



Changing of Women's Roles in Production under a Patriarchal Society: Case Study in a Traditional Craft Village, Northern Vietnam

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Abstract

Vietnamese women have been playing a key important role in economic development for a long time. Due to the social and cultural constraints of a patriarchal society, rural women were excluded from some kinds of work, especially those which consist of cultural meanings, for instance, art woodcarving industry. Under the changes of economic and social conditions, women are increasingly engaging in traditional occupations. Further, by negotiating with patriarchal idea of gender discrimination of work, women can take part in the so-called "male works", e.g. woodcarving industry not only as direct workers, but also as business owners, entrepreneurs and managers. Even though, the empirical data from Kim Thieu village witnesses that rural women have not totally overcome the domination of male authorities at both family and community levels yet. Thus, gender policies which pay attention to both economic and social empowerment of women are necessary in the context of patriarchal society like Vietnam.

Keywords: Rural women, Gender division of labor, Household's livelihood strategies, Negotiation, Empowerment

1. Introduction

Vietnamese rural women account for more than a half of the country's overall population, 52 percent of its labor force and 70 percent of rural labor force (Nguyen 2003). Vietnamese women have played a key role in economic development since the Feudal period. They have established an important force in creating physical products and building rural socio-culture. Women have contributed to both economic and non-economic sectors in rural areas. They have produced almost 60 percent of GDP of rural economy (Nguyen 2003).

Even though, due to the social and cultural constraints, Vietnamese women were excluded from a number of economic activities in the past. They mostly worked as farmers in subsistence agriculture and as small traders in local marketplaces, while the so-called industrial works have been assigned to male labors. Woodcarving industry was one of several sectors in which rural women could not participate. However, thanks to the renovation of the state's economic policy, rural women are able to take part in almost all sectors of rural economy including agriculture, industry, handicraft making and product marketing. The reason is the fact that high demand for labor for industrialization and commercialization of rural economy has allowed not only men, but also women to seek their jobs in both on-farm and off-farm activities. Further, as active agents of development process, rural women have found themselves the ways in which they can keenly participate in different income-generating activities. By doing this, women are not only emancipated from male economic dependence, but they also empower themselves at household as well as community level.

As a small contribution to the debates on women's contribution to rural household economy, this paper aims: (i) to investigate how gender division of labor changes according to historical context in a traditional craft village in northern Vietnam; and (ii) to explore the ways in which women negotiate for strategies of livelihood diversification. Finally, the paper also draws some recommendations and policy implications for rural women's empowerment.

2. Literature Review and Research Methods

2.1 Literature Review on Gender Division of Labor

As gender relations in general, gender relations of production are also socially, culturally and historically constructed and re-constructed. So, arrangement of gender relations of production is not static but it is a changing process and situated in particular context. This means that gender relations of production are continuously reorganized in order to be relevant to production process which is influenced by both internal factors (such as lifecycle of a household, desire of producer) and external factors (such as changes in state policies, in technical renovation, in input and output markets, and so on). However, labor reorganization is not determined by an authority, but it is considered as a process of negotiation of actors under certain social structure.

In the case of traditional craft villages in northern Vietnam, reorganization of gender relations of production, which has been happening in both farming and craft making activities, has been clearly seen since the time of *Doi Moi* (the early 1990s) when traditional handicraft sectors have been revived and commercialized. The high demand for workforce of those industries has absorbed almost all male and female labors in the village. Besides, the active participation of inward migrant labors those who come to work in the craft villages as regular contract labors and as casual hired labors makes the division of labor there become more complicated. As a result, reorganization of gender relations of production cannot be seen as a process of reversing economic roles of male and female labors within a household and a village. According to Agarwal's conceptualization (1994), gender relations of production now should be viewed as power relations and analyzed at multiple levels including household, community, and local labor market. In this paper I pay much attention to "gender differentiation of production" rather than gender relations. Beyond the concept of gender relations, "gender differentiation" implies both gender and class relations in production process.

