Rethinking gender equality from insider's point of view: case studies of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

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Introduction

Gender equality has been an important development goal of Viet Nam. Liberating women was one of the most important objectives of the Vietnamese revolution. The right to gender equality was affirmed in the first Constitution in 1946, and in 1980 Vietnam became the 6th country in the world to sign the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The State has legislated the Right to Gender Equality – this law officially took effect since 2006.

Gender inequality in Vietnam is considered universal problems not related to religion or ethnicity. However, according to *Vietnam Country Gender Assessment*, Vietnam has made good progress in improving gender equality, but one of the prominent issues is ethnic minority (EM) women and girls lag behind the majority Kinh and Chinese women. Gender inequality is considered root cause of poverty. Promotion of gender equality among EM groups and empowerment of EM women have long been seen as key to effective and sustainable poverty reduction.

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic country with 54 ethnic groups, officially classified by the government since 1979. The majority, Kinh (Vietnamese) ethnic group, accounts for 87% of national population. Other ethnic minority (EM) groups make up 13% of the total population, equal to more than 10 million people divided in 53 groups residing mainly in mountainous and highland areas (covering two thirds of national area) from the north to the south of the country. Ethnic groups are diverse in population. Populous groups including Tay, Thai, Muong, Chinese, Khmer, Nung are up to 1 million people each. Other groups like Brau, Roman, O-du have population of only 300 people each. Each EM group has its own rich and unique culture. The EM groups include patriarchal groups (Tay, Nung, Thai, Dao, H'Mong, etc.), matriarchies (E de, Bana, M'nong, Cham Ninh Thuan, etc.) and duarchies (Xo- dang, Brau, Xtieng, etc.). There are great differences among ethnic groups regarding their population, languages, location, cultural practices, customs, religions, livelihood activities economic integration, etc. Given this diversity, it will be impossible to generalize about gender relations within EM communities in Vietnam.

However, approaches to gender issues in EM areas in Vietnam are exhibited quite clearly through the discourse on gender inequality of EMs. Academic studies, the media, and development reports often portray EM women as victims of inequality, as undervalued, as having "a low status". The discourse on gender inequality among EM groups nowadays tends to present a one-way description and make a tragedy of the position of EM women: the women have lower status, they are the victims of domestic violence and an unfair division of labor, they have no rights and cannot make any decisions, they have few opportunities to access resources and markets and thus always sink into poverty. In other words, EM women are seen as disadvantaged, underprivileged people always in need of help. The World Bank, United Nations and other development organizations' discourse on poverty has established its own fulcrum by presenting "voicelessness" and "powerlessness" as the two main attributes of poor women, in addition to "vulnerability" (related to illness, material exhaustion, natural disaster, violence, etc.). On the one hand, these characterizations place EM women in an homogeneity, ignoring their diversity, dynamism and capacity for self-determination. On the other hand, they are produced through a gender analysis lens heavily influenced by outside (especially Western) perspectives of equality and human rights rather than the perspectives of EM people themselves.

Being fully aware of women's "low status" and gender inequality in the EM community in general, development programs in Vietnam have tended to try to create equality for women by giving them the chance to *participate,* to *receive the opportunity to access,* and to *improve incomes.* Reports by the Committee of Ethnic Minorities, UN organizations, and the World Bank (WB 2000/01, WB 2009) all show that the issue of gender inequality has been integrated into development programs for the purpose of eliminating or and reducing poverty. There have been hundreds of training sessions to spread gender knowledge and hundreds of development programs aiming for the goal of gender equality or integrating gender elements by both Vietnamese and international NGOs. Over the years, the Government of Vietnam has invested heavily in EM areas through countless poverty reduction programs. Women's Associations at all levels also have their own programs and activities (for instance, the Love and Shelter program) aimed at enhancing the standard of living and relative status and rights of women.

