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Soldiers and housewives

Change and continuity in female gender roles in Vietnam

Working Paper by

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1. Introduction[1]

Vietnam and its people have faced dramatic social, political and economic changes since the middle of the last century: After being a French colony, the following independence wars and the reunification of North and South Vietnam under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), a socialist system with central planning was established. During this process, Vietnam had to face serious problems. Corruption, hyperinflation and widespread poverty forced the VCP to launch reforms – called *doi moi* (Renovation). This decision in 1986 led to "high GDP growth rates, rapid reduction in poverty [and] more political openness" (Beresford 2008: 221). Of course these processes did not have just positive effects and affected people, their relations and (collective) identities and social roles – also gender roles are concerned: "Viet Nam's high growth has been accompanied by increased gender inequality" (Packard 2006: IV).

This working paper is aiming at the relation between social changes and ruling gender relations, focussing on women. Section 2 of this paper presents the theoretical framework. The thesis I want to develop here is that gender identities are effects of discourses which are reproduced through power-mechanisms, stabilized trough constant iteration and are naturalized in the end. Section 3 describes the different historical and social influences, which have built different gender roles and relations. Section 4 specifies the current hegemonically defined roles for women in the post *doi moi* era. Section 5 concludes by forecasting emancipatory and progressive facilities to improve gender relations and establish more (gender) equality.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Biology is not destiny

The aspect of sex plays a distinguished role in everybody's normal course of life: What we wear, how we behave or look, which toilet we use – the existence of two different sexes seems to be a self-evident and doubtless fact. But what implications does this difference have for relations of power, speaking of oppression and violence? Moreover, is this binary classification that "natural"?

For social sciences, nothing is initially "natural". Everything is social but it is nevertheless interesting as to what applies as "normal". I will be viewing sex not as a given, but as a set of negotiations. A lot of research has been done about this topic. But especially the feminist theories from western countries offered the tools of trade in this field. The categories and buzzwords they evolved are strongly connected – despite all their theoretical differences – with names of western feminists like Olympe de Gouges, Rosa Luxemburg, Virginia Woolf or Judith Butler.

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Due to attempts to reduce the differences between sexes, feminists in the middle of the 20th century established the separation between sex and gender. Mostly, sex is biological and defined anatomical, whereas gender is the social construction of specific roles and attributes. Famous for this view is Simone de Beauvoir's (1908 – 1968) quote from her masterpiece *The Second Sex* "one is not born as woman, one becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir 1973: 301). So one's biological sex does not determine the gender identity. It could be changed trough social and political struggles. This was a big improvement for feminist theory. But quickly this became a disadvantage, because the biological sex stayed essential and unchangeable[2] and so gender roles could be solidified again.

2.2 Gender as discourse

This is where modern theory appears by obeying an overarching approach. The trendsetter for this was Michel Foucault (1926 – 1984). He follows Marx' well-known assertion whereby it "is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx 1859). In this model, you can see a socio-political superstructure that prearranges people's lives through a relation of power. Foucault goes even further. Not actors who use power to achieve aims or even the power of structures towards men and women are central for him, but the idea that 'power is everywhere', floating and appearing in discourse and knowledge (cf. Foucault 1991).

Very simplified, discourses are social modes of speaking or ensembles that are institutionalized thus are subject to – alterable – restrictions (like heteronormativity) and feature at the same time performative impacts of power. "Foucault's work gave the terms 'discursive practices' and 'discursive formation' to the analysis of particular institutions and their ways of establishing orders of truth, or what is accepted as 'reality' in a given society. (…) These dominant discourses are understood as in turn reinforced by existing systems of law, education and the media" (Goldberg, n.d.). The rules of the discourses define what can be said, what is not allowed to be said or in which way it is allowed to be said. It describes opinions which can be seen predominate in different debates and become through their hegemonic position *de facto* praxis. Through its linkage to power, institutions, practices and politics, this analysis offers the possibility to compare different discourses and their relations of power.