Moreover, women are social actors in any society, therefore, according to Long (1992) they are "...not simply seen as disembodied social categories (based on class or some other classificatory criteria) or passive recipients of intervention, but active participants who process information and strategize in their dealing with local actors as well as outside institutions and personnel ... The different patterns of social organization that emerge result from the interactions, negotiations and social struggles that take place between different kinds of actor"(p.21). Even in the smallest social unit like household, women also negotiate for their own power. The reason is the fact that the nature of intra-household interaction could be described as containing elements of both cooperation and conflict. Household members can cooperate in so far as cooperative arrangements make each of them better-off than non-cooperation. However, there are also conflicts existing among them in terms of interest distribution and exercising power. In addition, cooperative-conflict relations can be seen in other arenas such as community, local labor market and the state.

In my research, there is an emergence of two main groups of women which can be classified as village women and female migrants who are either casual or regular contract labors. Nevertheless, women are not homogenous, even in a small group, but they are totally heterogeneous in terms of age, marital status, economic condition, and so on. As a consequence, the ways in which they negotiate for their engagement in income-generating activities and for their empowerment are so diverse.

As pointed out by Ong (1987), Agarwal (1994), Mills (2001), and others in the family women negotiate with male authority and traditional ideology of "altruism" and "dutifulness" for their economic independence with the hope that it can more or less empower them. At community level, especially in the kinship, women negotiate with patriarchal norms, customs and constraints which relate to gender differentiation of work. In the labor market, my case study shows that both female villagers and migrants have to bargain not only within and between one another or with male authority in labor management, but also with a number of actors who engage in woodcarving industry and farming activity. Thus, in the arenas like labor market and state, women negotiate not just because they are women, but also because they are villagers and/or producers and/or workers.

In summary, a variety of contemporary literatures have witnessed that rural women have to negotiate for their livelihood diversification. Through negotiation process, they get more advantages in gender relations at different levels. But, it is observed that gender relations in production are not changed so much at macro level. In northern Vietnam, women remain a crucial workforce in agriculture either as farmers or as wage laborers. The striking change is the fact that rural women work not only on their own farms, but also on the others'. Additionally, in off-farm sectors, rural women chiefly occupy the lower position with poorer wage of labor markets.

2.2 Research Methods

The ethnographic approach has been used in collecting data. This means that the researcher might have spent a time as long as four months in the field site. In addition, the researcher had to join all the so-called "everyday life" activities of local people in order to find the way in which gender division of rural labors in production has been arranged and the reasons for which women as well as men have been assigned to different economic activities in the past and at present. A number of the participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques such as group meeting, participatory observation and

oral history recording have been employed to get information from different villagers. Together with PRA techniques, the in-depth interview method was also applied to gather data from 20 typical households. Moreover, key informants such as head of communal women's union, headman of the village, some young and senior women and men were interviewed.

Information and data which were collected that focused on the ways in which gender division of labor was carried out in the households and in the workplace. Further, individual stories concentrated on the ways in which village women negotiated for their entrance to the "traditional occupation". All the data are analyzed by the qualitative methods which are mainly based on the typical stories of villagers rather than on the general information. Additionally, the SWOT analysis matrix is applied to scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages of village women when they participate in the diverse economic activities. Based on the result of analysis, the major policy implications will be recommended to empower women as well as to reduce gender inequality in rural areas.

3. Overview of the Research Site

Located in Red River delta, 30 km from Hanoi capital, Kim Thieu is considered as a traditional craft village with age-old history. Nobody can say when woodcarving industry was first appeared in Kim Thieu village. They have heard that since the period of domination by northern invaders (old Chinese), there were some villagers accompanying with thousands of woodcarvers who had to go to China to work as slaves. There was a hypothesis which supposed that woodcarving might be present in Kim Thieu as well as in surrounding areas due to the appearance of Thang Long capital under the Ly dynasty (eleventh century). Woodcarving cooperative was established in the late 1950s according to the state movement of collectivization. However, similar to agricultural cooperative, the handicraft cooperative collapsed after 27 years of its existence. Thanks to economic innovation, woodcarving industry has been revived and developed at household level since the late 1980s. Thenceforth, traditional woodcarving industry has linked local livelihood and production process to global market because most of its outputs are exported to China or to other countries through China while its inputs are imported from Lao, Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries. Woodcarving industry has generated almost all income of several households, so that it has been considered as a crucial livelihood strategy in the village since *Doi Moi*.

