

Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of
Discrimination against Women: Viet Nam

Initial report

191. The Committee considered the initial report of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam (CEDAW/C/5/Add.25) at its 70th, 75th and 76th meetings, on 13, 17 and 18 March 1986 (CEDAW/C/SR.70, 75 and 76).
192. In her introduction, the representative of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam informed the Committee that during the days of feudalism and colonialism, women were a symbol of evil and inferiority, even though they had a history of patriotic struggle against oppressors. The revolution of 1945 provided the impetus for the promotion of equality between men and women, and although the course for equal rights had been charted since that time, the adoption of the Convention, and Viet Nam's ratification of it, has provided the basis for continuing efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women.
193. The representative of Viet Nam drew attention to the legal status of Vietnamese women and pointed out that, under a new penal code enacted in July 1985, discrimination was a punishable offence and could result in 3 to 12 months' detention.
194. The participation of women in political and public life, the representative continued, was reflected for example in national and provincial elections in which they accounted for 13 out of 23 million voters, and the number of women holding elected offices has been increasing. A third of female involvement in public life was reflected in membership in the Women's Union which has, among other things, been active in collecting 15 million signatures for the promotion of peace and disarmament.
195. With regard to the participation of women in economic life, the representative of Viet Nam stated that the role of women in social, economic and political aspects of development was officially recognized and, in this context, she pointed out that child-care facilities were established in 1971 so that Vietnamese women could participate in resisting foreign aggression.
196. The representative drew the Committee's attention to the Law on Marriage and the Family of 1985 which reaffirmed the equal rights of men and women in all aspects of family life, including the raising of children and household duties. In view of Viet Nam's high birth rate (3 per cent), a National Committee on Population and Family Planning has been established to deal with family planning, which has resulted in a drastic decrease in the infant mortality rate.
197. The role played by Vietnamese women in the country's development over the years has been recognized and their participation in the future development of Viet Nam has been clearly reflected in Government policies and legislation. However, in a country ravaged by 30 years of war, it was difficult to allocate sufficient resources to facilitate the dual role played by women in the home and in society.
198. Although it was clear, the representative concluded, that Vietnamese women have made tremendous strides over the years in their struggle for emancipation and equal rights, a great amount of work is still required to implement fully the goals and objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women and the provisions of the Convention.

199. Many members of the Committee congratulated the representative of Viet Nam and expressed appreciation for the information contained in the report, which indicated that remarkable progress had been made in spite of the many difficulties, and that the Government was committed to the elimination of discrimination against women.
200. Many members were impressed by the fact that labour in the home was considered productive labour, that illiteracy had been eradicated in two years and that discriminatory behaviour was a punishable offence. Members of the Committee considered that the report reflected the Government's awareness of the problems associated with discriminatory behaviour and the will and determination of the Vietnamese people to overcome these problems were inspiring.
201. Members of the Committee noted that even when legislation was satisfactory, social attitudes were often the main obstacles and asked whether this was still a problem. Some members requested more information on rural women and asked whether problems were similar to those of urban women in terms of, for instance, access to land, credit and other resources.
202. Some members asked whether women were made aware of their rights under the law and whether the principle of equal pay for equal work applied. One expert requested more information on the cases before the courts related to discriminatory conduct.
203. More statistical information was requested on demographic data, the labour force, participation in the political level, and marriage and divorce rates. Several members indicated their interest in the number and proportion of women holding high-level posts in Government and in other sectors. It was noted that while over 50 per cent of the electorate were women, their representation as elected officials was low.
204. Some experts wanted more information on the Women's Union, how it was financed, its membership, functions and authority, whether it was a non-governmental organization or part of the Government, and whether women could only exercise their rights through the Union.
205. Many members noted the difficulties that must be encountered with the effects of religion and tradition and wondered what was their impact on social progress. Many members expressed interest in knowing whether education was compulsory and how Viet Nam was able to eradicate illiteracy in such a short time of two years.
206. Some experts wanted to know why Vietnamese women were not allowed to work in certain professions, and why there was a difference in the retirement age for men and women.
207. With regard to marriage and family life, some experts requested more information on contractual marriages, consensual unions and children born out of wedlock, their rights and their legal status. One expert asked whether the new law on marriage provided for a minimum age of marriage and whether it would be the same for males and females.
208. Some members requested more information on family planning programmes, how successful they were and whether government goals and objectives in this area were being met, whether contraception was free and whether family planning programmes were readily received in the rural areas.

209. Several members asked whether there was any rehabilitation of women following the Viet Nam war, the effect of chemical warfare and other effects on the health and life expectancy of women and children.

