A new decade for social changes
Research on gender in access to economic resources and labor market of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

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Abstract. Based on the results of a survey done in 2019 to collect information on the socioeconomic state of 53 ethnic minorities in Vietnam, as well as some current study findings on economic resources and in the labor market of ethnic minorities, the article aims to provide more solutions for Vietnamese authorities and policymakers in the process of developing and implementing policies for ethnic minority areas. Thereby contributing to the effective and comprehensive promotion of gender equality in ethnic minority areas in the future.

Keywords. Ethnic minorities, economy, gender, women

1. Preamble

As a multi-ethnic country with 54 ethnic groups coexisting, including 53 ethnic minority groups, Vietnam has signed many international treaties concerning human rights and women's rights in general and ethnic minority women in particular, including such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA), General conclusion of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW),... The Vietnamese government has made significant efforts to implement its international commitments and is well praised by the international community for its successes, particularly in the field of gender equality. Vietnam's ethnic minority and mountainous regions cover about three-quarters of the country's natural territory and are home to 53 ethnic minorities with a combined population of 14.12 million people, accounting for 14.7 percent of the total national population [1]. This is a region with a critical strategic position in terms of socioeconomic status, national defense, security, and ecological environment. The ethnic minority and mountainous areas, on the other hand, are currently the most difficult areas with the poverty rate many times higher than the national average [2]. The gender gap within ethnic minority groups and between ethnic minority groups and the Kinh ethnic group (Vietnam's majority ethnic group) has persisted in most economic and socio-cultural fields, particularly in terms of economic status, access to basic social services, and participation in political, social, and mass activities. Furthermore, in today's ethnic minority population, women and girls are the most disadvantaged groups in terms of their access to opportunities and resources, owing to social norms that place them in a lower status, confining them to childbearing and household production duties. The intertwining of various
forms of discrimination based on gender and ethnicity has a significant impact on the lives of women in particular and ethnic minority communities in general in Vietnam. This is an issue that has to be explored in order to determine the root cause and devise strategies to overcome it in the future.

2. General overview of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

According to the findings of the 2019 population and housing census (Vietnam conducts a population and housing census every ten years), the total population of Vietnam is 96,208,984 people as of April 01, 2019, with 54 ethnic groups residing. The Kinh ethnic group continues to have the biggest population (85.3 percent), with 82,085,826 individuals: the remaining 53 ethnic minorities have 14,123,158 people (14.7 percent) [3]. There are 6 ethnic groups with a population of more than one million people, 15 ethnic groups with a population of less than 10,000 people (also known as very few ethnic minority, of which there are 5 ethnic groups with a population of less than 1,000 people, including: Si La, Pu Peo, Ro Mam, Brau, O Du) [4]. In Vietnam, ethnic minorities are concentrated in 64 provinces and cities, 548 districts, and 5,266 commune-level administrative divisions, primarily in the Northwest, Central Highlands, Southwest, and Central Coast. The plains and cities are home to three ethnic groups: Khmer, Cham, and Hoa, while the remaining 50 ethnic minorities reside in communities in mountainous, border, remote areas with split terrain and difficult traffic. The Northern Midlands and Mountainous region has the most ethnic minorities (about 6.7 million people), followed by the Central Highlands region (about 2 million people), the North Central Coast and the Central Coast (1.9 million people), and the Southwest region (1.4 million people), the rest of the population is spread out across the country in provinces and cities. Ethnic minority groups generally coexist in communities, intertwined with the Kinh people [5].

According to the results of the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs and the General Statistics Office's 2019 survey to collect socioeconomic information on 53 ethnic minorities, most communes in ethnic minority areas already have health stations, accounting for 99.5 percent, which is equivalent to the survey results in 2015; Only 30 communes out of 5,468 communes in ethnic minority areas lacked health stations as of now; these communes are primarily concentrated in the three northern mountainous provinces of Ha Giang, Yen Bai, and Tuyen Quang. In which 99.6 percent of commune health stations were created permanently or semi-permanently, a 0.8 percent improvement over 2015. The number of unstable or simple health stations is quite modest, with 14/20 located primarily in the Northern Midlands and Mountains. The provinces with the highest number of unstable or simple medical stations are Tuyen Quang (5 health stations), Dien Bien (3 health stations), Cao Bang and Lang Son (2 health stations each). The proportion of communes with health stations meeting the national standards of commune health in the period to 2020 reaches 83.5%, nearly 2 times higher than in 2015 (45.8%). The proportion is lower in border areas than in other areas, 78.5% versus 83.9%, with little difference across urban and rural areas. Medical care conditions in the Northern Midlands and Mountains are somewhat more limited than in other regions, but all exceed 80% [6].