There are about seventy percent of total households that still cultivate in agricultural land what they were allocated by state since 1988 and even in the areas which are borrowed from other villagers, though most of their income is generated by woodcarving industry. In 2007, Kim Thieu had 1726 inhabitants who lived in 411 households (*ho*) of which 315 households have involved in traditional woodcarving industry. Total cultivated area of the village is 36.72 hectares (1020 *sao*¹), and the agricultural land area per capita is about 200m² that is considered as the lowest in the region, so that people cannot live on farming only. For this reason, people have to develop their livelihood strategies by combining a number of activities together, but mainly based on farming and woodcarving activities.

Table 1. Demographic Data, Labor and Income Source

Indicators	Unit	Total	Farming	Handicraft	Service	Others
Inhabitants	Person	1726	142 (8.23%)	1394 (80.76%)	170 (9.84%)	20 (1.17%)
Labor	Person	977	82 (8.39%)	799 (81.78%)	76 (7.78%)	20 (2.05%)
Main Income from	Household	411	33 (8.03%)	315 (76.64%)	48 (1.17%)	15 (3.65%)

Source: Provincial Department of Statistics, Bac Ninh 2007

The question is how people can operate both labor intensive sectors – farming and woodcarving at the same time. Regarding labor organization the revival and development of woodcarving industry have absorbed not only male but also female as well as not only village labors but also a number of people from other places as either regular or casual contract workers. Thus, labor relations in woodcarving industry and in farming activity have remarkably changed. It can be observed that changing division of labor at the village as well as at the family level has allowed villagers to operate farming and craft making together in the context of labor scarcity.

4. Changing Women's Roles in Production in Kim Thieu Village

As mentioned in the previous section, women have not been allowed to participate formally in traditional woodcarving industry since the early days. Traditionally, rural women were assigned to some kinds of work which were considered as relevant to their "biologic" characteristics and to gender reproductive roles such as agriculture, small trade and weaving in very limited spatial mobility. However, women's occupation as well as their spatial mobility has been remarkably changed in historical context. In this paper, the changes in women's roles in production will be analyzed in three major periods of economic development in northern Vietnam, which are pre-collectivization, collectivization and economic liberalization.

4.1 Women's Roles in Production in Pre-Collectivization Time

In the time of pre-collectivization, villagers lived mainly on farming, animal rearing and partly on woodcarving activities. The reason was the fact that rice cultivation alone was not able to make a village a complete economic cell (Tung and Dinh 1993). As mentioned in a variety of oral histories, there was not clear gender division of labor in farming activity. Men and women worked together as farmers in their own small plots or as tenants in the fields of the village landlords. However, gender division of labor in farming at that time reflected the physical and psychological qualities attributed to respective sexes - the strength of men, the dexterity and patience of women (Elson and Pearson 1997). Based on this sexual differentiation, various tasks were assigned to men or to women. In general, those tasks requiring great strength and energy such as plowing and irrigating fell to men, whereas women were responsible for work that was more onerous and time devouring such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting. Besides, although animal rearing and gardening could be seen as important secondary sources of households, these activities were assigned to different generations of female members such as grandmother, mother and oldest daughter. Like in other regions of Asia, Kim Thieu villagers have considered animal feeding and gardening as female sectors because they were conducted in domestic sphere.