As power is anonymous and 'comes from everywhere' in this sense there is neither a single agency nor a structure or centre (Foucault 1998: 63). This process of submittal under discourses constitutes subjects, because they are dependent on discourses: you can only fill in the role of a woman when there is a discourse about what a woman should be like.[3]

[2] Although also in biology, the category of sex is not clear at all. You can find the chromosomal (XX, XY), godonal (regenerative organs), hormonal and morphologic (genitals and sexual characteristics) sex. Biology does therefore not give an objective criterion for differentiation.

[3] In his work Orientalism Edward Said (1935 – 2002) deals with Foucault`s concept to examine a colonial discourse. Like Foucault, Said emphasises how the will to know and understand the non-western world in colonial discourses is inseparable from the will to power over that world (…) [and] how all texts that represent the colonial world are implicated in a structure of colonial power and knowledge" (Morton 2003: 85). For him a western discourse exists which is seen as modern, democratic and enlightened and a discourse of 'the rest' which is the contrast – so to speak antiquated and archaic. This is worth mentioning because looking at current gender relations in Vietnam means on the one hand – and mainly – to look through a feminist, but also trough a (post)colonial lense.

2.3 Modern feminist theories

This is the connection for modern feminists who see gender identities as a social construct. As Judith Butler (*1956) argues in *Gender Trouble*, sex and gender are neither ontological facts nor essential, pre-discursive conditions. Quite the contrary they must be seen as an effect of discourses. "For example, at the moment of childbirth, the midwife's assertion that 'it`s a girl` immediately names and defines a child according to the rules and norms of a patriarchal society" (Morton 2003: 74). So gender is a powerful and manorial reality. The norm generates the bondage everybody has to subordinate. People learn by constant iteration what it means to be a man or a woman in a given social background – and they learn that behaviour against the norm will be socially sanctioned. The difference of gender can be seen as a result of practices in the daily lives of people, who constantly make themselves women and men or are made as women and men. Media, institutions like state or the family, education and the law consolidate these roles. Through every banal action in our lives, gender is something we do. These actions were coined *doing gender*. Culture enlists our bodies through actual practice and as such becomes the essence of social 'reality'.

To sum it up, gender is the effect of social processes and changes. But as pointed out, gender roles and relations are powerful discourses which affect strongly our relations to other people and can be found inside our bodies. So it is always necessary to look how strong these discourses are – there is no need that they change automatically by social transformation.

2.4 Critique from the Global South

Concerning my research, there are a lot of papers on gender in Vietnam but none of them implies a Vietnamese or South-East Asian feminist theory. Even the *Institute for Family and Gender Studies of the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences* as the "only research institution of the Vietnamese Government on women, family and gender issues" (Giang n.d.: 1) acknowledges that "not many theoretical work on women/gender have been introduced into Vietnam. (…) This is the weakest point of women/gender studies in Vietnam" (ib.: 3). But still it is important to give an example of critique from the Global South. This little detour is necessary, because as mentioned above the theories evolved in western and capitalistic countries and cannot be converted at its face value into (post-colonial) countries like Vietnam. The history of western feminism is connected to the larger history of European colonialism, because "theoretical production pays tribute to the context where it has been originated, and feminism is not an exception to this rule" (Bruno 2006). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*1942) is one of the well-noted writers who deals with this topic of colonial implications of Western feminism: Western feminists with their "superior theory and enlightened compassion" (Spivak 1987: 135) often only "describe the experiences of 'Third World women' in the terms of western female subject constitution" (Morton 2003: 75). They see their theories and (social) fights "as lacking sufficient feminist ideology" (Bruno 2006). Of course such views totally ignore both the experiences of feminists from the `Global South' and the "very important differences in culture, history, language and social class" (Morton 2003: 75). So if theory keeps "the privileged distance from the lives of oppressed women in the 'Third World'" (ib.) one can clearly speak of "a feminist replication of neo-colonialism" (Bruno 2006).