People in Vietnam's ethnic minority areas still rely primarily on agricultural and forestry products for a living. The proportion of ethnic minority groups employed in industrial, construction, and service sectors is quite low, indicating that the region’s tourist and service industries have not yet fully realized their potential. The average monthly income of ethnic minorities is currently at 1.1 million, which is less than half of the national average [7]. Although agro-forestry is the most prevalent source of income for individuals in ethnic minority
and mountainous locations in general, as well as ethnic minority communities in particular, the absence or lack of productive land is common. According to survey data on the socioeconomic position of 53 ethnic minorities, up to 68.5 percent of ethnic minority households require more production land. In which, there are many ethnic groups in the Central Highlands, where over 80% of households lack productive land. According to statistics, only roughly 6.2 percent of ethnic minority workers (from primary vocational level and up) are trained, which is one-third of the national average [8]. Today, underemployment among ethnic minority youth is a major concern. More than 1.3 million of the 9.38 million ethnic minority people aged 15 and up do not have stable jobs. A portion of ethnic minority employees have left their hometowns to seek employment in industrial zones or as hired laborers in neighboring countries such as Cambodia and China. According to research on the population pyramid of 53 ethnic minorities and the population pyramid of Vietnam, the proportion of age groups of 53 ethnic minorities is lower than the national average. The proportion of the population under 15 years old is 29.7%; population from 15 to 64 years old is 65%; from 65 years of age or older is 5.3%; the corresponding figure for the whole country is 24.3%; 68%; 7.7%. This proves that the population of 53 ethnic minorities is a young population, the population aging rate is slower than the population aging rate of the whole country [9].

3. Some gender issues in accessing economic opportunities of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

Firstly, ethnic minority women face greater challenges than ethnic minority men in obtaining institutional financing for livelihood development, production, business, and service activities. Many preferential financing sources have been made available to individuals in ethnic minority and mountainous areas in recent years to assist production development and poverty eradication. The results of the 2019 Survey to collect information on the socioeconomic status of 53 ethnic minorities show that, while ethnic minority women play an important role in production, business, and service activities of traditional products in ethnic minority and mountainous areas, the percentage of ethnic minority households headed by women who received preferential loans from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies only reached 15.8 percent, nearly 5 percent lower than the corresponding percentage of male-headed ethnic minority households of 20.7%. The loan value of female-headed ethnic minority households is lower than that of male-headed ethnic minority households [10], and it is also much lower than the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies' maximum loan level [11]. Reasons include: (i) Female-headed production, business and service establishments/households are small in scale, so there is no need to borrow great amounts of capital; (ii) capacity of female heads of ethnic minority households to prepare loan documents, production and business plans is still limited, so they cannot access loans of great value; and (iii) small production, business, and service establishments and households lack sufficient books, transaction documents, and financial statements, so they do not meet the conditions for loans without loan security [12]. The most vulnerable ethnic minority women groups are less likely to benefit from microfinance institutions due to their lower success rates and lower ability to maintain savings and credit groups after the end of supporting projects [13].

Secondly, the ethnic minority female workforce is facing many disadvantages, being one of the "weak" groups in the labor market. The professional and technical level of the ethnic minority workforce has improved compared to 2015, however, it is still very weak. The proportion of ethnic minority people aged 15 years and older who received professional and technical training from primary level or higher in 2019 was 10.3% (11.7% of male and 8.9% of
female) [14], not yet equal to half of the corresponding rate of the national labor force [15]. Up to 18/53 ethnic minorities have less than 5% of the labor force who have undergone professional and technical training, such as La Hu 1.7% (2.0% of male and 1.4% of female), Xtieng 2.1% (2.8% of male and 1.3% of female), Xinh Mun 2.1% (2.9% of male and 1.3% of female), Brau 2.3% (3.0% of male and 1.5% of female), Ba Na 2.3% (2.8% of male and 1.9% of female) [16].

Thirdly, ethnic minority women are more likely to enter the labor force at a young age; the employment structure reflects a "double" disadvantage due to ethnic and gender variables. Many ethnic minority girls have been working as adults since before they were 15 years old. While most Kinh girls are still in school at this age. The labor force participation rate of the ethnic minority population aged 15 and over is 83.3 percent (87.2% of male and 79.4% of female), which is higher than the national rate of 76.2 percent (81.1% of male and 71.4%). There are 9/53 ethnic minorities with high labor force participation rate, from 90% or more such as Co Lao 94.8% (94.4% of male and 95.2% of female), Lu 94.1% (95.4% of male and 92.8% of female), Cong 91.9% (92.5% of male and 91.4% of male) [17]. These are also the ethnic groups with a high proportion of employment in the agricultural and forestry sectors; people often begin to participate in agricultural and forestry production with their households while still in lower secondary school, and they tend to work even after they reach working age. Furthermore, while the percentage of women involved in agriculture is high in many ethnic minority areas, they are less likely to have access to land, finance, natural resources, and other economic resources. Ethnic minorities frequently borrow from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies rather than commercial banks; nonetheless, the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies' loan to poor households for production and business is quite small, ranging from 5-7 million Vietnamese dong.