Similar to other villages in Red River delta, handicrafts provided villagers with a particularly significant source of subsidiary income, especially in the case of starvation (Scott 1976). Nevertheless, craft making activities were merely considered as "supported activities for household economy" in this period. The peasants reserved only their leisure time for craftwork, doing them after finishing their farmwork in the fields. The oral histories of Kim Thieu village indicate that most of artisans who had to go to work outside the village were landless peasants. This means that many peasants had forcedly to become artisans because of their subsistence security. Moreover, in this period, woodcarving services used to be paid in-kind, frequently by rice or paddy with small amount that merely met the workers' need and a little surplus for their family members. Thus, the craftwork was perceived as equally to the farmwork in terms of economic contribution. Nevertheless, according to the rungs of Confucian ideological framework (1.scholar, literati; 2.peasant; 3.artisan; 4. merchant), craftwork was at the lower position in comparison with farmwork (Luong 1997).

Although woodcarving was seen as equal or lower position in comparison with farmwork in terms of economic gain, it was more privileged in cultural aspect because of patriarchal social constraints and differentiations not only between men and women, but also between insiders (local residents) and outsiders (non-residents). Before colonial period, woodcarving was bounded within the village. It has never been taught to the outsiders, even to the village daughters. Besides, village customs did not allow matrilineal practice. All these local laws were maintained in order to prevent special skills of craft production from the outsiders.

Almost all interviewees contended that in the Feudal period, only men could participate in the craftwork because of two reasons. First, the craftwork was related to constructions of temple, pagoda, communal house, imperial palace and making a roof where women had been excluded from due to the gender ideology of spirituality. Secondly, provision of woodcarving services and selling products in Hanoi city needed the labor's mobility which was one of the major constraints for women in patriarchal society. Both spiritual and spatial mobility restrictions prohibited women from involvement in traditional woodcarving activities.

Even though, this gender work was contested. Although were not able to engage in woodcarving as the same way as could take part in by their roles in the family. Female villagers used to travel with their husbands in order to look after not only their husbands, but also the team of carvers such as food providing, washing, and doing some minor works as active helpers as demonstrated in the popular local idiom.

<p><i>Wherever you (male carvers) go to work, I (carvers' wives) will carry chisels and planes and go with you. (Local idiom)</i></p>

ideology of women

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In the Feudal period, woodcarvers in Kim Thieu village were called "artisans" with more or less respectable attitude. The reason is the fact that there were very few artisans in general, woodcarvers in particular at that time. The know-how of woodcarving was strictly kept within the village. As a result, it was impossible to deliver to everyone. In addition, the craft products merely served wealthy people and those who were privileged in society. Besides, those products were produced for special purposes such as religion, mostly Buddhism, and national symbols. For these reasons, craft making activities mostly belonged to men, not to women. Patriarchal customs coupled with Buddhist ideology of gender excluded women from craft activities. The term artisans had only referred to men, and implicated male superiority over female.

4.2 Gender Division of Labor in Production in the Collectivization Period

At the end of the 1950s, Vietnamese government implemented economic reform on agricultural and rural economy. The main content of this reform was to collectivize all means of production such as agricultural land, labor, draft animals, and tools. By doing this, almost all labors had to work in either agricultural cooperative or handicraft cooperative. The

cooperative regime has significantly contributed to the equalization of male-female relations by transforming wives, unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law from unpaid family labors to cooperative paid members. This way of women’s liberalization had been carried out not only in agriculture but also in other sectors including rural industry, craft making, and rural trade. In other words, in the time of collectivization, women’s works were remunerated by the same system as the male members in their family.

Immediately after the establishment, Handicraft Cooperative’s Management Committee in Kim village invited lecturers from Hanoi University Art going to teach modern fundamental theory of woodcarving for its members including both women.

It can be said that it was the first time we (female villagers) had been taught how to carve, and since that time we could join formally in traditional craft work.
(A village woman - April, 2006)

Thieu
of Fine
men and

However, female workers were merely allowed to carry out the simple works. Particularly, during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Handicraft Cooperative seemed to stop carving wood and changed to carve ivory based on the contracts between Central Art Import-Export Company with Indian Companies. Women could not engage in such activity because ivory carving was defined by the cooperative leaders as so difficult work that only high-skilled male carvers could do. In the late 1970s, due to the withdrawal of Indian Companies, Handicraft Cooperative changed to sculpt statues and to carve wooden pictures in order to export to Eastern European countries. Unlike ivory carving, female workers were allowed to participate in statue and picture carving. Even though, female cooperative members were fewer than male in both absolute number and proportion. Moreover, Handicraft Cooperative employed the Fordist model of specialization to its production process in which male carvers were responsible for the main and more important stages such as framing, basic carving, and assembling while female carvers only completed or made the products better.