Discussions about different concepts should ideally be generative and on a level playing field. But in reality the clash of different beliefs raises in many cases difficulties. So over the past years feminism in Vietnam and other postcolonial states had to face two challenges: First the introduction of Western feminism as described above and the problems of adopting or refusing these concepts. Second the search for an own form of Vietnamese feminism in a broader/ global context.[4] Therefore, in a historical view, the category gender is in a permanent process of (re)negotiation in which one ideal of maleness and femaleness is defined as a social norm within given the socio-political structures. A critical, feminist analysis must be aware of them, too.

3. Socio-political changes

3.1 Confucian influences

I will start with the influence of Confucianism because its impacts still can be seen very evidently in today's Vietnamese society. The social order is based upon its values; it embosses a social value system. Since hundreds of years, Vietnam is influenced by Confucian philosophy because of Chinese occupation. Like in China principles as allegiance, authority and education were enforced and by this also the structure of families was influenced: "Gender regimes for the majority of Vietnamese (…) were framed by Confucian ideas" (Jacobs 2008: 25). Confucianism was the reason for a hierarchic und regulated society and family with clear roles of order and obedience, "which emphasised the supremacy for men over women" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 3).

This doctrine emanates from two natural, complementary sexes. Connected with them are different social roles. Women should align their deeds with this for female goodness like: domestic work, appearance, polite language and ethical behaviour (cf. Poma Poma 2012). Strongly connected to this are the "three obediences for women" (Jacobs 2008: 25, see also Schuler et al. 2006: 368). At first a women must obey to her father, then to her husband and to her adult sons. In this patriarchal and patrilineal family structure women are clearly subordinated under men (cf. Poma Poma 2012).

Although agriculture in Vietnam has long been seen as a task for both sexes and harvesting or also trading was not that gender-stereotype, the domestic place of reproduction was clearly dedicated to women whereas men were more in the public space and powerful positions. By this, the Confucian discourse creates roles according to it. Generally, it provides "hard work, chastity and proper behaviour, and focused on women's roles as daughters, mothers and wives" (Schuler et al. 2006: 368). So the women's role is always in relation to the male counterpart. Women are seen as the not-man and the not-normal, not worth mentioning - the relation of power is obvious.

[4] It is also important to consider that there is never merely one discourse about gender. Gender roles are changing based on intersectionalism with categories like race, class and gender and hereby evolve various discourses. In her essay *Under Western Eyes* a critique of Western feminists, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (*1955) points out exactly this problem to see women "as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests" (Mohanty 1984: 336f). She also speaks about the discursive colonization of Third World women who are described and devaluated trough concepts like Third World women, Arab women, and Islamic women.

"Women are responsible for preserving family harmony, which in this society often requires giving in, keeping quiet, and making sacrifices to the family" (ib.: 387). The subordination under the strict structure of the family (or the state[5]) and its stability is the most important thing, disagreement should be barred and women (but of course also men) who do not fit in this pattern are sanctioned. Women are seen as a means to an end and not as autonomous human being.[6]

3.2 Socialist role model

In the wake of independence wars, the reunification and state building in Vietnam this discourse was abolished and replaced by another female role – fitting for the new ideas of a unified nation and socialism. Since its founding in 1930 equal treatment for women and men was central for the VCP. The aim was a unified country and in this process of nation-building every person should be involved and contribute. "Vietnamese Marxists were unmistakably nationalistic" (Pelley 2002: 11). Under the leadership of the VCP, they were able to create a national narrative and seize the "idea of a national essence" (ib.: 140). This was the creation of a Vietnamese fighting spirit and a national homogenous culture.[7] Also women were integrated in this idea of Vietnamese resistance. "During the war years, women played a key role in social management and production activities [and] (…) also played a decisive combat role" (Packard 2006: 15). This (active) contribution in the French and American War improved the situation and the possibilities of women. They were not just invisible but were shown as own identities playing an active role in the wars and the revolution – as the case may be as a warrior with a gun in her hand. For Wendy Duong, an American Vietnamese professor this period was actually the "birth of a Vietnamese national feminist culture" (Duong 2001: 198).

