

Vietnam: For Gender Justice, Women Journalists Use the Power of the Pen

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HANOI, Dec 10 - The conviction of an elderly man in November 2017 in the southern Vietnamese city of Vung Tau for sexually assaulting baby girls was a long-awaited triumph for Chinh Truc, a female journalist who had campaigned tirelessly to bring the paedophile to justice.

Chinh Truc is the pen name of Ms Dinh Thu Hien, who reported the case of the 77-year-old sexual predator in a series of over 20 articles published in the online 'Vietnamese Women' newspaper.

The three-year prison sentence handed down by the court to the abuser on 17 November was a major news story, showing how women journalists are effectively using the power of the media to help victims of gender violence and injustice in the country.

'Vietnamese Women' is one of the many media organizations that are increasingly taking up the cause of gender equality and justice in Vietnam. By keeping the case continuously in the public eye through her series of reports, Chinh Truc was able to force authorities to act against the sexual abuser in Vung Tau.

"Vietnamese Women newspaper was always updating this case through interviewing the suspect, lawyers and keeping in touch with survivors' families," says the journalist. "The local legal authorities in Ba-Ria - Vung Tau and Vung Tau city were 'delaying' prosecution of the suspect," and it was only after "tens of articles published in Vietnamese Women, that the case was brought to light", she says.

A female government prosecutor, Madam Thuy of the Supreme People's Procuracy of Vietnam recognized the role played by the media in the Vung Tau case. "It was a very serious case and it was hard to implement the prosecuting process. Media supported this process," she says.

Ms. Dinh is aware of the power that media gives to her in her fight for gender equality. By adopting the pen name Chinh Truc, she has put her faith in her ability to use the media for public good, the journalist explained in an interview to the online media website 'Doisong Plus'. "Investigation takes a lot of effort, time, money and persuasion, especially for female journalists," she said.

She is one of the growing numbers of women journalists in the country who have brought gender issues to the forefront of public discussion. Women-related news and stories have become popular in the Vietnamese media. A Google search for "child sexual abuse", "female worker" or "businesswomen" yields hundreds of thousands of contemporary news stories in Vietnamese.

“Women have become very significant in the media. Women-related issues are being explored from many angles,” says woman academic Nguyen Thi Hang in an article on the theme of women in current Vietnamese media, which was published on the website of the Vietnamese Journalism Association.

There has been a considerable increase in the number of female reporters in newsrooms in the country, says Associate Professor Dinh Thuy Hang, Director of Vietnam’s Media Museum, affiliated to the Vietnam Journalists Association. Vietnamese women are represented in different fields of journalism, ranging from reporting to management, printing and advertising, and account for more than 50% of the all personnel in the news media industry, she says.

Child sexual abuse a media priority

The Vung Tau sexual abuse case highlighted the growing public awareness of sexual abuse of children in the country. Earlier in March 2017, Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang asked the Ministry of Public Security and the Supreme People’s Procuracy of Việt Nam to direct judicial authorities to investigate a widely reported case of sexual abuse of pre-teen girls.

According to data published by the General Department of Vietnam Police, girls accounted for more than 80% of the over 4,100 cases of child sexual abuse between 2014 and 2016, nationwide. Six percent of the child victims were under the age of six, 33% were between 6 and 12 years old while the rest were between the ages of 13 and 16. Of the victims, some 30% were sexually abused twice or more. Nearly 700 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in the first half of 2017.

In spite of the prevalence of this gender-based crime, it is very difficult to bring the perpetrators to justice as the process takes much time.

“Some cases would not have been ‘well-known’ if they had been solved in time. Local authorities take a long time in dealing with these cases,” says Pham Dinh Nghinh, Director of the Centre of Children Social Welfare, Ho Chi Minh City. Such delays in justice motivated Ms. Hien and tens of her female media colleagues to do their utmost to raise public awareness of gender-based violence, especially against baby girls.

“Almost all journalists reporting cases of child sexual abuse are female,” says a woman communication officer for an organization working to protect children from sexual abuse.

Ms Hien says she empathizes with the victims of child sexual abuse and persists in trying to bring the perpetrators to justice. In her interview with Doisong Plus on the Vung Tau case, she recalled how her coverage of the case was “full of hope and despair” but she “tried all my best whenever I thought of Madam Thuy (the victim’s mother) and the victim.”

Some media organizations, including Vietnamese Women, report all child sexual abuse cases. VietnamNet, the official media news agency run by the Ministry of Information and Communications, has a special section titled “Child sexual abuse” which focuses on the social impact of such cases.

“Over a short period of time, the continuing frequent nationwide media coverage of child sexual abuse has resulted in a public outcry,” say editors of the VietnamNet Child sexual abuse section.

Vietnam’s President Quang too has acknowledged the significant role of the media in the fight against gender-based violence. In recent months, he has twice called on local authorities to punish any case of violence against children. “Executive bodies will punish and sentence perpetrators or

anyone supporting this violence,” the President said.

The increasing media coverage of gender-based violence and inequality has led to the government collaborating with the United Nations in a project to support policies and programmes to prevent and respond to gender-based violence, using a human rights-based approach. Jointly funded by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Ministry of Labour, the project is being implemented by Vietnam’s Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA).