210. In replying to questions asked by experts, the representative of the State party informed the Committee that the total population of the country was 58 million, out of which 51.2 per cent were women.

211. She affirmed that special measures or positive discrimination had been used in regard to women's employment. This meant that if out of two candidates equally qualified one was a woman, the woman was chosen.

212. Prostitution, drug abuse and pornography were social evils left behind by colonialism. In all cases, rehabilitation had taken place through counselling, training and health care organized by women's organizations. Article 99 of the Penal Code punished by imprisonment anyone who distributed or sold pornographic material.

213. In regard to article 7 of the Convention, the representative indicated that there were 17 ministers and vice-ministers: a woman minister of education, who had previously been foreign minister during the anti-colonial war, women vice-ministers for labour, trade, food, light industry and justice, among others. The vote was guaranteed by the Constitution at 21 years of age. The Union of Vietnamese Women had played an important role for many years. It had been founded on 20 October 1930 during the clandestine struggle. It was a mass organization with an outreach into remote areas and with 9 million members as of 1984. It continued to play a role in the mobilization of women and in bringing about awareness of equal rights and participation. Through article 86 of the Constitution, the Union was able to submit bills to the National Assembly.

214. Vietnamese women constituted 18.7 per cent of the total staff in the diplomatic service; 17 per cent were outposted. There is one woman ambassador, one chargé d'affaires and many first and second secretaries. Large recruitment of women is being undertaken directly from the university into foreign service. Women were also able to join the army as doctors, nurses, telecommunication experts and as cultural promoters. Many women had attained officer status as commanders, sergeants and others.

215. Women, continued the representative, could keep their nationality upon marriage with a foreigner unless they decided otherwise.

216. Illiteracy was eradicated in North Viet Nam in 1958 with the assistance of voluntary brigades. The situation in South Viet Nam was different. At the end of the war there had been 35 million illiterates; however, by January 1978, through voluntary efforts of the general population, illiteracy had been eradicated in South Viet Nam as well.

217. In regard to article 10, education was compulsory and co-educational. A major reform had taken place in 1979 and intensive training had been launched in vocational and other disciplines. Secondary education also included family planning. Special needs of women were provided for through cultural efforts by the State publishing house, which translated novels of foreign authors, biographies of famous women, and other relevant material.

218. The representative said that women accounted for 51 per cent of the labour force. Women were not employed in heavy labour. The rule of equal pay for equal work was applied without restriction. Working hours were eight hours per day and only women with small children worked one hour less. Research was going on to ease the work-load of rural women.

219. The obstacles in the population policy of the country were certain popular traditions giving preference to male children and the lack of contraceptive devices. Family planning was, however, currently being practised, contraceptive devices were offered free of charge and abortion was acceptable. Thirty per cent of women of child-bearing age used contraceptives, and the birth rate had been brought down over the last 20 years. Campaigns were carried on to have no more than two children. The representative mentioned that the percentage of children born in maternity clinics was still low, particularly in the villages, but that infant mortality had gone down considerably.

220. The representative said that the chemical weapons had had a considerable impact on the health and reproductive functions of women, and the country had appealed to the World Health Organization to combat the long-range effects of those toxic materials.

221. Sixty per cent of the agricultural labour force were women; rural hygiene had been greatly improved and day-care centres and maternity institutions expanded. Although only 32 per cent of the rural population had access to safe drinking water, the situation had greatly improved over colonial times and it had to be borne in mind that the country was still very poor.

222. After marriage, women could keep their maiden name and children took their father's name. The minimum age for marriage was 18 for girls and 21 for boys, as women matured earlier, whereas the electoral age was 18 for both sexes. The habit of child marriages or marriages of little boys to older women was practically eliminated. As a result of legal and administrative measures, cases of wife-battering were currently quite rare. Divorce, following a process of reconciliation, was a straightforward procedure and the common property was equally shared.

223. Legitimate children had the same rights as children born out of wedlock, free unions were rather rare and unmarried women were not discriminated against.

224. The representative explained that the fact that women played a major role in political life and diplomatic spheres was an achievement of the revolution. In the north, after 40 years of socialist government, traditions were more liberal than in the south, where the liberation took place only 10 years ago. By and large, the problem of discrimination against women had been solved by the revolution. The only major obstacle was the lack of peace. Women could not fully benefit yet from the necessary material conditions. When the political situation returned to normal, Viet Nam could be the best place for the implementation of the Convention.

225. In reply to a further question, the representative stated that the National Union of Women was supported by modest monthly dues of its women members and by contributions in kind.