With the independence of (North) Vietnam 1945 and the first socialist Vietnamese Constitution in 1946 and later the reunification, Marxism was transformed "from a theory of revolution into a theory of state power and a method for maintaining the status quo" (Pelley 2002: 11). The aim was a strong party-centred state to reach socialism. This state should also regulate gender relations and abolish antiquated Confucian conventions – Article 24 of the Constitution points out pretty clearly the legal equality between men and women:

> "Women in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of political, economic, cultural, social, and domestic life. For equal work, women enjoy equal pay with men" (SRV 1946).

[5] An interesting analogy between the father as head of the family and the state as head of the society can be found in Pelley 157 – 161. Pelley comes to the conclusion that just "as authority in a family resides 'naturally' in the father, authority in postcolonial Vietnam is located naturally in a benevolent (…) state" (Pelley 2002: 161).

[6] This Confucian legacy culminates in this commonly quoted saying of Confucius that "one hundred women are not worth a single testicle". But in Vietnamese history you can also find egalitarian as well as matriarchal structures. Especially in different ethnic minorities they could and can be found. There the Confucian influence was not as big because of social borders like language and natural barriers. Few minorities could keep their traditions and matriarchy can "still" be found. But to take a closer look on this (interesting and important) topic would go beyond the scope of this paper.

[7] Of course, this was a construction of postcolonial historians and politicians but it helped to connect the experiences of the "twentieth-century Vietnamese who struggled against American aggression (…) [with] the eminence of first-century heroes who had resisted the Chinese" (Pelley 2002: 145).

This formal equality was a huge progress and was reflected in the production process. Women worked as well as men in the new collectives and State-owned-enterprises (SOE). This brought several advantages for women. The "collectivisation took some (or all) direction of agricultural labour away (…) [and] women's burden of work was eased" (Jacobs 2008: 23). Work was spread on many shoulders, independent from gender. So "women's work was made visible and it thus gained public status" (Jacobs 2008: 23). A high horizontal segregation of the labour market could not be found, but this equality was also ambivalent: Because of the destruction and a lot of death soldiers women were simply needed as employees.

On the one hand women were official on a par with men and could break out of the former ideal types of gender. "Women often merged as radical activists in anti-landlord campaigns, protesting against sexual as well as economic abuse. During such campaigns, women were sometimes elected to village leadership posts, an entirely new phenomenon" (ib.: 26). Women had now the – limited but still – chance to enter the public spheres of politics, economy and power. This led to an improvement of women's situation: more freedom, rights, independence and formal equality. The hegemonic idea that women were not able to enter higher position and the discourse about it changed drastically.

But on the other hand structural discrimination and disadvantages remained obvious and the ideal of women still was highly competitive. Women's work in collectives, like men's, was rewarded with work points, although fewer than those that men received. This discrimination increased in the month and years directly after the war. After the – mainly male - soldiers returned from war they became head of household again (cf. Packard 2006: 15). The old patterns were revitalised. In addition to that, "women remained responsible for most domestic labour" (Jacobs 2008: 27). At first thought as an improvement, it changed to make it even worse for women: "along with collective production" (ib.) and the work in the household they now "had extremely heavy workloads" (ib.).

To sum it up, "post-1946 Vietnam brought about a kind of social emancipation for women: 'women`s liberation' and participations in social and political life were important elements in the anti-colonial movement, even though the traditional Confucian role of women as caregivers was still very much emphasized" (Schuler et al. 2006: 386). This gap between the legal framework – "what is written on paper" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 3) – and real gender equality was enormous. This gap demonstrates that gender-relations are not just legal powers written in laws but much more discourses as described above.

3.3 A brief visual digression

A good example for these contradictions in gender roles – between legal rights/ everyday actions and socio-political emancipation/ traditional care-work – gives the Women's Museum in Hanoi.[8] The first and second floor are dedicated to women in family. The main topics are marriage, birth and family life. Although differences in role and position between minorities with patrilineal and matrilineal structures are shown, women are mainly seen functional as mother or wife. The fourth floor shows fashion, different dresses and traditional clothes and the

[8] These observations stem from a series of visits to the Vietnamese Women's Museum in summer 2014.

making process of this fashion. In these parts of the museum, women are objectified. Here as housewife, there as feminine beauty. Individual women or names do not play a role at all.

