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Vietnam, Factor 15: Human Rights

### **Vietnam: Empowering the Suppressed Population in Order to Eradicate Poverty**

In a society as developed as ours, we still face many social problems. An important problem we face is gender inequality. This problem, however, is not unique to the United States and the Western World. Gender inequality can be found across the globe. While developed countries such as the United States are taking efforts to close the gender gap, the situation is much more dire in other parts of the world. The countries that are not helping women are the countries with the most economic and social problems, which can be linked to the fact that they aren't helping women in the agricultural and economic fields. An example of a country that would benefit from helping their female population is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Women in Vietnam are treated poorly due to the traditional views on their set roles in society. Women, however, are the most important asset of Vietnam's agricultural sector, making up 68 percent of those employed (FAO). They feed the population of Vietnam yet they are undervalued, leaving a profound impact on the agricultural market. Women are vital to Vietnam's economic system, and if their role in society was seen as important as it truly is, many of the barriers that the agricultural sector faces would be resolved. The obstacles that prohibit Vietnam from becoming food secure include the rising of sea levels affecting rice production, toxins in the water because of fertilizers, and an underdeveloped economy. These issues are also heightened by other social problems, including ethnic problems and social inequality for minorities. These factors attribute to food insecurity in 9 percent of the population (World Bank). Vietnam can achieve food security if they make efforts as a society to achieve social equality, which would allow women and minorities to become more valued and more secure in their growing roles in society. Women are an important asset of Vietnam's stability and growth yet Vietnam has recently been chastised by the United Nations for discriminatory gender bias displayed in education, which is a major reason why women are stuck in their given social roles. Women are viewed as inferior, therefore they are expected to fully take care of the children and the home, even if they work each day. This attitude is due to the Confucian value system, which teaches women to be obedient to men and value men above themselves. Ethnic minorities in Vietnam also face similar problems. They do not have equal access to education and healthcare, and thus they make-up the majority of the Vietnamese citizens in poverty (World Bank). Vietnam's people, men and women, must begin to view and treat Vietnamese citizens as equals and prioritize programs that will help resolve the problems that Vietnam has.

Vietnam borders China from the north, Laos and Cambodia in the West, and the Pacific Ocean to the East. Vietnam has a population of 90.73 million of which 68 percent of the population live in rural areas and 35 percent of their land is used for farming. Vietnam is one of most populated countries in South Asia though the population density is decreasing. Rural areas, on average, have larger families compared to urban areas, especially in the Central Highlands and northwest Vietnam (PRB). Having a large family leads to a lack of stability because a modest amount of resources is intended to support the whole family. Due to this cycle, minority women and indigenous women more commonly suffer from poverty, ill health, and tend to live in a geographical location that makes it harder to access services (OMCT). Rural Vietnam has an estimated population of 608,500 people (Thin). Specifically within the rural areas such as the Central Highlands, infant mortality rates are high because it is harder for medical staff to access families in an immediate time frame due to the rough terrain (PRB). Healthcare is much harder to access in rural areas because the majority of doctors prefer to live in urban areas (Shobert). Vietnam has increased spending on health care by \$90 billion because of the overpopulation in urban hospitals and lack of advanced services in rural areas. Though this amount still only covers about 30 percent of the population (Just Landed). Most Vietnamese people must pay for their own health care services, thus

stretching their budgets further. Vietnam has set a goal as a country to cover every citizen with basic health services to help lessen the gap between service quality in rural and urban Vietnam (Just Landed).

Vietnamese children living in rural areas do not only face major barriers in health services but they also have many problems accessing a quality education. Vietnam's literacy rate is 92.5 percent, which lead to the number of college and university students to nearly double from 2003 to 2008 (Breu et al.). But these percentages do not account for the quality of the education. Vietnam's countryside contains 90 percent of the poorest Vietnamese people (ChildFund). These families in rural areas do worse on educational tests than urban children (Young Lives). There are three factors that attribute to this. The first factor is that there is discrepancies between what type of students are being taught in the countryside. Ethnic minority children do not comprehend the material as well as Kinh (the majority ethnicity) because they do not have the economic stability at home that enables them to focus more on school (Young Lives). The second factor is the quality of education. More children in urban areas have tutors and attend private schools, leading to higher scores on educational tests. The third factor is that the Vietnamese government does not invest enough time into reforming Vietnam's educational system. Vietnam's teachers focus more on exam scores than a diverse educational system. This negatively impacts the children because their education is not personalized to their abilities, and therefore many rural children emphasize work over their education.