However, in reality, many studies show that even when the woman is the main breadwinner in a family, she still does not achieve "gender equality" as understood in its conventional sense (Berk 1985, UNESCO 2010). Micro-credit programs and preferential loans for women do not make them more powerful, but only increase the burden on them. The UNESCO study carried out in Sa Pa and Ky Son, Nghe An province, indicates that for H'Mong women, selling is only considered an "extension" of housework. One interview in the study reveals that Zao women, in spite of being the main income earners in their families, are still regarded as inferior to men, and no increase in their incomes can change this.

Thus, it seems that solutions to the current problems of gender inequality must involve more than just increased incomes and improved economic conditions. Before we can develop appropriate strategies and policies aimed at solving the problem of gender inequality in EM areas, we must first explore EM people's own thoughts on gender relations in the context of ethnic culture. That's why we decided to do research on this issue.

Research fieldwork on case studies of ethnic minorities in VN

Our research takes an anthropological approach to the study of gender issues in EM areas. The most fundamental method of anthropology is *fieldwork* with skills such as *participant observation,* listening to *the people's points of view, needs and aspirations as they explain them* instead of using the perspective imposed from the outside. This approach also requires not treating EM people as passive beneficiaries of development programs but as *active agents* fully capable of self-determination.

Taking a multi-sited ethnographic approach, focusing on participant observation and listening to insiders' points of view, we conducted interviews in many different EM communities throughout 2011-2012.[1] Recognizing that EM perspectives on gender and gender relations need to be viewed from both sides, we conducted interviews with both men and women in the communities. Interviewees were selected randomly from various age groups (with the youngest being 17 and the oldest 65). The main research methods were semi-structured qualitative interviews, group discussions, and real life observation. Each interview lasted from 1 to 2 hours with questions exploring issues such as: What are the perceptions of EM men and women on gender equality, gender roles and gender standards? What problems does "gender inequality" present for EM culture? Is the position of EM women really as "inferior" as gender discourse portrays it to be? Can that be treated as the basis for empowerment efforts? Is the common approach to gender and gender inequality really relevant to EM social and cultural contexts? Without the opinions of EM people themselves on these issues, assessments of gender inequality among EM groups will only reflect the perspectives of outsiders, whose referential value system positioning men at the center

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[1] The communities include: Muong people (Lang Chanh, Thanh Hoa), H'Mong people (Ky Son, Nghe An), White Thai and Black Thai people (Que Phong and Ky Son, Nghe An), Red Dao people (Cho Moi, Bac Kan), Dao Ten and Dao Khau people (Sin Ho, Lai Chau), Kho-mu people (Ky Son, Nghe An), Lu people (Sin Ho, Lai Chau), and two matriarchal groups of Raglai people (Bac Ai, Ninh Thuan) and Mnong people (Lak district, Dak Lak).

leads to prejudice.

From three basic principles of anthropological approach, which are diversity, agency and insiders' view, this research formulate an analytical framework to evaluate EM women's empowerment in 3 aspects: I) Gender roles and division of labor; ii) Accessing resources and increasing income; iii) Participation and decision-making.
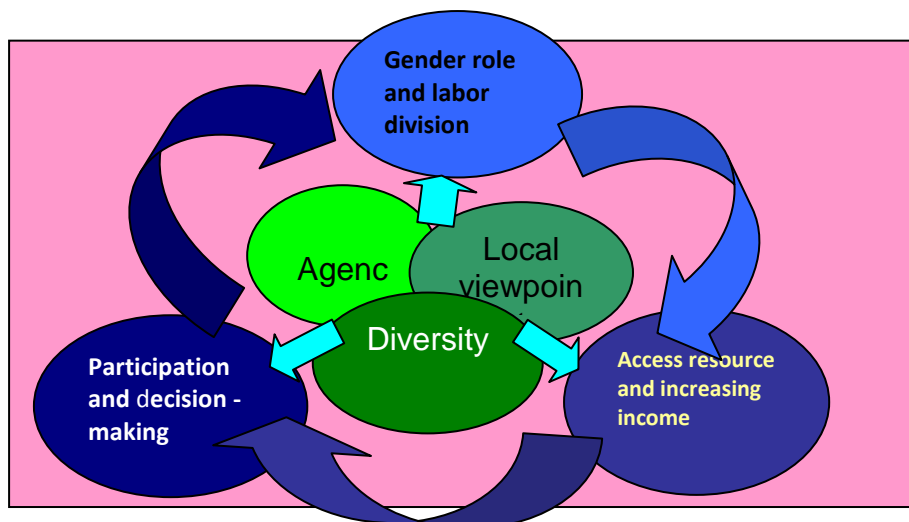
Research Findings:

