about the achievability of gender equality targets and a real concern that the mainstreaming of gender should be complemented by the construction of concrete and feasible performance targets:

‘The social economic development report only mentions “pay attention to [gender equality],” without any specific targets for evaluation. It is only a formality. It is impossible to evaluate or punish

anyone for failure to achieve.... I think that guidance should be concrete.’ (Head of the Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

Part of the challenge is to tease out and learn lessons from the perhaps more effective experience of programme implementation in areas with clear goals involving women’s ‘practical gender needs’ (to borrow Molyneux’s 1985 terminology), such as those undertaken by the Women’s Union, including micro-credit, vocational training and household sanitation and nutrition improvements. In this case, not only are the programme goals aligned with the Women’s Union’s institutional remit, but development projects also help to mobilise members by meeting their practical needs, thereby raising the profile and prestige of the Women’s Union within the broader political system (Deputy Chairwoman, Vietnam Women’s Union, 2009 interview, cited in Jones and Tran, 2010).

However, this neat alignment of institutional interests is much less evident in the case of poverty reduction and social protection programming where gender equality-related activities are often time- and energy-intensive and seen as secondary to sector-specific goals, rarely appreciated by senior managers (Jones and Tran, 2010). Addressing this disconnect requires implementation guidelines from the central government, twinned with grassroots monitoring mechanisms, and backed by specific budget lines for gender activities within poverty reduction programmes. In addition, sub-national leaders need to be persuaded of the close relationship between tackling gender inequalities and achieving socio-economic development gains. This is where ideas come to the fore.

Ideas

The third set of challenges for a political economy approach relates to the dominant set of discourses or ideas that underpin policy debates about vulnerability, risk and social protection, and the role of the state in addressing these. Unpacking and engaging with such ideas—which are typically multiple and shaped by specific sectoral and disciplinary perspectives—is critical if social protection policies and programmes are to address the economic and social vulnerabilities and risks experienced by men and women, boys and girls in an effective and sustainable way.

In the case of our focus on gender and social protection, there seems to be a general openness about the interlinked nature of gender equality and sustainable development.

'Due attention must be paid to gender quality because all activities must have the participation of both men and women so they will last for long time. If an activity is attended by either men or women, it is decided by just a half of world. [When] both men and women participate we can promote equality. (...) "[If] we wanted to [hold] a meeting attended by local people, for instance, we should invite 20 people including 10 men and 10 women so that we can have ideas from both sexes. So for example, men may want to get loans for doing business, such as purchasing a motorbike and become a motorbike taxi but women may have different needs, such as raising domestic animals.' (Commune Poverty Reduction Officer, Lao Va Chai, Ha Giang).

However, our key informant interviews suggest that this top-line support may be undermined by a relatively common misperception: that addressing gender inequalities leads to gender bias and even the neglect of other vulnerable social groups:

'If [our programming approach were] disaggregated, we would only care for women not men or care for children not elderly. In the health care sector, men and women, old and young are equal. If it is disaggregated, the women's union only cares for women. The province has a board specialising in care for women so we won't do it to avoid overlapping, waste of time and ineffectiveness. For health care, all patients should be given attention.' (Department of Health Officer, An Giang).

Widespread concerns – including among officials from the Departments of Social Affairs (DOLISA) and Ethnic Affairs (DEMA) – that state support fosters dependency among the poor pose further obstacles to substantial investments in social protection.

'[P]roviding the poor with a subsidy is like giving them a fish. After they ate, they would have nothing. Material support might make the poor become dependent and make poverty reduction activities become more difficult. It discourages those who try their best. Hardworking people don't have any support while lazy people do. So, the fish-like subsidy should be removed. A growing trend involves showing the poor how to do things. Now, officers can come and instruct them in details.' (Vice-Director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

'Many people want to join the poor list in order to have support... In fact, it is impossible to hasten the process of poverty reduction and hunger elimination. The improvement of educa-

tion standards may help... The system of policies always has two sides and what we should do is to enhance the positive side and restrain the negative side.' (Vice-Director, DOLISA, Ha Giang),

'The People's Committee thinks that we shouldn't pay them an allowance. If the programme pays them once, then all participants in the future will ask for money. The scenario should be avoided. Let people understand that they learn for knowledge, not for money.' (Vice-Chair of Co To People's Committee, An Giang).

Given the strength of these attitudes about the 'deserving poor' and the role of the state in addressing poverty, it is worth reflecting on how they intersect with broader ideas in the *Doi Moi* era about appropriate gender roles. Werner (2002), for instance, notes that the *Doi Moi* transformation has been highly gendered. In contrast to the idealised 'socialist woman' and 'socialist man' during the War of Resistance, the *Doi Moi* approach has been premised on a conceptualisation of the household as the primary economic unit with the main role of household members being to contribute to familial prosperity and, in turn, to broader national development. The development of the household economy has in turn been underpinned by an emphasis on the 'greater and more efficient utilisation of women's labour' both in terms of production and reproduction (Werner, 2002, pg 33), twinned with a gendered division of labour whereby men are assumed to be the heads of households and women are expected to sacrifice their individual interests in the interests of family advancement. Indeed, in the 2006 national Family Survey, most respondents equated family headship—typically male—with effective leadership: household heads 'act responsible and as an example' (89.1%) and 'are able to make decisions' (78.5%).