The presentation changes completely in the third floor named women in history. Here the fighting spirit and patriotic feelings of (individual) women are in the focus. This dates back to 40AD. The history starts with the Trung Sisters, who fought for independence against the Han Chinese, and moves on to the anti-colonial and anti-feudal movements, demanding socio-economic and democratic rights. Women created, developed and protected the Party bases. In 1945, they took part in the uprising against the local powers, contributing to the August Revolution and after that in the guerrilla forces founded in villages to fight against enemy raids and to destroy enemy post. Nationally 980.000 Vietnamese women participated as guerrilla forces. Hoang Ngan in Hung Yen province hosted the largest group with 7.365 female members. This group fought 680 battles, destroyed 13 enemy posts, 16 km of telephone lines and killed or arrested 383 enemy soldiers. During the resistance war 12 guerrilla women were awarded the "Heroine" title amongst them Ho Thi Bi, Nguyen Thi Chien, Mac Thi Buoi and Vo Thi Sau. Thousands of women joined the militia, the army or became young volunteers. Women are seen as specific human beings, as subjects and equivalent to men. You can find individual names and biographies of women and the gender-contrast is presented as less important than the connecting in the common patriotic goal.

Additionally, the structure of the exhibition is important. The first impressions when you enter and the last impressions when you leave the Museum are the functional roles of women and the hierarchy between the genders. The first sentence you read in the first floor is "Wife and husband are as inseparable as a pair of chopsticks". The family-part starts with "A man builds his house, a woman her family". Although the Museum has included the socialist role in a central place – it is kind of restricted to a historical perspective and therefore marginalized in the sense that it is not seen as relevant for today's gender roles. It is easier just to be beautiful – like the generality shown in the museum – then to follow these single, obviously strong-minded characters. The beginning and the end of the museum, this frame of function and beauty is by contrast clearly connected to the present.[9]

4. Post *doi moi* era

4.1 Economic changes and conservative rollback

The most important and for the current Vietnamese society most fundamental transformation that concerned not just the economy or policy but the whole society, was initiated by the process of *doi moi*. "At its 6th National Congress in December 1986, Vietnam's Communist Party made a decisive step to abandon the central planning model of socialism and to adopt a 'market-orientated socialist economy under state guidance'" (Beresford 2008: 221). One effect of this controlled liberalisation and the economic growth was the development of a new middle class – more and more orientating on the consumerism of the west. Entangled to these new possibilities was a new order

[9] Just the fact that there is a Women's Museum points out the dialectics of women`s politics in Vietnam. On the one hand women are considerate that "important" to build them a museum. Otherwise as it is a museum it is not daily routine and visitors could experience the topic as external to the daily live.

of disciplinary action, ways of living and their relations. Through the liberalisation a new disciplinary power that leans on more flexibility, functionality and personal responsibility amends the traditional state sovereignty (cf. Foucault 1991).

The *doi moi* reforms were officially gender-neutral, but by closing cooperatives and privatisation of the SOEs women were effected in a special way. On the one hand they were disproportionate more dismissed because of less education (cf. Vo and Strachan 2008: 5) and on the other they suffered more from the decreasing social services. With "the end of services provided by collectives, such as day care for children and the elderly, retirement homes, and health care, women may assume near-total responsibility for these services" (Jacobs 2008: 24) by increasing of their domestic work.

The state, formally responsibility for gender-equality restricted its own power, its "ability to influence gender relations has declined (…) and so has its capacity to promulgate equality" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 15). This small window of opportunities for equal treatment for women was closed through the market reform. Central planning was virtually gone by 1989, free markets emerged and instead "foreign investors and the domestic non-state sector have begun to dominate the economic landscape" (Beresford 2008: 241). The CPV of course was still in power and tried to "retain its ability to influence the long-term structural changes" (ib.: 226) but social rules and securities established in Socialism broke away little by little. And so the family attained more importance again. "In contrast to the idealised 'socialist woman' and 'socialist man' (…), the Doi Moi approach has been premised on a conceptualisation of the household as the primary economic unit" (Jones and Tran 2012: 9). Families had to get along with the new circumstances by their own and without any help of the state because "gendered poverty and vulnerability is not seen as a core concern of the state" (ib.: 9). The logic of capitalist accumulation affected families and especially women directly.

