

ARTICLE

Vietnam: Activities Targeting Marginalized Women's Groups for Gender Equality and Development

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Abstract The Vietnamese Women's Museum (VWM) opened in 1995 with the mission to improve public knowledge of the historical and cultural heritage of Vietnamese women in the nation's 54 ethnic community groups. The VWM aimed to be a center for cultural exchange with women from other nations with the goal of fostering "equality, development, and peace." At the outset it honored the positive role played by women in general, and presented some typical individuals acclaimed for their contributions and sacrifices. After some visitor research, the museum is now using a gender-specific approach, playing the role of social critic, reflecting contemporary life, and targeting marginalized women groups.

OVERVIEW OF THE VIETNAMESE WOMEN'S MUSEUM

The Vietnamese Women's Museum (VWM) opened in 1995 with the mission to improve public knowledge of the historical and cultural heritage of Vietnamese women among the nation's 54 ethnic community groups. The VWM aimed to be a center for cultural exchange with women from other nations with the goal of fostering "equality, development and peace."

The Vietnamese Women's Museum is funded by the Vietnam Women's Union and is an entity within this organization. VWM reflects the policies and political agenda of the VWU; all exhibition information and literature must first be examined and given permission by VWU. The VWU is an extremely large organization operating on the national, provincial, and district levels throughout Vietnam; it advocates policies to ensure women's rights, and provides services for women in both urban and rural areas. In 1985, Madam Nguyen Thi Dinh, the president and founder of the VWU, first

raised the idea of creating a museum dedicated to honoring Vietnamese women, and thereafter made the creation of a women's museum one of her special concerns. Designed by female architect Tran Xuan Diem, the museum began construction in 1991 with financing from the state.

Although there is evidence of the ancient roots of a matrilineal society in Vietnam, most of Vietnam's ethnic tribes (including the majority Kinh, which is 87 percent of the population) follow a patrilineal family model. Family is at the center of Vietnamese culture and spiritual worship. Traditionally, women are responsible for matters of the home, child care, and rice harvesting. During the period of conflict, women played a decisive role in the battle against their oppressors, often fighting side by side with the men. In 1975, after Vietnam was liberated, the work of the Vietnam Women's Union made a dramatic improvement to women's rights. At present, women can study

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and work as freely as men, and many hold positions of power in Vietnamese government. Underlying prejudice against women still remains, however, especially in poorer Vietnamese communities. Over time, VWM has shifted from a museum of history and culture to a museum focusing on gender, in order to continue improving the rights of women in Vietnam by providing information on contemporary social issues of Vietnamese women.

As a gender-tasked museum, VWM works with experts on gender studies to produce regular publications based on museum work. Education services and resources are provided to teach children and students about women's contribution in history and everyday life. The museum website has many online exhibitions for researchers into gender studies overseas, and VWM is currently working on producing a newsletter to provide regular updates on contemporary women's issues and museum events.

In addition, VWM has increasingly been focusing on the development of special exhibitions which reflect aspects and issues relating to gender and the contemporary life of Vietnamese women. To effectively develop into a domestic and international center of research and cultural exchange that contributes to achieving the goal of gender equality, VWM constantly renews the contents and activities of these exhibitions. As such, VWM has become a dynamic cultural center in the capital city of Hanoi.

In October 2010, the Vietnamese Women's Museum completed the major project of upgrading and renovating its permanent exhibitions. Since the renovation, the exhibition spaces have been modernized and are displayed in a more systematic way, covering three topics: women in family, women in history, and women's fashions. The VWM currently has a display area of over 21,527 square feet (2,000 square meters), and a collection of more than 25,000 valuable

objects and documents which reflect the significant contributions of Vietnamese women to the nation's development, culture, and society. Since opening to the public in 1995, the Vietnamese Women's Museum has organized many successful exhibitions, serving millions of Vietnamese and foreign visitors.

KEY ACTIVITIES OF THE VIETNAMESE WOMEN'S MUSEUM

Like many other museums in Vietnam, the Vietnamese Women's Museum, from its establishment in 1987 to 2000, concentrated its exhibitions on issues of past history and the women's revolution. It honored and praised the positive role played by women in general and presented some typical individuals acclaimed for their contributions and sacrifices. It paid little attention to the private lives of women, particularly disadvantaged groups of women. This curatorial viewpoint, which used this approach for both theme and selection of contents, attracted very few visitors to temporary exhibitions which failed to meet visitors' needs and interests.

In response to this situation, the Vietnamese Women's Museum conducted an assessment and survey to gather public feedback to determine the following information: why exhibitions were not attractive to the public; what visitors wanted to see when they visited the museum; and how the museum could play a role in society, particularly in promoting gender equality. As a result, VWM realized and created its new mission as a gender-focused museum and expanded its critical function regarding contemporary social issues and cultural heritage in a multicultural society.