In short, there were a lot of changes in craft making activity in collectivization in comparison with the previous period. One of the most important changes is that the skills of woodcarving were no longer kept secret within small group of male carvers. All men and women in the village, even outsiders, were able to access to the so-called “know-how” of woodcarving because these skills were taught as other scientific knowledge by modern methods. As a consequence, artisans’ position was no longer important as before, and the meaning of craftwork was also changed. The most significant change was the fact that craftwork was no longer a male dominated occupation. By contrast, women were able to participate in.

Even though, women’s liberalization and gender equality in the period of collectivization in Vietnam could be seen as a “myth” because of the following reasons. Firstly, though women can go and work in the same unit with men, they are usually in the lower rank of work in comparison with men due to the traditional ideology which assumed that they were in lack of education, of skill, and of productivity. For example, in the agricultural cooperative men mostly occupied the works that need great strength and energy like plowing and pesticide spreading, so they used to get higher work-points than what women got. Thus, they had more power in control over the distributed produce at family level. Similarly, in handicraft cooperative men got higher salary than women because they used to do the skilled works while women were assigned to unskilled works. Secondly, there were less women can reach to the leading position as men in the productive organizations such as cooperatives and factories. Lastly, women could go and work in the same unit and do the same work as men in the workplace, but they had to spend the same time for the domestic works including cultivating in private plots and home gardens and keeping animals as before. The fact that even if women can go to workplace like men, they continue to be subordinated, but “by a new form of socialistic patriarchal family, socialist working conditions, far from having liberated women, doubly burdened them” due to patriarchal customs (Rofel 1999, p.51).

4.3 Changing Women’s Roles in Production in the Period of Economic Liberation

4.3.1 A Big Change of Women’s Roles in Woodcarving Industry

Before Doi Moi, even in the collectivization period, it was not seen any woman who was able to carve the sophisticated wooden pictures. But nowadays, they can not only carve, but also design the subtle wooden arts. Some of village women become very successful in woodcarving business. Their families have big factories and they have contracted with several other factories in Kim Thieu and in surrounding villages. All woodcarvings produced by these factories have been exported to China. These persons have good relationships with many big customers in large cities in China such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Xian, Guangzhou, Fukien, Shangdong, and Shengzhen, so they can sell a lot of woodcarvings. The monthly revenue of their business is about a billion VND (more than six hundreds thousands USD). These women usually go back and forth between the village and the border market (Puzhai trade zone – 150 km from the village) five or seven times a month because they have rented showrooms there.
(Nguyen Van San – A statistical staff in commune, October 2006)

Since the initiation of de-collectivization of both agricultural and handicraft cooperatives in the late 1980s and its more recent acceleration by new land reforms, agriculture and rural livelihoods in Vietnam have experienced great transition (Tuan 1995). The peasant household economy has become the most important mode of production. In the period of economic liberalization, peasant livelihoods in Kim Thieu village are no longer depended on rice cultivation, but on a number of income-generating activities including on-farm and off-farm. Changing in peasant livelihoods has brought about the change in gender relations in production. Due to the expansion of production with high demand for labor, most of male and female villagers engage in the craft works. The roles of female labors in the craft works now are more diverse than before. Women who were born in the village can take part in the stages from which they had been excluded because of traditional patriarchal customs and gender discrimination. Village women involve in craft works in various ways. They either directly participate in woodcarving production or take responsibility for product circulation. If they are contract labors, they are mostly assigned to the simple tasks such as product polishing and cleaning before selling.