Fourthly, female ethnic minority workers in unstable and vulnerable jobs are more than male ethnic minority workers and female Kinh workers. Agriculture and forestry employ up to 76.4 percent of female ethnic minority workers, approximately 6% higher than male ethnic minority workers (70.5%) and and twice as high as that of female workers nationwide (35.9%). There are 24/53 ethnic minorities, with women accounting for more than 90% of agricultural and forestry workers [18]. In terms of employment position, the percentage of female ethnic minority workers doing "unpaid family work" is 52.0%, nearly 2 times higher than this rate of male ethnic minority workers at 26.6% and 2.5 times higher than female workers nationwide at 19.4% [19]. This group of jobs is unstable, working conditions are worse than those in other areas and are not subject to social insurance, unemployment insurance and compulsory social insurance.

Fifthly, there are still many impediments for female ethnic minority workers to move out of agriculture and forestry and into wage jobs in local factories, enterprises, and industrial parks in the country or go to work abroad. Among the causes are: (i) in the current gender role, ethnic minority women are still more connected to housework and family care than ethnic minority men; (ii) among some ethnic minority groups, society's prejudice against women working away from home is still strong (iii) the status of illiteracy, re-illiteracy, inability to communicate in the common language, low education level, no professional and technical training of ethnic minority women is high; (iv) they are lack of basic skills for safe and effective labor migration, such as a lack of understanding of labor and employment laws and policies, communication skills, information technology, and so on.

Sixthly, disadvantaged female ethnic minority workers' last option is to seek illicit employment outside the border. If poor female ethnic minority employees do not match the requirements for employment in domestic factories, enterprises or work abroad under contracts,
then finding illegal work outside the border is an increasingly popular option [20]. Although this job can provide an immediate source of income for disadvantaged women, it poses many risks in the process of working illegally abroad, especially in human trafficking. According to research on the livelihoods of ethnic minority households, ethnic minority areas, and mountainous areas, ethnic minority women have limited access to opportunities to support livelihood development and income generation than that of ethnic minority men [21] because they suffer from mixed disadvantages caused by ethnic and gender factors. The identification of value chains has many beneficiaries being women, according to experience in value chain development for the poor and ethnic minorities; the participation of women in key positions in production groups, commencement activities, and start-ups are important factors influencing the results. However, women in crucial positions in production groups, cooperatives, businesses, or start-ups frequently encounter more obstacles and barriers than men. These hurdles can include: financial barriers, competitiveness, movement limits, family ties, a lack of professional training, a lack of risk-taking aptitude, and so on.

4. Some solutions to develop and implement policies for women in ethnic minority areas in Vietnam

Firstly, carry out comprehensive socioeconomic development in ethnic minority and mountainous areas. In the current economic and social development conditions of the country, as well as ethnic minority and mountainous areas, in order to improve the quality of the population of ethnic minorities, the solution that is both immediate and fundamental is to promote socio-economic development, improve the living environment, and constantly improve the material and spiritual life of the people of ethnic minorities. In order to develop socio-economically in mountainous ethnic minority areas in the short term and in the long term, it is necessary to synchronously implement key criteria such as: Solve the shortage of residential land, housing, production land, water for daily life; Plan, arrange and stabilize population in necessary places; Develop sustainable agricultural and forestry production, bring into play the potentials and strengths of regions to produce goods along the value chain; Invest in essential infrastructure, serving production and life in ethnic minority and mountainous areas and public non-business units of the ethnic sector; Develop education and training to improve the quality of human resources of ethnic minorities; Preserve and promote the fine traditional cultural values of ethnic minorities in association with socio-economic development; Take care of people's health, improve the physical condition and stature of ethnic minorities; prevent child malnutrition; Implement gender equality and address urgent issues facing women and children; Prioritize investment in development of ethnic minority groups with very few people and ethnic groups with many difficulties.

Secondly, prioritize issue of teaching writing to ethnic minority women. For the subject group, literacy programs need to be practical, combining economic development and literacy, to encourage women's participation. For target groups such as primary school students (grades 1-5) and secondary school students (grades 6-9), additional investment is needed so that they can continue to the end of high school (grades 10-12) and get higher education and avoid falling re-illiteracy like previous generations of women. Conduct more comprehensive research on the illiteracy rate among ethnic minority women so that appropriate solutions for eradication of illiteracy can be devised and enhance the participation of ethnic minority women in accessing opportunities for themselves, their families and the community. Conduct more comprehensive research on the vulnerable context of ethnic minority women to be able to make recommendations and design policies tailored to the needs of ethnic minority women,
strengthen their resilience to issues of globalization, climate change, social phenomena such as trafficking in women and children, etc.