The same survey found that decision-making patterns within the family are highly gender-segregated. Wives tend to make decisions on daily routine life-related expenditures involving small amounts of money while husbands tend to make decisions about more major things, including larger expenses such as buying or repairing the house or land, purchasing expensive household goods and taking out loans (MOCST, GSO, IFGS and UNICEF, 2008). In the context of a return to more traditional gender roles under *Doi Moi* and the simultaneous shrinking of the state from public sphere provision, this suggests that gendered poverty and vulnerability is not seen as a core concern of the state but as a normal part of 'modern family' life (Werner, 2002:4).⁴

Conclusions and policy and practice implications

Overall our analysis suggests that Viet Nam's national social protection system plays, at best, a limited role in addressing gendered risks and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, key strategy and policy frameworks are in place, including the Gender Equality Law, the new National Targeted Programme on Poverty Reduction, Resolution No 80/NQ-CP on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2011-2020) and a new master Plan on Social Protection. Together, these have considerable potential to promote more gender-sensitive social protection interventions. On the other hand, however, the political economy dynamics of decentralised policy and programme implementation need to be tackled urgently and systematically if scarce resources are to be harnessed effectively for the well-being of all citizens.

Action needs to be informed by an understanding of the institutional blockages, actor interests and incentive structures, as well as the political cultural ideas underpinning current approaches to poverty reduction and social protection, and the ways in which gender power relations permeate each of these domains. Our findings therefore point to the importance of the following policy and practice implications:

1. Given the multiple national institutional actors involved in social protection, **promote strong leadership and improved coordination mechanisms, including among those involved in the roll-out of gender equality legislation.** Here it will be critical for government agencies and development partners to discuss feasible options as the new Master Plan on Social Protection is rolled out. Experience to date indicates that achieving a more joined up approach will require no less than supra-ministerial leadership, potentially at the Deputy Prime Minister level. This is especially the case in light of on-going tensions and differing institutional motivations among key ministries involved in these areas. It is also important given the inadequate results of Decree 70./2008 on responsibilities for the integration of gender into subnational socio-economic development plans and programmes.

A similar focus on strategic, streamlined and well-resourced gender capacity strengthening support on the part of the UN and other development partners is needed, in turn, to complement such mechanisms.⁵ Here it would be useful to build on the work of the Gender

Action Partnership, a quadripartite policy forum on gender supported by the Joint Programme on Gender Equality.

2. **Foster more decentralised models of social protection programming and budgeting processes,** with adequate feedback loops from the grassroots level on key vulnerabilities and demands for support, to more effectively tailor social protection interventions to the most vulnerable. Given their community reach and relevant institutional goals, the Women's Union could be mandated to play a larger role in vulnerability assessments and programme roll out, but its involvement would need adequate funding and careful design to promote inter-sectoral partnerships rather than reinforcing existing siloed ways of working.
3. **Prioritise investment in improved quantity and quality of human resources deployed to tackle poverty and vulnerability, including a focus on regular, adequately tailored and sufficiently detailed capacity strengthening on gender equity issues for staff at all levels** (from central government to the commune level). Given the growing number of gender equality-focused civil society organisations, partnerships with them could be explored to better harness existing gender expertise in the development and roll out of more institutionalised and carefully sequenced capacity strengthening interventions. Particular attention should also be paid to supporting capacity development for officials and programme implementers involved in tackling the intersection between gender and ethnicity-related vulnerabilities – an area that remains under-resourced.
4. **Support the development of clear and tailored implementation directives and guidelines** at all levels. This should include working towards the development of corresponding and achievable performance targets for staff in relevant departments so as to promote the long-term institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming within social protection strategies and programming.
5. **Strengthen information management, monitoring and evaluation systems** as well as the development of gender-sensitive indicators to identify problem areas, especially at the provincial, district and commune levels. Here, the new national system of gender indicators being developed by the General Statistics Office (GSO) and issued by the Prime Minister Decision No. 56/2011/QĐ-TTg is a welcome step. This initiative should be supported by carefully tailored capacity building support for the GSO so that it can develop appropriate instruments and related data analysis plans to capture the way in

which gender affects the experience of poverty and vulnerability, as well as access to and outcomes of social protection programming. Data collection and reporting approaches could be further strengthened by the introduction and adaptation of social audit methodologies that have been piloted recently by the Ministry of Planning and Investment and UNICEF to promote adequate citizen feedback mechanisms.

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Endnotes

1. Epprecht et al. (2009) found that, although geographic remoteness accounts for a great deal of minority vulnerability, ethnicity accounts for even more. Language barriers are certainly key to this, but factors such as age of household head (five years lower for ethnic minority families), access to education (only four in five primary-aged minority children are enrolled in school (UNICEF and SRVN, 2010) and a greater dependency burden (owing to larger family size) are also important (Imai and Gaiha, 2007).
2. Government Report No 63/BC-CP on Gender Equality, 2009, and the Document of National Programme on Gender Equality, 2011
3. See <http://www.mdgfund.org/sites/default/files/Vietnam%20-%20Gender%20-%20Mid-term%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf>
4. Werner (2002) notes that this normalisation process is manifested in ubiquitous public billboards depicting the nuclear family of Husband, Wife, Son, Daughter in service of the nation.
5. See: <http://www.mdgfund.org/sites/default/files/Vietnam%20-%20Gender%20-%20Improvement%20Plan.pdf>

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