In 2004, VWM experimented with its first special exhibition, *Family Life and Social Activities of Women in Cua Van Fishing Village*. The exhibition reflected these new views by creating



Photo 1. The Vietnamese Women's Museum building in Hanoi. All photos in this article are courtesy of the Vietnamese Women's Museum.

basic changes in its approach, including respecting and developing the voices of the owners of cultural heritage. Through the personal stories of insiders, the exhibition revealed important aspects of their daily lives.

From 2004 until now, the Vietnamese Women's Museum has organized eight exhibitions using this new focus, with a corresponding increase in public interest. These exhibitions focus on women's issues in contemporary life and depict the challenges, difficulties, sacrifices, and losses suffered by women. These women include vulnerable groups, women living in disadvantaged areas, female victims of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS, and women entrepreneurs who are facing challenges in a period of international integration. Many exhibitions have received a warm response from domestic and

international visitors, especially the exhibitions *Street Vendors* and *Single Mothers' Voices*.

Some exhibitions held by VWM and public feedback

The exhibition *Family Life and Social Activities of Women in Cua Van Fishing Village* opened in early 2004. At that time, Ha Long Bay had been recently recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage Site and had become known both locally and internationally as one of Vietnam's most famous attractions. Yet very few people knew of the existence of a small fishing village in Ha Long Bay where the villagers' way of life, their shelter, and customs are very different from the majority of the people living on the mainland. The Vietnamese



Photos 2 and 3. Permanent exhibition, Women in the Family.

Women's Museum selected the topic of women's lives in Cua Van fishing village for a special exhibition.

The exhibition asked visitors to learn more about the daily life of women and children in the fishing village: how pregnant women give birth in difficult conditions on the vast sea; how children grow up on a narrow fishing boat deck; and how they have to row themselves by boat to go to school. The exhibition presented the difficulties and disadvantages as well as the aspirations of women and children who lived in this village after Ha Long Bay was recognized as a World Heritage Site. It also raised issues for policy makers on how to improve the quality of life for these people by narrowing the gap among different social groups and resolving the necessity of preserving cultural heritage in the cause of development and integration.

In 2006, the Vietnamese Women's Museum held an installation exhibition entitled *Who Is Going to Care?* The exhibition provided an opportunity for people living with HIV to be involved in creating some of the exhibition displays by sharing writings of their thoughts and aspirations for their family and community. The exhibition aimed to educate visitors to the threat of HIV/AIDS to women, as well as to help victims of HIV/AIDS to become more confident when integrating into the community, and helping the community to assist these disadvantaged people.

In the 2007 exhibition *Women Overcoming Bad Fates*, stories were told of women in extreme conditions who had to overcome the difficulties of their severe circumstances to find happiness for themselves, their children, and their family. Women from diverse backgrounds came together to tell of multiple hardships—stories



that are typical of many women in Vietnam. Many were mothers of large families who had to adjust to the death of a spouse or extreme poverty in order to raise their children—yet through perseverance and hard work these women managed to send their children to university. The skill, spirit, and remarkable perseverance of these women gave them the strength to overcome their misfortune. The exhibition asked visitors to take inspiration and strength from their stories in overcoming their own difficulties.

I felt very moved when seeing this exhibition. Thank you VWM for making a meaningful exhibition which gave me the chance to learn more about their lives and leave with increased knowledge for myself. —Nguyen Huong Ly, Vietnamese visitor

This is a meaningful exhibition. Vietnamese women are extraordinary: their incredible

sacrifices and strength. I hope that the VWM will continue to create more exhibitions like this so women in difficulty will be honored, and we will be able to contribute towards easing their difficult lives. —Trinh Hong Linh, Vietnamese visitor

Thank you for organizing this useful and interesting exhibition about women who overcome their hard fates in order to have a bright future. I hope we will have more women like this in Vietnam. —Le Viet, Vietnamese visitor

In 2008, VWM launched the exhibition *Street Vendors*, which received a very good response from domestic and international visitors. Most street vendors are rural women who are unable to find jobs in their home town and thus migrate into major cities to earn a living. Although they work from dawn to dusk, they barely earn enough money to support themselves

and their families. These already difficult conditions were exacerbated by legislation that forbade women from selling their wares on certain main streets; there were arguments that the women were blocking traffic as well as concerns about hygiene, and the community was divided over how to deal with this issue.