In rural Vietnam, the foundation of the people's diet is rice. A Vietnamese diet lacks balance, with more rice than protein and green vegetables (FAO). A Vietnamese citizen suffers from many deficiencies in their diet, including deficient iron, folate, vitamin A, and zinc levels (Nguyen et al.). Healthy food shortages exist and unfortunately are substituted by rice, which is grown in abundance (FAO). This leads to inadequate diets, among the poor especially (Nguyen et al.).

Agriculture employs 60 percent of the work force (FAO). Under the Vietnamese constitution, all of the land is owned by the people, with the state looking over the land. Therefore, individuals and corporations cannot own land but they can obtain the rights to use the land (Marsh et al.). There are over eleven million farms across Vietnam (Marsh et al.). The average size of a farm is .2 hectares per capita (World Bank). This farm size is far below the average in South Asia, which is a farm of 1.4 hectares (Global Agriculture). The Mekong River Delta, known as the "rice bowl", produces half of the country's rice (Union of Concerned Scientists). The river delta helps the farmers irrigate their crops. Due to the small farm size for each family, however, a farmer's income remains low, forcing them to also work in non-farm sectors as well (FAO). This problem leads to long term problems, such as time taken away from education in order to provide more money to support the family and less money for services such as healthcare.

Despite the large amount of farms in Vietnam, agricultural products only amount for 2.19 percent of all exports (OEC). The Vietnamese government has tried to help its people by improving the agricultural market though the economic policy reforms known as Doi Moi. Doi Moi has helped Vietnam become a country of lower-middle income through land reforms, electricity reforms, and other governmental policies (Bazilian and FAO). It helped liberalize the economy, allowing more social classes to become a part of Vietnam's economy. But Doi Moi has also increased human rights abuses against women because it has mobilized their place in society and restricted their family size (OMCT and Gender and Security). The social program has also left ethnic minorities vulnerable, with many staying in poverty despite the economic reforms (World Bank). The Vietnamese government has also made aims to further develop the agriculture, fishing, and forestry industries with the Viet Nam Socio-Economic Development Strategy that will last until 2019. It aims to create policy that cater to vulnerable and poor social groups of Vietnam, especially Vietnamese women of indigenous cultures. One reform of the agricultural sector has been utilizing improved fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation systems (FAO). These systems, however, have been overused and have resulted in toxic residues, leading to increased resistance in diseases, hurting the livestock sector and creating pollution (FAO).

Agricultural practices have been revised in recent years to increase the crop yield for farmers in Vietnam. The main farming practice is organic farming, which includes rice varieties in cropping seasons (Xuan, 2005). Another practice that some farmers in Vietnam are a part of is the World Bank Vietnam Agriculture Competitiveness Project. This has allowed farmers to only focus on one crop such as flowers, coffee, or cashews, instead of switching to farming a different crop because of its market value. This project has promoted good farming techniques. Most importantly, it has given Vietnamese farmers opportunities to attend training sessions (World Bank). This has allowed a farmer's income to increase from a range of 5-20 percent because of the contract with companies (World Bank). Another example of innovative farming in Vietnam is the System of Rice Intensification (SRI). "SRI are appropriate agricultural practices for hand-planted rice that increase yields while using less seeds, water, and fertilizers" (Oxfam). It reduces the plant's competition for light, water, and nutrients and creates healthier rice crops (Seang). Over a million Vietnamese farmers are implementing SRI practices because of the benefits of increased yields and a higher income (Seang).

