

Engendering Trade Liberalisation: Rural Women and the Rice Sector in Viet Nam

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“The good thing with Doi Moi is we now work for ourselves not for the cooperative...but it does not mean our lives become easier...Work in the rice fields is hard and it is harder when you come home and have to do all the small jobs...My husband ? He is busy with discussing politics...It’s a man thing ...we women do not have their guts.”¹

The promotion of trade liberalisation has become a norm in the global economy underpinned by the neo-liberal set of policies. Despite the recognition that the costs and the benefits from trade are not spread evenly amongst members of societies, the debate on trade liberalisation understates the repercussions of trade policy on gender relations. However, in recent years, there is a burgeoning literature on trade and gender which agrees that trade liberalisation is not a gender-neutral process and can be seen as a new divide around which gender relations are being configured. Yet, the discussion on trade liberalisation and its differential impact on men and women tends to concentrate on the manufacturing sector. At the same time, the impact on women of the accelerated trade liberalisation in the agricultural sector remains largely under-researched. In fact, at the global level women represent 66 percent of the economically active population in the agricultural sector and are identified as a major provider of food and income for their families and communities. In transition countries, the difficulty of studying the interrelations between trade, agriculture and women is compounded. Indeed, liberalisation is not merely an externally imposed set of policies but it is intertwined with domestic reform. Hence, it is anticipated that the impact on women’s lives is extensive.

The objective of this paper is to examine and analyse the forward and backward linkages between rice trade liberalisation policy, the mediating institutions and rural women in Viet Nam. Commencing from 1986 the Doi Moi (renovation) policy has transformed Viet Nam’s agricultural sector. In an attempt to remedy the persistent food deficit resulting from low productivity in agriculture, the cooperatives were abolished and replaced with a contractual system. Subsequently, an export-oriented approach has become central to Vietnamese agricultural production. Given the centrality of rice for Viet Nam’s agriculture and that rural women account for sixty five percent of the agricultural labour force in the production of rice, this is deemed an appropriate sector to assess the impact of liberalisation. Employing gender-aware economics as a conceptual framework complemented with an analysis of women’s agency, the paper aims to analyse how Doi Moi reform and its focus on trade liberalisation affect the lives of rural Vietnamese women involved in rice production. It is concerned with how the

¹ Interview with a woman in Than Toan village, Hue Vietnam July 2005.

liberalisation policy is played out at different levels of the economy and more importantly how rural Vietnamese women as social agents interpret and negotiate downward reform pressures from the national level. Overall, this paper seeks to investigate the limits and potential of the gender-aware theoretical approach, whilst analysing women's perceptions and negotiation of change in the context of rice trade liberalisation and the Doi Moi reforms.