Gender roles and division of labor

Different EM communities live in different cultural contexts, but we can easily see that the concept of "gender equality" is not endogenous to any of their cultures. To EM people, "equality" – a word quite alien to their values – does not necessarily imply that husband and wife have equal rights to make decisions or gain benefits, but is interpreted to mean that both members of a couple work hard and share the workload. In other words, for women, "being together" is more meaningful than "the right to make decisions" and "the right to gain benefits":

> "*Don't know what equality is. As husband and wife, we do everything together, discuss everything together*. (Zao ethnicity, female, 41 years old, Nong Thinh commune, Cho Moi district)

> *"Equality means that when they have guests, both husband and wife sit down to eat and drink wine with them"*. (Black Thai ethnicity, female, 25 years old, Ma Quai commune, Sin Ho)

> "*Equality means men and women are the same, work the same. If the wife is busy then she asks her husband to work together with her. When the husband brings guests back home, he asks the wife to prepare together with him. If it's a full meal then guests, husband and wife all sit and eat together*. (Lu ethnicity, female, 56 years old, female activist, Nam Tam, Sin Ho)

To an EM family, the issue of "who does what" implies sharing labor rather than dividing/distributing labor. Husbands and wives both support and depend on each other; each person does the work that suits him or her the most. Husbands believe they take on the responsibility of doing heavy housework so that their wives only have to do light chores. As a result, a husband can do little but must handle all of his family's big tasks, while his wife does many little things around the house. EM women consider this an obvious fact. If there exists

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recognition of women's burden, then it is regarded as common sense. EM women feel that they must accept it in order to achieve the goal of a harmonious family.

In order to explain why "being together" is so significant to EM people, it has to be placed in the context of EM people's livelihoods.

Most EM people reside in mountainous areas. Each community group usually ranges from a few dozen to a few hundred households. Although many ethnic groups usually live together in a region or a town, within a single village, people often belong to the same ethnic group, and in many cases they are from the same family clan. In a way, they live together in a *social network*, in which each individual is an intersection. People in the network are brought together by livelihood activities (assisting one another by rotation, according to mutual help procedure), and cultural and religious activities, which are often set by rules and regulations. Dry-crop livelihood activities in the mountainous areas and the paddy-field plantation activities of some lowland resident groups are all associated with nature and thus heavily dependent on the weather. Both dry-crop activities and paddy-field cultivation involve heavy work (hoeing, tilling, tree-lopping, etc.) and tedious tasks (pricking holes in the ground, transplanting rice seedlings, plucking up weeds, etc.), and also require intensive labor towards the end of the crop (the harvest season).

The majority of the EM groups we interviewed have a history of farming and/or settlement (either spontaneously or following State policies), and individuals and families are often closely associated with their clans. Factors such as poor farming conditions, limited land and forest, lack of capital, etc. have forced these communities to come together and depend on one another to survive. This mutual attachment and interdependence has helped them to gain, share and develop indigenous knowledge as well as experience in labor and production. Their history of settlement and the prejudices other ethnic groups often hold against them have also encouraged EM people to develop a psychology of closeness and interdependence. Their relationships exist in a continuous circle that cannot be broken. They are connected together by culture, society, migration and livelihood. Likewise, interaction between women and men within the family is a two- way interaction, an interdependence, with the men taking on all work considered "heavy" and "big" and the women doing things considered "light" and "tedious". Of course, definitions of heavy and light work depend on the perceptions of gender relations in each community.

