Negotiating with Multilayered Public Norms: Female University Students’ Struggle to Survive the Đổi Mới Period

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Introduction

You know, students who are studying in the humanities will have a hard time finding jobs after graduation. Very hard. However, we can find good husbands more easily than female students who study in other majors. This is the fate of female students in the humanities!

Interview with the author, 2012

These are the words of a female student in the history department at one of the top universities in Hanoi. Her pessimistic outlook is partially true: university graduates in the humanities have faced difficulties in finding good work opportunities in Vietnam. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), about 63 percent of university graduates were unable to find employment immediately after graduation (Báo Giáo dục Việt Nam, September 9, 2012). Although the methodology of the study and the actual time of the research were unclear, this significant percentage of the “unemployment of university graduates” reveals that the Vietnamese labor market, which contains young people who have obtained high academic skills, has serious problems. The interview quoted here perhaps reflects this hardship. Nonetheless, why did the interviewee demonstrate the recognition that “we”—that is, female graduate students in the humanities—“find good husbands more easily than other female students in other majors”? Finding good job opportunities in the marketplace and getting married to a good man essentially belong to different dimensions, particularly for people who attain high academic backgrounds; thus, why did she carry the self-directive that she should find a good husband if she failed to find employment after graduation?

As Bélanger and Pendakis (2009, 265) have pointed out, young, single women who migrate from rural to industrial areas to work for wages struggle against and continually negotiate with the social norms of gender in
Vietnam. One of the main purposes of the literature relating to this topic is to clarify whether women’s experiences in work outside their natal villages may empower them, and if so, to what extent, with regard to their role change not only in relation to their families and kinship but also in society. Specifically, “factory girls” in many rapidly industrializing countries in Asia, including Vietnam, have focused on their experiences in moving away from their families in rural areas and finding new social relationships in cities or rural industrialized zones (Nguyen-Vo 2006). The literature on such “factory girls” shows that their wage work has served to achieve measurable outcomes, such as education or better health, as well as contributing to those which cannot be measured as easily, such as empowerment (Bélanger & Pendakis 2009, 268). Although these young women experienced many “moments of empowerment” through their work in factories (268), they also were conflicted, struggling against changes in their identity and family status that resulted from their becoming too urbanized. By physically separating from parents, even tentatively, single female workers become disconnected from the normative notions of femininity ascribed to daughters unrelated to sexuality, which is considered a somewhat dangerous and immoral force that needs to be controlled, even to the point of being excluded as a “social evil” (Rydström 2006, 284).

Another way exists, however, for young, single women to leave their rural villages for a while: they can “migrate” to large urban centers by attending university. As many scholars have already clarified, economic development and global standardization of education deliver opportunities for higher academic attainments for women as well as men (cf. Moock et al. 2003; Nguyen 2006; Đặng 2007). However, most families living in less developed countries with meager financial resources must decide whether to spend money, and how much, for their daughters to go to school. Such a decision pertains not only to families’ financial restrictions, but also to the estimated returns on a daughter’s education. Specifically in East Asian countries, including the northern part of Vietnam, which are still strongly influenced by patriarchy, daughters tend to be accorded a lower priority in the family than sons. It has been claimed that gender-unequal practices have been revived in Vietnamese families, which have in turn influenced educational provision for children, especially daughters (Liu 2001; Barbieri & Bélanger 2009, 2; cf. Colclough et al. 2000; Bélanger & Liu 2004).

Despite a socialist regime for more than thirty years and despite feminist values, patriarchy—which dictates a preference for sons—survives strongly in the cultural values and practices of Vietnamese families (Haughton & Haughton...