Thirdly, create opportunities for ethnic minority women's groups to access and equally enjoy social resources. The solution is to help ethnic minority women access and enjoy policies, services and resources to support economic development and the labor market in order to improve employment and economic status by strengthening propaganda and dissemination to raise awareness of ethnic minority men and women about equal rights in land and property ownership; and participate in economic decisions in households and communities. In addition, strengthen training to improve the capacity of ethnic minority women with sufficient knowledge and skills to use their property rights, ensuring substantive gender equality. Specifically, it is necessary to ensure the mainstreaming of gender equality in the development of agricultural and forestry production to promote the potential and strengths of regions to produce goods along the value chain by: (i) Determining the proportion of ethnic minority women and men participating in planning, organizing, implementing and benefiting from all production activities; (ii) Allocating an adequate budget for projects, models and activities proposed and implemented by poor ethnic minority households headed by women, households headed by single ethnic minority women; and production groups, women's cooperative groups; cooperatives, enterprises owned or co-owned by women; (iii) Organizing training courses to improve knowledge and skills for the most disadvantaged ethnic minority women groups (middle-aged ethnic minority women, who cannot speak, read, write the common language, low level of education, raising children, ..) in science and technology, calculating expenditures and producing goods along the value chain. Training courses should be gender-responsive, suitable to the needs and actual conditions of disadvantaged ethnic minority women groups (training, practicing in ethnic languages; training by tutoring method, strengthening practice in the field; longer training time; support costs or arrange childcare during the training period); (iv) improve the capacity of ethnic minority women who are business owners, owners of production, business, service and cooperative establishments in ethnic minority and mountainous areas in terms of foreign language proficiency and ability to access to market information at home and abroad.

Fourthly, provide information, propagandize, support labor migration and prevent human trafficking for female ethnic minority workers. The main support activities need to be carried out such as: career orientation counseling; vocational counseling; job introduction, counseling to work abroad under contract; legal support in labor relations; financial management and money transfer to home; counseling to deal with crises and difficulties in the process of labor migration and providing support services for victims of human trafficking. To do this well, it is important to collect data disaggregated by gender, age, ethnic origin, place of residence, and socio-economic background, as this is crucial for a better understanding of gender inequality level within each ethnic group as well as between different ethnic minority groups. It should pay attention to the specificity of each ethnic minority region in planning and organizing the implementation of policies on ethnic minorities. There is a mechanism to promote the positivity, self-reliance of ethnic minorities, socio-economic development, implement sustainable multi-dimensional poverty reduction, etc.

Fifthly, promote the participation of ethnic minority women and women's representative organizations in the process of formulating, operating, managing - controlling and monitoring policies, programs and projects to support supporting production development, job creation and job transformation in localities and ethnic minority areas. Specifically, based on the situation of gender inequality in localities and ethnic minority areas to: (i) Regulate the
proportion of ethnic minority women participating in the process of formulating, operating, managing - controlling and monitoring policies, programs and projects; (ii) Developing a pilot model to support ethnic minority women to participate in the process of formulating, operating, managing - controlling and monitoring policies, programs and projects. After implementing the pilot model, it is necessary to organize a review, draw experience and replicate the model. To do this well, it is necessary to strengthen the capacity of the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs in developing evidence-based gender-responsible programs, policies, schemes and plans, as well as implementing and monitoring programs, policies, schemes and plans effectively. Conduct regular and comprehensive research on the specific needs of ethnic minority women, with a clear understanding that the interweaving of discrimination on the basis of gender and ethnicity makes ethnic minority women particularly vulnerable politically, socially and economically, and their disadvantage is distinct from that of other groups in society.

5. Conclusion
In the context that Vietnam is committed to the implementation of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the principle of "Leave no one behind", then the issues of ethnic minorities and the promotion of gender equality, for the advancement of women in ethnic minority and mountainous areas need special attention [22]. To continue to improve the quality of life for ethnic minority populations and to meet development needs in this period of accelerating industrialization, modernization, and international integration, it is necessary to develop specific policies for ethnic minority development; integrate policies on population development and people's health care into socioeconomic development strategies, schemes, plans, and projects. This should be viewed as a long-term career, involving the entire political system at all levels, branches, and ethnic minorities themselves. Only via socioeconomic development can the living standards, living conditions, education, transportation, healthcare, and quality of life of ethnic minority populations be enhanced.

References


[12] According to Clause 1, Article 2 of Decree No. 178/1999/ND-CP dated December 29, 1999 on loan security of credit institutions.