Despite new, innovative farming techniques, there are still many barriers for Vietnamese farmers. These barriers are resulting in a Vietnamese population that is food insecure. Poverty and food insecurity primarily impact the ethnic populations that live in rural areas. Over 50 percent of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam are in poverty (Vietnam Development report). These people primarily live in rural Vietnam and work in the agricultural field. They are the main population facing these problems but they also are the best citizens to resolve these barriers. The first barrier occurs in the Mekong Delta. Sea levels are rising there due to carbon emissions, resulting in flooding near the delta. Sea levels could rise to an estimated 23 inches, which will result in economic losses worth an estimated \$17 billion (Union of Concerned Scientists).

The second barrier towards agricultural production is lasting toxins in the water because of the rising sea levels. Currently, there is no water treatment system in place, resulting in 80 percent of the diseases in Vietnam being caused by polluted water (Vufo-Ngo). "Vietnam has 180 processing and industrial zones, 12,259 healthcare facilities, 72,012 enterprises, which discharge hundreds of untreated wastewater cubic meters into its rivers everyday" (Vufo-Ngo). This dire problem has the potential to displace 11 percent of Vietnam's people (World Bank). Currently, the water pollution is impacting the people's health, and is worsening the quality of life in Vietnam.

The third barrier is food poisoning from the chemicals used in fertilizers. "Food safety in Vietnam is a significant issue, resulting in an estimated 3 million cases of food poisoning a year" (Breu et al.). Many of these cases occur from chemical residue on plants. Housewives try to be selective when choosing their vegetables from the markets, but safe products are limited in quantity despite that they are in high demand (Tam). Currently, Vietnam is facing a drought in the Mekong Delta, causing less crop output, a rise in salt levels, and detrimentally impacting the economy (Boudreau). Vietnam's economy in comparison to other South Asian countries is underdeveloped. The economic markets are focusing on output instead of the quality of the product. Vietnam, in order to have more nutritious food products, must increase competition within domestic and international economic relationships (World Bank). The country needs to diversify their labor force in order to create a path towards an economic transition that focuses more on the needs of the consumers. These needs include alternatives to the current agricultural practices, in order to produce healthier products.

The women and minorities of rural Vietnam have a major role in resolving the barriers presented today. Through the following three solutions, suppressed Vietnamese citizens will have the opportunity to resolve agricultural problems, educational problems, and to help lessen poverty. These solutions will help improve the quality of life in rural Vietnam for all families.

Gender equality is a goal of the Vietnamese government. Yet, the only way to reach true equality is to remove the stigma in Vietnam's society that women are of less worth than men. Women need to be empowered to rise up and take control of their lives. This will take time and will be a gradual change. The first solution to help begin removing the stigma is by giving rural girls and women job training and further education on skills such as farming, banking, and necessary skill sets. If females have certain skills that make them unique in the job market, then their potential of employment will increase. This training will have to be done slowly, and in groups of women because many women do not have the excess time to take part in this training. It will have to be at times that do not interfere with farming and will allow women to maintain what stability they have, meaning that the training cannot take away from their family's current income. When more women are working, they are better able to benefit their family by providing additional income. This training can be done through the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), a regional union that has over thirteen million members (UN). The VWU is organized through central, provincial, district, and commune levels which helps increase the stability and accommodation level of this well-developed organization (Smith and Newman). Currently, the Vietnamese Women's Union is trying to initiate change through campaigns that promote a women's equal place in the workplace, a change in the housework dynamic for families, and more opportunities in leadership roles (World Bank). This is a grassroots campaign that is beginning to expand to the national level with the help of UN Women and World Bank. Another initiative that the Women's Union has begun is teaching men and boys the value of women in society, in order to remove the stigma women currently face.