As there was no more a strong actor or power to safe gender equality the regaining strength of more traditional gender norms and patterns under *doi moi* could be stated. The "decollectivisation and liberalisation often mean widespread female unemployment [and] the feminisation of subsistence farming" (Jacobs 2008: 33).

On the one hand they had to face more and more poverty because of invisible "unpaid household labour" (Beresford 2008: 240) on the other hand they also had to face poverty when they worked "officially", because they (still) earned less than their male colleagues.[10] So working outside led coupled with housework to a 'double burden' for women. They saw themselves confronted with more work, less time (for political events, trainings, networks) and less contact with others due to the retreat into the household (cf. Jacobs 2008: 32) – chances were more "linked to household and kinship roles and much of their labour is organised within households" (ib.: 22). In this relation men were "assumed to be the heads of the households and women are expected to sacrifice their

[10] While the gender gap is about 12% nationally, it rises to around 50% in the informal sector (cf. Jones and Tran 2012) and women's employment is more often "concentrated in agriculture and forestry, light industry (especially textiles and garments), hotels and restaurants, banking and finance, education and training, social affairs and as housemaids" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 4).

individual interest in the interests of family advancement" (Jones and Tran 2012: 9). This role-back in gender relations was assumed to be more far-reaching than the socialist attempt.[11]

4.2 Legal framework

To fight against this injustice „Vietnamese government has successfully created an invitational context for the advancement of women's rights" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 15). It has a strong political framework in place to support gender equality. In "1995, the government approved the implementation of a Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, based on the Beijing Declaration and Platform Action" (Schuler et al. 2006: 384). Since 2006 Vietnam has its own Gender-Equality Law (SRV 2006), in 2008 the Law on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence (SRV 2008) was passed. Resolution 11 (SRV 2007), the 2011- 2020 national strategy for gender equality (SRV 2009), and the signing of the Millennium Declaration (UN 2000) showed the governmental effort to promote gender equality. Research institutions for gender in the *Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs* and Provincial Departments of the Ministry were established.

Because of this legal framwork "Vietnam is far ahead of most other countries with similar levels of income in terms of (…) gender equity" (Schuler et al. 384, see also Packard 2006: 5). Women have to the greatest possible extend access to medical care, education and to the labour market, where they enjoy formally equal rights. About one quarter of the members of the National Assembly is women (cf. BpB 2011). In addition, the "gender wage gap in the formal sector narrowed during the transition period, but inequality remains significant" (Packard 2006: 3).

Apart from these official rules, gender inequality is still visible everywhere. The leading positions are male: there are only two female ministers (of the total 22 ministers) and 10 female vice-ministers (of the total 128) (cf. iSEE and CGFED 2013). Although the majority of women is employed (cf. Poma Poma 2012) they are still paid less or are more often in low payed sectors like minor dealing.[12] The integration on the labour market did not lead to a shift the balance of power in the family structures but more to a conservative understanding of one's role (cf. Schuler: 390).

4.3 The Vietnamese Women's Union (VWU)

In this context the VWU with about 13 million members, or over 50% of all women over 18 years of age (cf. Waibel and Glück 2013) plays a critical role as the official public institution for women. Though it "promotes women's educational, political and economic advancement (ib.: 383), gives women a chance to be heard and to organize themselves, it "simultaneously exhorts women to pay attention to their Confucian role of maintaining family hier-

[11] Even more concerned were rural and peasant women. They faced "a loss of services, increased economic instability, and increased risk" (Jacobs 2008: 17). Even legal right like the 'right to work' was "virtually never applied to peasant women. Most of their work takes place within households and smallholdings, under the direction of husbands or fathers, and so is invisible and easily forgotten" (Susie Jacobs 18).