4.3.2 Livelihood Diversification: Double-burden or Empowerment?

The reality of craft village development witnesses the fact that livelihood diversification forces women in most craft villages in northern Vietnam to experience the triple-burden when they are responsible for on-farm, off-farm and domestic works because they don't want to entirely give up farming for off-farm jobs. The question is why village women keep farming even if their household income is mostly generated from craft making industry.

A variety of agrarian studies interpreted that villagers try to keep farming even if they can get high income from off-farm sources because of their subsistence security in the context of economic vulnerability (Romyen 2003; Eder 1999; Kitahara 2004). This finding is entirely relevant to the case of Kim Thieu village where people live on commercial and instable woodcarving industry. Many villagers suppose that they can earn a lot of money from woodcarving activity when the market demand for its products is high, by contrast, they may have not any cash in hand when the market demand is decreased. Sometimes, they even have not enough money to buy food for their families. For this reason, farming, especially rice cultivation, still plays an important role in sustaining their livelihood. However, from the view point of gender research, it could be contended that keeping small farming in off-farm-based community helps women to empower themselves because of several reasons. Firstly, women's income sources become more diverse than men's. While village men only generate income from woodcarving, women can contribute to family budget not only by off-farm and cash, but also by on-farm and in-kind incomes which, for Beneria (1997), will be very significant in the context of economic crisis when stagnation happens with woodcarving industry. Secondly, by keeping farming as a strategy in livelihood diversification, women provide not only rice, but also vegetables and other foodstuff for their family members including men, not for themselves (Schroeder 1999). Further, in the time when chemical inputs are overwhelmingly used, providing their family with organic and fresh farm produces makes women become more powerful ever. Of course, this conclusion may be only relevant to the regions where people's living standard is relatively high, so they pay much attention to food quality rather than quantity. The evidence is the fact that most of interviewees in Kim Thieu supposed that food produced themselves must be safer and fresher than what is bought in the market. Thirdly, by leasing their farm works out to others, women not only avoid the double-burden, but they also create themselves a new kind of power. The case of Kim Thieu woodcarving village witnessed the rise of hierarchical relationship among women – one whose livelihood based on off-farm activities and other whose livelihood is agricultural-based. The discrimination is expressed not only between the female owners and female workers, but also between other villagers and hired labors. Some village women, even though they have never hired labors, still consider female hired labors as subordinate to them. It can be argued that women have capability to turn rice farming from subsistence, female, and less privileged sector into the sphere producing their new kinds of power at both intra- and extra-household levels.

4.3.3 How Village Women Can Diversify Their Livelihood Strategies?

A proliferation of livelihood studies showed that when rural livelihoods become more diverse, there are three trends of gender arrangement of labor in rural households (Kabeer 1998; Ellis 2000). The first trend asserts that women have been left behind with farming tasks and numerous chores, while male members go to seek outside works. The second popular trend of labor arrangement refers to the double-burden or multiple-burden of rural women when they have chance to diversify their livelihood strategies. The last trend seems to be unreal when discussing about the flexibility and interchangeable roles between men and women in both productive and reproductive spheres in the context of a patriarchal society like northern Vietnam. All of these trends are not able to explain the ways in which village women negotiate for diverse livelihood strategies in Kim Thieu village.

Now you cannot see any village women directly work in the rice field because earning from woodcarving is much higher than what you need to pay for hire labor. If I spend one day on woodcarving, I can pay for two or three mandays of farmwork. Moreover, woodcarving can be carried out in the home space while farm work has to be done outside with dirtiness. For this reason, I usually give my mother money to hire labor in the peak-seasons such as transplanting and harvesting, instead of doing by my self. It is very easy to look for female labors those who are willing to work in others' plots in our region.

(Tran Thi Tuyet, twenty-one-year-old girl, October 2006)

Unlike popular trends of labor rearrangement mentioned above, high income from woodcarving industry allows village women to hire labors, mostly women, from agriculture-based community for rice cultivation. By doing so, they can both participate in woodcarving as direct workers and conduct farming as managers. A number of women, especially young women, assert that they can keep farming as a strategy of their diverse livelihoods but they do not need to do by themselves.