Accessing resources and increasing income

A structural perspective of gender often posits that gender differences arise from differences in access to resources. According to this perspective, women have to do more housework to match their husbands' income, while the men do less housework because they earn higher incomes than women, and thus they have more power in the family.

However, our research has shown that there is no clear evidence for a relationship between poverty reduction and women's empowerment; inequality in housework labor remains unchanged. If the woman's income and work are considered to be small, or just a minor thing compared to those of other members of the family (for example, working and producing at home), then the income does not play a role in changing her position. There are even cases in which the woman makes more money than her husband, leading to conflicts and disagreements within the family, causing the woman to move to an even more inferior position. On the other hand, the ability to access productive resources and manage family economics is not compatible with the rights and status of women.

The fact that income increase does not necessarily change positions can be explained with several reasons. First of all, from the *perspective of traditional culture*, some ethnic minority groups (patriarchal groups) value men much more than women (for example, they send sons to school before daughters); married women do not get a share of their biological families' possessions (not even the dowry); women are expected to give birth to boys; married women are undervalued as all family assets belong to the husbands, and in the future to the sons; a woman's

virginity is still considered important (a woman's falling pregnant before she has married is a source of great shame for her parents); women do more work and are the main income earners of their families. Second, *if the idea of women earning money for the family is not a cultural expectation*, then their efforts not only do not change their status in the family, but also cause the men to feel aversion towards them. Third, *if a woman's income and work are considered to be small tasks, or minor work* compared to those of other family members (in regard to production at home as opposed to earning money outside), then the income does not play a role in changing her position

Participation and decision-making

The participatory role of women is very different from community to community. Some locations where we did research, women hadn't participated in any commune meeting at all. Yet we cannot look at the surface signs and conclude that it is a manifestation of gender inequality, because non-participation is not necessarily due to women's weakness or lack of rights. The inability of many EM women to speak the Kinh language (official national language) fluently, on the one hand, has discouraged their participation in public meetings and training courses, and on the other hand seems to have created opportunities for women to lighten some of their burdens other than housework.

In reality, after attending meetings, husbands often report back to their wives, so they can discuss matters and make decisions together. Besides women who want to participate in society more, there are also many women who are happy and satisfied with their current situations, where they do not have to attend public meetings but still get to be consulted, to discuss and to interfere. No matter where we asked the question "Who in your family gets to decide?", we almost always received the same answer: "Discussion." Following affection, harmony, and togetherness in family life, the matter of who makes decisions is only a minor priority for EM women and only the end result of a process of mutual consultation by which consensus is reached. In other words, "everything needs to be discussed" is the main principle of conduct; therefore, decision-making is actually just the appearance of consensus.

Empowerment – for whom?

The position of women cannot be viewed from a personal level but must be observed in relation to the community and prevailing gender standards. In both traditional society and contemporary society, even though patriarchal society is characterized as "look up to men, look down on women," in reality, no gender receives absolute admiration, and no gender is completely repressed. The traditional practices of EM community groups reveal that even in a patriarchal society, the women still have a certain role and position. Matriarchal and patriarchal systems merely express community perceptions of whether the men or the women play the most important role in continuing a family line (blood). The idea that men are cherished more in a patriarchal society or that women are preferred in a matriarchal society stems mainly from this concept.

Anthropological and sociological studies have shown that *context* plays a very significant role in gender relations in all societies, and the relationship between a man and a woman is not an inevitable and immutable natural phenomenon. Gender relations in EM communities are not fixed but have also experienced tremendous changes, along with the evolution of social life, the resettlement process, urbanization and the impact of mass media. According to EM women's own assessments, their lives have changed significantly. For example, in the past, due to the influence of traditional perspectives, boys were often prioritized in education and access to resources over girls. Nowadays, limiting girls' education to prioritize boys' education is no longer common. Mitigation of traditional ritual practices has also led to more open perceptions of the roles and positions of husband and wife.