The exhibition focused on street vendors working in Hanoi, giving them the opportunity to tell the true stories of their livelihoods and their silent sacrifices for their family. These women make money by selling products on the streets, and send money home to their family, husband, and children who live in the countryside. To save as much money as possible they live in narrow boarding houses and are very sparing with food. The exhibition also highlighted the emotional toll that the women and their families faced in living apart for long stretches of time. The exhibition had a strong impact on the perception of this community, particularly among people in Hanoi, and by raising awareness it helped the public become more sympathetic to the plight of female vendors.

Following on from the success of this exhibition, the Vietnamese Women's Museum launched an educational program for students by organizing a photo exhibition *Street Vendors through the Eyes of Students*. This program allowed students to directly interact with street vendors and gave them the chance to experience their lives by following them for a day. In addition, the program provided training to street vendors to improve their awareness of environmental protection, food safety, and hygiene. In this case, VWM established a network with over 1,500 street vendors.

Without street vendors in Hanoi, we would miss a beautiful image. I think we have to work with street vendors in order to keep this cultural

beauty. We should let the street vendors continue to sell fresh food such as fruit and vegetables. —Van Anh, Vietnamese visitor

I found this exhibition very useful and through this exhibition visitors can discover more about the lives of women who work as street vendors. They are highly appreciated. —Ha Thu, Vietnamese visitor

This is a very, very interesting exhibition. I hope many tourists walking through the streets of Hanoi like me will see this exhibition in order to understand the situation and circumstances of their lives of these street vendors. —Gisela Blomberg, Germany

I am Vietnamese but now I live in Australia. Last time I returned to Vietnam on the Lunar New Year in 2008 I found that the street vendors made me angry because they caused traffic jams. But this time, seven or eight months later, I feel so sad to see that they have gone. The archetypal cultural feature of Hanoi has disappeared. Thank you for preserving this ancient feature of Hanoi. —Nga, Vietnamese visitor

On World Violence Prevention Day (November 25, 2009), the exhibition *Changing for Alteration* was held in cooperation with the Center of Women's Development (CWD), and attracted significant public attention in the media. The stories of victims of domestic violence were told at the exhibition and visitors were asked to witness the physical and spiritual pain of each victim. The exhibition aimed to break the silence of the victims and called on the community to raise their voices against domestic violence.

The Exhibition *Peaceful Place*, held in 2010, raised awareness about the trafficking of



Photo 4. Permanent exhibition, Women in History.

women and children in Vietnam. It featured the touching stories of victims at a “peaceful house” which provides shelter for them after being trafficked. Their stories revealed the pain they experienced, the loss of honor and dignity, as well as their aspirations for integrating back into community. The exhibition left a strong impression on visitors, calling on them to raise their sense of responsibility and build an equitable society for development.

On March 7, 2011, the exhibition *Single Mothers’ Voices* was opened to the public at VWM. Applying the approach of cultural anthropology and photo voice, 20 single mothers from the Tan Minh commune, Soc Son district, Hanoi were trained and given cameras to take photos of themselves, their daily lives, and other women in the same circumstances. The exhibition portrayed 18 mothers who have to

“shoulder the heavy burden” of acting as both mother and father, as well as overcoming difficult circumstances and gender stereotypes and their own sense of inferiority in order to raise their children and find happiness. The focus on discrimination and prejudice against these women demonstrated that changes are needed and action should be taken to improve the condition of single mothers in Vietnam.

After the *Single Mothers’ Voices* exhibition was launched, it was widely covered in the press. Museum staff and single mothers who took part in the exhibition were interviewed by VTV 1. Subsequently, Viet Nam News shot a documentary about several of the single mothers from the exhibition. In addition, many visitors who were moved by the exhibition contacted VWM about possible ways to improve the condition of single mothers, such as job offers at



Photo 5. Permanent exhibition, Women's Fashions.

factories and workshops. The overwhelmingly positive response from the community demonstrated that the exhibition was successful in delivering its message to the public.

The thematic exhibitions held by the Vietnamese Women's Museum targeting marginalized women groups have received warm response and encouragement from domestic and international visitors. They help raise public awareness and prove most effective when featuring contemporary social issues. They also demonstrate that the goal of reaching marginalized groups of women and presenting challenging social problems is correct, and this will be the path that the Vietnamese Women's Museum will follow in the future.