The question here is why market of contract labor becomes available in rural area today. Like other regions in Southeast Asian, there is the introduction of numerous technical innovations in agricultural production that helped to reduce remarkably amount of labors per land unit. As a result, women in farm-based communities can finish their farmwork faster and they have more time to work outside as casual contract labors. The motivation of livelihood diversification of farm-based women can be seen as an element that helps women in woodcarving village realize their diverse livelihood strategies. Together with the availability of contract labors and the introduction of technological innovations, rural women succeed in negotiation for their livelihood, thus for their empowerment, thanks to the combination between their own exertion and outside supports from public agencies and development programs such as education, infrastructure, and so on. Apart from farming and woodcarving, some village women perform different income-generating activities. These active women do many types of business such as pig slaughtering and pork selling, operating a grocery, and fruit trading in the local market.

I usually get up at four AM, and go to slaughter pig with some villagers as my colleagues. We slaughter one pig a day then divide into three parts for three retailers. I start to sell pork since seven AM in the local market because I am one of retailers. I often finish my business at nine or ten o'clock. I come home to prepare lunch for my family including two regular contract labors. In the afternoon, I spend time on farming activities, woodcarving product polishing, or participating in some activities of Women's Union.

(Nguyen Thi Toan, October 2006)

Another question is how village women like Mrs. Toan can operate very complicated livelihood strategies as described though they remain responding to almost all domestic tasks. According to Mrs. Toan and Mrs. Hoa, they don't have to do all the works by themselves. They can ask the help from other family members. In the case of Mrs. Toan, she has two single daughters who work as craftswomen at home. So, when she comes home late, her daughters stop working earlier for food preparing and pig feeding. Further, with the help of modern facilities such as electric rice cooker and other family machines, chores are no longer work-loads for women. Like Mrs. Toan, Mrs. Hoa can get the help from her husband and her mother-in-law when she went to China for her business. She usually makes appointment with Chinese customers prior, so she merely spends two or three days on a journey from her home town to Puzhai market. Besides, the support of modern means of communication and transportation allows her to contact with Chinese customers more easily but don't need to take so much time.

Dissimilar to Hoa's and Toan's cases, several village women are still main doers in domestic works, though they increasingly participate in different economic activities and play more important role in household economy. They remain facing with patriarchal constraints in everyday life, especially at communal level. The traditional customs of a patriarchal society seems to be a barrier which limits rural women to take part in social and cultural activities in their community. Mrs. Thich – a fifty-four-year-old woman recalls that:

On the day of village festival, my husband invited his friends to have lunch in my house. I have prepared food for them before I went to join a music performance of village women because I was one of the best folk singers. But, do you know what happened when I came back from the performance. I was shock when I saw all the plates and bowls were cast down the yard in front of my house. Further, my husband angrily shouted at me that "who allow you to be absent when we have lunch?" Did he mean that I had to stay at home to serve them as a maid? I was very sad but I kept quite. I was afraid that if I said something against him, I won't have a chance to go out for such activities. (November, 2006)

In summary, in the modern time, village women not only have more job opportunities, but they also know how to improvise different factors and social relations in order to negotiate for their livelihoods. Moreover, in the process of negotiation for livelihoods, village women can obtain two purposes which are both to improve the living-standard of their families including them and to empower themselves at the household and the community levels. However, it can be argued that village women still accept patriarchal differentiation of gendered roles within the family, particularly reproductive roles. Most of them adopt the traditional norms because they don't want to trade off their total freedom by losing their stable relationships intra-family.

5. The Opportunities and Challenges of Rural Women in Economic Development

In this section, the SWOT analysis matrix is applied to indicate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of rural women when they are increasingly participate as major labor force in a number of economic activities. As an outcome of PRA approach, the SWOT matrix here was built based on the interviews of key informants and group meeting of village women (table 2). Based on the result of SWOT analysis, the major recommendations for policy-makers on women's empowerment and gender equity are drawn as following:

First, although Vietnamese government have promulgated a number of policies and programs aiming at improving women's roles in household economic development, these programs mostly targeted those who live in the remote areas while they seemed to neglect women who live and work in pre-urban places. As a result, women in Kim Thieu village have rarely benefited from such development projects, though they need to be supported the knowledge on doing business in the context of commercialization and global economic integration. Most of female traders there suppose that they do business either based on their own experience or learning from their relatives. Thus, providing women in pre-urban area like Kim Thieu village with business knowledge should be a focus in national economic policy.