As discussed above, the concept of "empowerment" for EM women reflects a discourse that characterizes EM women as a group of vulnerable, passive, inferior, dependent people with no

rights. In reality, studies show that EM women in many areas exhibit initiative and the capacity to make choices and decisions on their own. Women's capacity to make choices and decisions is reflected not only in the fact that many women dare to dispense with "common sense" to do and say things contrary to the expectations of the community, but also in the fact that they can be aware and self-conscious but still decide to follow "common sense" for the sake of harmony in the family. Interviewing EM women and understanding their cultural contexts, we come to see that it is not that the women do not have rights, but they *actively "empower"* the men to practice long-standing expected community value standards (for example, Lu women cannot/do not want to go to meetings but almost 100% of them get to discuss matters with the men; Dao women let their husbands keep the money if their husbands are nice and stay away from alcohol and gambling).

Discussion and conclusion

Our study indicates that workload sharing by husband and wife in order to co-exist and support the family and household in a context of scarce productive resources has become the main criterion for identification of a model husband and wife relationship in EM communities in Vietnam. By endeavoring to achieve and maintain this model, individual EM people express his or her personal consent to the common sense/standards of the community. However, although EM people do not have a concept of inequality and accept that they must behave in accordance with the rules of traditional culture, this does not mean justice for women. From a human rights perspective, women deserve to have the best opportunities for their own development. However, in contrast with Western societies where each human being exists with an individual status, Vietnamese EM society does not view a human being as an independent individual but as a component of a social network whose members are closely attached to and dependent on one another. Therefore, any change of personal awareness of an individual EM woman that is not accompanied by a corresponding change in the whole community and in that person's immediate relationships cannot lead to fundamental changes in EM gender relations. What we must do is loosen the social space through propaganda campaigns and awareness- raising programs in order to create a safe and friendly environment for women to express and practice their concerns.

Recent development programs targeting empowerment have tended to associate gender equality with economic factors, and *have not paid adequate attention to cultural aspects or ethnic factors.* Gender relations in EM communities are affected significantly by EM people's livelihoods, but we should not "economize" relationships and gender relations. Poor understanding of EM cultural norms and concepts of gender relations can make the achievements of development programs and poverty alleviation models burdensome for women, as well as cause EM women to be blamed for being weak, slow or lazy if the introduced models do not succeed. Cultural context plays just as important role in gender relations as financial factors. In addition to raising awareness of women, gender equality interventions need to work to eliminate prejudice against EM women by changing the beliefs and perspectives of EM men and EM communities (for example, by raising awareness of the value of housework). On the other hand, women's empowerment strategies should follow the findings of the assessment survey carried out in each community and take into account which practices are considered important for women and from which activities women are restricted in order to develop basic and fundamental intervention activities.

The roles and positions of EM women and men are *very diverse,* depending on family, community group and social context. In addition, EM economic life and gender relations are changing every day, although not quite as described in the discourse on EM people. In particular, the *self-determination* of EM women is exhibited in their selection, calculation and consideration of what they and their husbands should do and, more importantly, the purposes and goals of their actions in various situations. "Dramatizing" EM women can lead to one-sided assessments of their gender relations. The application of the concept of inequality should take into account the structural features of the local culture and society to gain a more flexible understanding in the context of EM culture. Similarly, we cannot apply a common gender analysis framework to all EM groups, but need to evaluate empowerment as it affects women's relationships with other women, their

families and their communities. On the other hand, we should develop a framework of *individual agency* by which the ideas and actions of individual women can be understood as they negotiate and develop their own relationships with family and community.

The diversity, variety and colorfulness of Vietnamese culture is a dynamic combination of diverse EM community cultures, including tremendous contributions from women, both those who preserve traditional culture and those who catch up on modern life in their own ways.