The project will develop standards for gender-based violence prevention, policy advocacy and behavioural change promotion campaigns among others, to prevent domestic violence.

Gender issues in media spotlight

Other aspects of gender justice in the country are increasingly being spotlighted by Vietnamese women journalists. In a first such report in the media, Nguyen Anh Thu, a woman reporter from the national radio station, Voice of Vietnam spent seven nights with homeless women who live on the streets of Hanoi. These women migrated from rural areas to earn a better income in order to educate their children. The young reporter, who has worked for Voice of Vietnam for the past six years, spent nights with the migrant women on the dusty cement pavements of Hanoi during the summer to get a first-hand feel of their living conditions.

“I saw a group of women collecting rubbish from 6 pm to 4 am in the morning. After talking and living with them, I found that it might be not be a good idea to provide them with free meals that people often give to the homeless,” Ms. Thu Anh reported. The women are happy and want to do the work they are doing. “They dream of winning the lottery. They sing and laugh”.

In her 10 -minute audio story for Voice of Vietnam, the journalist told about the happy and independent life of these women in Hanoi. Ms. Thu Anh’s bold reporting of their living conditions, helped change the popular image of women working in the informal sector of the Vietnamese urban economy.

According to government data, more rural women than men migrate to seek work in Vietnam’s big cities. Women account for 52.4% of all rural-urban migrants in the 15-59 age groups in Vietnam , says the 2016 report of the General Department of Statistics. This trend of feminization of migration is confirmed by previous surveys.

The issue of working conditions for Vietnamese women in the country’s formal sector, in particular its large export manufacturing industry is also coming to the forefront in media coverage, thanks to the interest shown by women journalists.

Following up on the shocking findings of a joint investigation by a foreign and local non-governmental organization (NGO) of working conditions for women in two Vietnam-based factories of global consumer goods giant Samsung, a Vietnamese woman journalist applied for and took up a job as an assembly line worker in a Samsung factory in Vietnam to study the situation at first hand.

According to the investigation by the Hanoi-based Research Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) and global NGO network IPEN, about 80 % of the workers in the two Samsung factories were women in their twenties who had to remain standing throughout their 8-to-12-hour shifts and even work on weekends. Workers suffered extreme fatigue and fainted on the job while miscarriages among pregnant workers were “extremely common” and “even expected.”

There has also been widespread media coverage of new pension rules for workers that discriminate against women. Under the new rules, women employees retiring in 2018 will get a lower pension in comparison to those who retired in 2017. A woman employee retiring on 01 January 2018 will lose 10% of her pension compared to a woman employee who worked for the same number of years but retired on 31 December 2017. "It is unfair. It is clear that these calculations do not benefit, and are even unjust for these women," wrote Vu Hanh, a woman journalist of Voice of Vietnam.

Almost all media outlets have extensively reported the issue with a clear message that this "irrational calculation" should be adjusted because it is unfair and would affect at least 21,000 women retiring in 2018.

A woman journalist writing under the pseudonym Minh Van for VTC News argued that although this change in pension calculations affected both women and men, the impact on the latter was less as it was to be applied to men in phases.

During an October 2017 online press conference held by the Vietnam Social Security office on the new pension rules, attending journalists, who were almost all women, expressed alarm over the increase in the number of female employees seeking early retirement due to their concerns over the new pension calculations.

Responding to the media concern, a top official from the government social security department said his office had requested parliament to consider revising the new pension rules. A month after the press conference, the President of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour made a similar request to the parliamentary committee, the National Assembly Chairwoman and the National Assembly Committee on Social Affairs.

The interventions, taken under media pressure, led the Minister of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Dao Ngoc Dung to declare that his office would try to resolve the issue so that women employees' benefits were not affected.

Reporting the role models

Women journalists are also telling success stories that can inspire other women. Freelance journalist Nguyen Thi Lan Anh has written about Vietnamese businesswomen in different business magazines and online publications. She depicts them as active and inspiring examples of modern women who successfully lead independent lives and have escaped traditional women roles.

There is no shortage of successful businesswomen in Vietnam. According to a report by Deloitte Global, Vietnam leads Asia in terms of gender diversity in the corporate sector. Women account for 17.6% of places in corporate boardrooms in the country, according to the fifth edition of Deloitte's "Women in the Boardroom: A Global Perspective". Twenty percent of Vietnam's 500,000 business enterprises were women-owned, as of 2016.

However, Vietnamese women's progress is largely confined to the corporate sector. At the lower rungs in the workplace, gender equality is still far away as the NGOs' investigation of the Samsung factories showed. A survey earlier this year by the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions found almost every women respondent of the view that their gender would stand against them at some point during their career. Manufacturing and construction were identified by young women in the survey as the most gender-insensitive sectors of the economy. What was even more startling, several multinational companies were equally bad.

Media coverage stimulates state action

Vietnamese women journalists are playing an important role in highlighting gender concerns in the country as is evident in the increasing importance given to gender equality and justice at the highest policy making levels. The National Strategy on Gender Equality (2011-2020) and the National Targets of Gender Equality (2016-2020) aim to level the playing field for women in all spheres of life in the country.

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