[12] Minor dealing is traditionally a job done by women but the high proportion of women in street trading in Hanoi is an effect of the urban employment situation: Circa 80% of dealers were women according to a study done by Marita Schnepf-Orth. After being unemployed they are now searching for jobs in family enterprises or at the informal sector. This is combined with low level income, tenuous labour conditions.

archy and harmony" (Schuler et al 2006: 383). So a predetermined gender role is constructed which puts "tremendous demands on women" (ib.: 391). 'Feminism' in this case is based on clear differences between genders and women's issues are just dealt with by women. For this it is also often argued that the VWU serves as a fig leaf for the state. Gender questions are treated in the Union which leads to a "quasi-ghettoisation of gender issues" (Jones and Tran 2012: 8) with the effect "that many leaders have limited gender awareness and still more limited access to gender expertise" (ib.: 7). In a similar direction[13] goes Vietnam's current Constitution from 2014. Article 63 and 64 speak of equal rights, the ban of discrimination against women and equal pay for equal work. But these rules are not seen to create immanent equality for women but should help to "play their roles in society" and fulfil the "maternal duties". Also is the family seen as "the cell of society" and the "state protects marriage and family" (cf. SRV 2014).

5. Conclusion

In current Vietnam different discourses – orientated on the western capitalism and conflicting pre-capitalistic orders – lead to a variety of tensions and contradictions for women although "gender prejudices, gender stereotypes and patriarchal thinking based on an essentialized understanding of gender are nevertheless prevalent if not predominant" (Wischermann 2010: 34). Although women gain more and more opportunities for advancement in their work, more independence and are said to be the more hard working part of the society, gender prejudices and stereotypes still are widespread in Vietnamese society and women have mostly internalized and habitualized their roles as suppressed. The Confucian influence is still very high and the socialist attempt for equality was more or less a historical period. In the meantime, the Confucian belief of a hierarchic and patriarchal society fits perfectly together with the paternalistic claim to leadership of the VCP. Active fights against this are difficult because of the political situation in Vietnam and the weak civil society.

But as gender relations must be seen as discourses, as shown above, they also must be changed discursively. Aiming at a change, amendments of laws are to be welcomed. On this level the Vietnamese state did a lot. Formal equality is reached, compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Vietnam is a pioneer. In addition, the long history and tradition to deal with this topic in the VCP shows its importance. "In practice, public administration is primarily concerned with the formal and legal aspects" (Vo and Strachan 2008: 14). But gender roles and relations cannot (just) be changed by formal resolutions. To reach real equality and stop the broadening of this neoconservative gender-regime after *doi moi* as described above it is necessary to find new and different forms of actions, education and different (self)organisations – by the people themselves. Simultaneously, it is important to be aware of different social backgrounds like city or countryside, majority or minorities, workers, employees or peasants.

[13] Another example is the campaign against social evils since 1995 (for this see: AAS 2006) which can be seen as a reaction to more and more western lifestyle was to a greater extend a conservative return on traditional values to safe the social order and the family a core of the society and the implemented roles for women.

Gender policy is not just a 'women's issue' but everyday action. A feminist movement that also denounces missing LGBT-rights and other forms of discriminations like divorced and single women (and men) deals with forms of life, hegemony and discourses. Political experiences from the West can be seen as examples but not as the standard. Which emancipatory form for gender politics are to be chosen is not the topic of this paper but the task for progressive men and women in Vietnam. The VWU can be a contact point if it discharges its essential and biological understanding of two different sexes, where "women are seen as unequal to men in the strictest sense of the world because of what in Vietnam are called 'biological facts'" (Wischermann 2010: 22) and promote more effectively a "greater diversity in gender norms" (Schuler et al. 2006: 383).

Vietnamese civil society organisations but also non-governmental organisations from abroad – on equal footing with the local actors – can deliver therefore infrastructure, causes for thoughts and analysis. The actions for a fundamental change have to be done by everybody every day. The Vietnamese term for revolution *cách mang* literally means "changing the mandate of Heaven" and stands for change within continuity (cf. Pelley 2002: 193). Maybe this can be the guideline.

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