The second solution that I recommend today is through education. Right now, the educational system of Vietnam has an outdated curriculum that reinforces gender roles. The educational system needs to have increased funding on a national level in order for schools, rural and urban, to be able to create the best curriculum for the region. This will help women and minorities have more opportunities outside of the agricultural field. "In 2007, only 10.7 percent of the rural labor force has been provided with technical training. Only 8.8 percent rural women had technical education compared to 12.6 percent of rural men" (GSO). A continuance of education, as found in other Asian countries, results in more modernization within the country. This will lead to students of both genders challenging the traditional value system (Gao et al.). The majority of children in rural areas attend a few years of school and then are forced to drop out because of their inability to comprehend the material or because their family needs them to work to earn money. It would be helpful for these children if school hours complimented the farming seasons, thus making school more flexible and accessible for rural students. If rural children were taught farming techniques and other necessary skills for their region along with academia, then school will be seen as more valuable. It will also give these children options for employment outside of their family farm because they will still be learning the needed skills for jobs outside of the agricultural sector. An educational system made for the regions, not the nation, will help children stay in school longer. This reformed educational system will enable rural families to earn higher wages in nonagricultural jobs with these improved skills, providing them with increased security and income. A long term benefit would be that more women would become educated, resulting in a diversity of minds within the workforce that is not apparent in rural Vietnam. The educational system would also be creating an environment that values women more because of their training, which will translate into the future families of rural Vietnam.

The third solution will resolve multiple agricultural problems. Women, because they are the majority of Vietnamese citizens employed in the agricultural sector, will have the ability to take the lead in this new era of sustainable farming. Women need to be empowered and be part of the solution to food insecurity because if women become a vital necessity to the agricultural market, such as being trained in the latest technology, then they will be valuable in the workforce. This will result in more families with a stable food supply and income because of the female. One way to do this is through the Sustainable Agricultural Intensification (SAI) program. Sustainable Agricultural Intensification is a popular, global solution that has been utilized in rural populations of third world countries that face food insecurity. This clean-energy solution will create more nutrient crops. It has helped rural farmers adapt to climate change by providing

the skills and tools to farm more successfully in new environments. This adaptation process includes teaching farmers how to use new technologies as well as providing genetic seeds, new markets, and an infrastructure that is funded through insurance providers, service providers, training providers, and input providers (SAI). SAI will limit the amount of pesticides and fertilizers, greatly improving the water supply of Vietnam. This will help resolve the current problems Vietnam is facing regarding toxins in the water from the chemicals in fertilizers. This new agricultural method can be implemented at the community level because the providers of these services can be local companies, and can be expanded through the contract farming program. Currently, non-profit organizations such as Oxfam have promoted SAI by working with the Vietnamese government to expand this Golden Rice awarded program (Oxfam America). Women and minorities should be given priority for these contracts to increase their social mobility and their income because they would be distributing the nutritious crops that consumers desire. This new leadership capability will give them more respect and a valuable new role in society. The solution should be tested in the Mekong River Delta and then expanded throughout Vietnam if SAI is successful there.

If women and minorities were equipped to become more involved in the job market in Vietnam, then food security will increase. Rural Vietnam faces many problems, including health and nutritional barriers, climate change barriers, and educational barriers. The women and minority citizens of Vietnam, due to the culture of Vietnam, are discriminated against. This gives them less educational opportunities resulting in less employment possibilities. Gender discrimination needs to be combatted by all citizens and the government of Vietnam to help eradicate poverty and begin to better the livelihoods of the rural population of Vietnam. When gender discrimination begins to be reversed through educational methods by teaching men and boys the value of women, as previously done in several parts of urban Vietnam by the Vietnamese Women's Union, women will become more valued. If this is done across Vietnam, particularly in the areas where the indigenous women and minorities live, women will be allowed to integrate further into the economy. The next solution involves educating children and women to increase their value in the economy. This can be done regionally with job training and a better educational system that focuses on unique skills that will make them more valuable in the job market. The final recommendation is SAI, an agricultural solution that utilizes genetic crops and training funded by regional corporations and the government. These recommended solutions will help eradicate poverty in rural Vietnam and give the citizens a more nutritional diet, helping eliminate deficiencies. With these recommended solutions, the discriminated citizens of rural Vietnam will have more opportunities to get an education and a job that allows them to become more respected and valuable in their environment.

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