I cried when reading and understanding more about the circumstances of these single

mothers and I admire their bravery. Today there are a lot of women like this in Vietnam who can't live as they wish because they don't dare to live as a single mother. This exhibition helped me understand better about women's rights. Good luck and success to the exhibition. —Viet Anh, Vietnamese visitor

I am a member of the Women's Union in Yen Son district, Tuyen Quang province, and for a long time I have wanted to visit the VWM. I was especially moved when seeing the *Single Mother's Voice* exhibition because these women live in my community. I now feel that I have some deficiencies as a member of the VWU. After seeing this exhibition, I will return to my hometown and will try to initiate some new plans to help these women. I am grateful to this project for helping society understand more



Photo 6. Visitors to the permanent exhibition.

about single mothers and presenting them with humanity and respect. They are so strong. I hope the VWU will build on this project to care for and help single mothers across the whole country and multiply the models like this. I promise I will immediately help the women in my community village. —Vu Thi Toan, Vietnamese visitor

This is the best exhibition I have seen. It gives the story of real life through the words of the single woman. I am glad that these women are overcoming their hardships, although I understand that life is still very difficult. I hope through exhibits like this a greater understanding and compassion is given to these women. —Ain Mc'Grally, Ireland

I don't know the words great enough to express how important and moving this project

and exhibition is. That some concrete and solid work is being undertaken to allow these amazing, strong, incredible women to succeed in their lives is fantastic. Their courage and power is also incredible—the strength to follow a path in life which is so against the norm, when the society could censure them so heavily for doing so. It is so valuable too, that visitors to this museum can learn about their story and be educated about how life is for many, many women. It is a different world from my culture and continent. The clarity and realness of the accounts and photos really bring the situation present. The fact that the women were given the cameras, rather than being subjects of a photographer, exemplifies the quality that makes this project stand out—it is about empowerment, rather than charity or patronage. I only wish that more of our richer nations would make a difference like this so that our sisters all over the world can live independently whether they are



Photo 7. A temporary exhibition, *Single Mothers' Voices*.

single through choice or circumstance. For women to have the say in their destiny is so important. Thank you to all you women for sharing your stories with us and thanks to the curators of this exhibition for placing it in this accessible context.—Rosy, London, U.K.

DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

With its new function as a gender museum and social critic, VWM faces a number of difficulties and challenges in its curating, organization of its exhibitions, and its educational programs relating to marginalized women groups. They include:

Research methodologies and approaches

Marginalized groups are often very sensitive. They lack information and often suffer

from an inferiority complex about themselves; therefore it is sometimes difficult to reach them and conduct research. It often takes a certain period of time for curators to establish good relations with them and win their trust.

Resources to undertake activities

For each exhibition, VWM always has to conduct activities to support curating and establish good relationships with the source community. However, due to our limited resources (including financial and human resources, competence and capacity to realize significant commitments to the community), educational programs have been effective but are not yet sustainable. Their activities can only be maintained for a short period of time.

During the development of curating and organization of exhibitions, VWM curators are inexperienced in applying different research

methodologies, particularly in the arrangement of interviews, interviewing skills, and data analysis.

Cooperation to resolve sensitive issues

In the past, most of the museum exhibitions in Vietnam only featured positive aspects

of life. However, during the process of renovation and the application of a cultural anthropological approach, VWM has begun focusing on sensitive issues and marginalized groups. The VWM must establish cooperation and partnership with social organizations and other international museums to jointly tackle these sensitive issues in order to raise community awareness and fight the discrimination and stigmatization of marginalized groups.

FUTURE ACTIVITIES

VWM is seeking partnership to conduct future exhibition projects, including *Women Marrying Foreigners*, *Scrap Iron Dealers*, and *Migrants*, with an aim to promote gender equality for these marginalized women through exhibitions and educational programs.

Studies in visitor demographics demonstrate that the VWM is primarily visited by foreigners. For example, in the month of February 2012, the VWM received 1,500 visitors, 1,100 of which were foreign. Generally, the museum receives most Vietnamese visitors on national holidays, especially International Women's Day and Vietnamese Women's Day. However, visitor numbers are still fairly low, and the VWM is working on increasing visibility by working with local organizations and tourist agencies, as well as developing resources and activity packs for family and school visits.

VWM wishes to take part in the FIHRM Conference to learn from the experience of other museums in tackling sensitive issues in a positive way through exhibitions and educational programs. This event will help improve the capacity of our curators and staff in undertaking issues such of human rights and gender issues.



Photo 8. The interactive "experience space" in the permanent exhibition.

CONCLUSION

It can be confirmed that the Vietnamese Women's Museum is one of the museums in Vietnam pioneering in renewal and renovation of operations and research target groups, and as such is fulfilling its function as a social critic. This is evident through its efforts to upgrade and revise the contents of its permanent exhibitions and to shift from a museum of culture and history to a museum of gender, as well as its attempts to organize thematic exhibitions on marginalized women groups in the recent past.

In the trend toward gender equality, VWM will continue its research, curating, and exhibitions focusing on other marginalized women groups. In addition, it will continue to diversify its educational activities and public relations, increase communication to encourage higher visitor numbers to the VWM and its exhibitions, and create favorable conditions for visitors to join its activities in order to bring the museum closer to the public and build it into a gender museum of international standards. **END**

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