Secondly, as pointed by other researchers on gender issues, the growing participation of women in paid employment has contributed significantly to the economic and social empowerment of women. Access to earned income improves women's position within the household substantially, gives them greater control over the distribution of such earnings and household resources, and generally improves their status and strength in society as well as their own self-esteem. However, this line of argument seems to ignore the power relations intra-family in the patriarchal society. The empirical data in Kim Thieu village has demonstrated that even if women significantly contribute to household budget, they are still subordinated to male authorities in social and cultural aspects. For this reason, apart from the measures to give women employment opportunities, government agencies should pay more attention to social relations in making policies on gender equity.

Table 2. SWOT Analysis Matrix of Rural Women's Participation in Production

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Women can access to traditional woodcarving industry because they were born in the village - Some women were trained the skills of woodcarving since the early days of collectivization; Most of female artisans have been trained by transferring traditional skill from generation to generation - Village women possess "nimble fingers", patient and patient characteristics - Small credit fund targeting rural women for household economic development - Strong capacity of local women's union in supporting its members in economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Woodcarving industry – high return economic activity is still considered as "male sphere" - Women are seen as main doers of farm sector and domestic chores - Patriarchal and Confucian ideas of gender differentiation prevent village women from politic, social and cultural activities - Traditional perception of gender division of labor more or less devalues women's contribution to household economy - Many women tend to accept the traditional norms and customs which confine women in reproductive sphere, especially the idea of "son preference"
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High demand for woodcarving products of domestic and international consumers creates employment opportunities for village women - Availabilities of hired labors in local market, modern agricultural technologies and domestic facilities help women to avoid double-burden - Availability of policy on gender equity in the country as well as in the region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instability of global market for woodcarvings effects women's economic contribution - Low educational levels among women - Women have to cope with health problem caused by pollution of both woodcarving and agricultural production - Lack of general project integrating rural women into economic development

Thirdly, while there is a growing number of women are succeeding in the use of new and innovative technologies in formal sector, women who work in the family-based sector remain trap into simple, traditional and manual techniques. For this reason, pollution from those technologies negatively impacts on the health of female workers. So, supplying women with the knowledge of protection from noise and dust should be put as an important part of the strategies of revival and development of traditional craft village in Red River delta.

Lastly, aside from providing women with training courses on innovative technologies and business skills, government and non-government organizations should help rural women to actively perceive their important roles and positions in

both production and reproduction. By doing this, rural women can empower themselves and will become more self-confident to participate in different economic as well as social activities.

6. Conclusion

Women's works and values of their works should be perceived and assessed in specific context. The case study in a traditional craft village indicates that patriarchal ideology of gender in work differentiation can be changed accordingly to the variation of economic, social and political conditions. The data and information evidence that the clear discrimination of work can be seen in the pre-modern time and even in the communist regime under the structure of cooperatives. But in the period of economic liberalization, gender relations in both farming and craft making industry have changed a lot. Women are no longer confined in the traditional occupations, but they have occupied many kinds of work that used to belong to men. Changing in gendered patterns of work brings about the change in gender relations not only in production, but also in other aspects. By taking responsibility for domestic works and for a number of income-generating activities, women have more voice in their families as well as in the community.

It can be argued that patriarchal ideology of work and patriarchal gender division of labor are not fixed structure, but they can be interpreted in particular situation. Therefore, the patriarchal customs and norms are de-constructed and re-constructed in specific historical context. In the case of Kim Thieu village, women have been negotiating for changing their occupations as well as their economic contribution to the households. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, they still adopt the traditional patriarchal customs of gender differentiation as "identity" of village women.

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Notes

Note 1. One sao equals to 360 m²