



VOICES *OF*

Vietnamese women

ENTREPRENEURS



BUSINESS AND FAMILY WORK - LIFE BALANCE

As women throughout the world have greater access to economic opportunities, they are increasingly able to contribute financially to the well-being of their families. However, they may also encounter more complications in balancing work and family life. In many countries, traditional expectations of a woman's role and functions within the family can persist, potentially leading to a "double shift, double burden" for those who work outside the home. This is especially true for many women in developing nations, "where poverty and lack of infrastructure can make the most basic tasks harder and more time-consuming".¹⁴ For women entrepreneurs in particular, time spent on domestic duties can leave them with less availability for other activities that may help grow their businesses, such as training, networking and business development.

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

In Vietnam, women entrepreneurs strive to build successful businesses while also maintaining a strong role in their families. Many believe that balancing work and family can be much harder for women than for men. Women often feel pressure, either self-inflicted or from others, to put their families first before their businesses:

"Sometimes I feel women have to divide themselves in two halves: one for family and one for society."

Another woman told us,

"I have worked for over 20 years, but in my mind it's always 'family and work,' never 'work and family.' "

Tran Thi Lan Huong, 29, is the director of Hanoi-based Nam Son Trading and Production Co. Ltd., a business that assembles, produces and distributes bathroom and kitchen equipment. Huong started her business in 2001 and registered it as a private company in 2003. As is common for many women entrepreneurs in Vietnam, Huong has found that her family is both an invaluable source of support as well as a significant time commitment.



With little business experience and a small amount of capital borrowed from her family and friends, Huong started a business as a small-scale trader.

"In the beginning, foreign business partners didn't take me seriously because they thought I was too young. I knew nothing about running a business. I was

just learning by doing - learning from each experience about dealing with customers."

Two years later, Huong was ready to set up a company. She was also pregnant with her first baby.

"It was such a difficult time for me. I was doing everything myself, even making deliveries to my customers."

The ability to make quick and effective decisions is a key aspect of managing any business. Although women entrepreneurs recognize that business advisors or consultants can add value to their enterprises and help them with key issues, the high cost of such expertise prevents many women from actually employing them. Instead, many women in Vietnam frequently turn to family members for advice before making important business decisions:

"Both my husband and I are entrepreneurs, so we often discuss business matters. My husband has good ideas...everyone looks at an issue from a different perspective. Sometimes he helps me by giving me a number of options from which to choose. But other times I just have to make my own decisions and stick to them."

Family members, especially husbands, can provide varying levels of support:

"If both a husband and wife are entrepreneurs, they can discuss business with each other...but if they do different things, it's more difficult. Family happiness is ultimately determined by the woman."

Many women managers of family enterprises indicate that even though they exercise *de facto* operational control, it is extremely important to have important decisions appear as though they were made by their husbands or another man in the family.

SOCIAL PRESSURES

Most women entrepreneurs in Vietnam cherish their traditional roles and influences within their families, but they are also sensitive to the fact that societal conventions, which stem partly from patriarchal Confucian traditions, may complicate their efforts to strike a balance between business and

personal life. Those who want their businesses to grow find that practical considerations, such as time and resources, can limit their choice of activities:

"I want to grow my business, but only to the extent that I can manage it. I don't want my business to expand to a point where it's beyond my own management capacity. As a woman, I have a lot of other responsibilities to both my family and society."

However, other women feel that gender biases prevent society from acknowledging their achievements and contributions:

"When your business achieves a certain level of success, you want to take some pride in it. But when a woman entrepreneur is successful, sometimes she isn't given the credit she deserves, and instead, people will say that she used her femininity to get ahead. When I hear something like that, it bothers me, and it affects my work and attitude. I feel like all of my efforts, the fact that I worked all those years and sacrificed spending time with my family hasn't been recognized and valued. This is especially difficult for younger businesswomen who are successful, as they may have small children at home and therefore more family responsibilities...it's probably a bit better for older women."

Occasionally, some women entrepreneurs have even had to defend their right to success, wealth and a career.

STRIKING A BALANCE

Although juggling work and family can be difficult, many women entrepreneurs have developed their own creative and effective ways of managing their time and other people's expectations:

"The biggest lesson I've learned in running my own business is the importance of planning my

time and relying on the right people. I didn't have my first baby until six years after I got married because I couldn't juggle work and family at the same time. Before I had my baby, it wasn't unusual for me to work 16 hours a day. Now I work 10 hours a day, and when I get home, I focus solely on my baby. I manage this by delegating responsibility to others. At home, I have a housekeeper, and at work, I have slowly moved away from dealing with day-to-day management of the company towards focusing on strategy and business development."

Women find that networking with other women, sharing experiences and discussing strategies both helps and inspires them to continue with their efforts. Through their successes, businesswomen challenge traditional Vietnamese gender roles on a daily basis, ultimately paving the way for the next generation of female entrepreneurs.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Although Vietnam is a regional pioneer in the area of gender equality, women business owners believe that more can be done to improve business opportunities. At a broader level, government and society should recognize that

"Equality doesn't mean that women want to trade places with men. They still want to be wives and take care of the family. Society needs to provide more support for women-owned enterprises, because women entrepreneurs have to juggle both family responsibilities and run their businesses."

In terms of specific policy solutions, besides investing in the infrastructure and services that women need to coordinate their family and professional lives better, providing more access to business and management training would be a smart way for the government and society to go. As Do Thi Tuyet Mai suggests,

"Women entrepreneurs need better access to business education and training so that they can manage their businesses better. Training courses need to help women establish longer-term strategies for their businesses. Women entrepreneurs would benefit from having access to networks where they could ask questions of each other and share experiences about running a business."

During the next few months, the National Assembly is expected to pass the Law on Gender Equality, which not only reinforces the principle of gender equality in various arenas, including economic and social, but also will outline specific policy measures to support women's empowerment and shape a more equal society. The Vietnam Women's Union has been actively involved in helping the government solicit feedback on the law from business groups and the broader public so that it can be relevant and effective.