

# Vietnamese Women Intellectuals and Global Integration in the First Half of the 20th Century

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## Abstract

Through a variety of archival materials, newspaper articles, and memoirs, I have presented the role of women intellectuals in Vietnamese society in the early 20th century and their attitudes towards their country's integration into the world. Historical documents have shown that even though there were few women intellectuals in Vietnam at that time, these women led the country in promoting new attitudes and establishing women's movement in Vietnam. Through their activities, such as publishing newspapers; writing articles to popularize democratic ideas, feminism, and socialism; organizing forums, fairs, and book rooms; and initiating movements for equality in culture, economics, and politics, Vietnamese women have been an important political and social force that has contributed greatly to the success of the 1945 August Revolution. This revolution has transformed them from "lieges" or "slaves" into "citizens" of the new independent and democratic Vietnam.

**Keywords:** women intellectuals, women's rights, women's liberty, national liberty, integration

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งนำเสนอบทบาทของปัญญาชนสตรีในสังคมเวียดนามในช่วงต้นศตวรรษที่ 20 และทัศนคติของสตรีเหล่านี้ต่อการที่ประเทศเวียดนามได้เข้าสู่กระแสสากลของโลก โดยใช้วิธีการศึกษาค้นคว้าเอกสารในหอจดหมายเหตุ บทความจากหนังสือพิมพ์ และบันทึกความทรงจำ เอกสารทางประวัติศาสตร์เหล่านี้เผยให้เห็นว่าแม้ว่าในช่วงเวลาดังกล่าวที่ปัญญาชนสตรีในจำนวนไม่มากนัก แต่สตรีเหล่านี้ก็เป็นผู้ชี้นำประเทศเวียดนามผ่านการนำเสนอทัศนคติแบบใหม่และการก่อตั้งขบวนการเคลื่อนไหวทางสังคม ปัญญาชนสตรีได้มีกิจกรรมต่างๆ เช่น การ

ออกหนังสือพิมพ์ การเขียนบทความเพื่อสร้างค่านิยมในแนวคิดประชาธิปไตยสตรีนิยมและสังคมนิยม การจัดกลุ่มสนใจงานออกร้าน ห้างสมุด และริเริ่มขบวนการเพื่อสร้างความเท่าเทียมด้านวัฒนธรรม เศรษฐกิจ และการเมือง จนทำให้สตรีเวียดนามมีพลังทางสังคมและการเมืองอย่างสำคัญ อันมีผลต่อการปฏิวัติเดือนสิงหาคม 1945 การปฏิวัตินี้ได้เปลี่ยนสตรีจาก “ข้า” หรือ “ทาส” เป็น “พลเมือง” ของประเทศเวียดนามที่มีอิสรภาพและประชาธิปไตย

**คำสำคัญ:** ปัญญาชนสตรี สิทธิสตรี เสรีภาพของสตรี เสรีภาพของชาติ การผนวกรวม

In 1906, while attending the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille<sup>1</sup> for the first time, Tran Tan Binh, chief of Hoai Duc district, was amazed at the achievements of western civilization. “Things I have seen here, I have never seen before. What I have heard I also have never heard before...” (Dang co tung bao, 4 November 1907). Thirty-six years later, in 1942, Hoai Thanh and Hoai Chan wrote about changes in Vietnamese life in their book *Vietnamese Poets*:

We are living in western houses, wearing western hats, pants, and shirts. We are using electric lighting, watches, cars, trains, bicycles... and more. We can't say enough about the material changes that were brought by western civilization...which [also] brought new philosophies. In the Duy Tan movement, its effects were at least as powerful as the impact of western philosophical books and the works of scholars such as Khang (Kang Youwei) Luong (Liang Qichao).... In the past, scholars of our country just knew Confucius, now they have started to quote Lu Thoa (Rousseau) and Manh Duc Tu Cuu (Montesquieu), and they are beginning to write the national language.... (Hoai Thanh and Hoai Chan, 1997: 16).

<sup>1</sup> Colonial Exhibition in Marseille (Exposition colonial de Marseille) was held in 1906 in order to introduce goods which were produced in the French colonies

Three years later, in 1945, the August Revolution inaugurated the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with the Declaration of Independence bearing the full spirit of the times consistent with the current of development of human history. For many centuries an independent feudal state, Vietnam had gradually become weaker because its seclusionist policy isolated it from the world. The French took advantage of this weakness and made Vietnam a colony of its empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

After suppressing the last major armed revolt under the banner of Can Vuong<sup>2</sup> in 1897, the French colonial authorities in Vietnam implemented two programs of exploitation.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these policies, Vietnam's small-holder agricultural economy developed into a colonial economy. These policies also changed the composition of society. Beside farmers and feudal landlords there appeared laborers, the bourgeoisie, and the petite bourgeoisie. Modern cities with plumbing and electricity emerged along with industrial centers. The development of railroad systems, ports, and telephones<sup>4</sup> helped Vietnam become integrated into the modern world.

<sup>2</sup> The Huong Khe Revolution (1885-1896) led by Phan Dinh Phung is considered the pinnacle of the armed struggle against France in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>3</sup> The first colonial period of exploitation was 1897-1914. The second colonial period of exploitation was 1918-1930.

<sup>4</sup> Over the last twenty years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, newly-formed modern cities were classified into city type 1 (Hanoi, Saigon, Hai Phong), and types 2 and 3. Old cities also witnessed rapid change. For instance in Hanoi, new construction projects were begun, such as the governor's building, city hall, the treasury building, the Bank of Indochina, the Metropole Hotel, as well as the big villas of the French Quarter, the power plant (1902), the Yen Phu water mill (1904), the Railroad Company building (1912), automotive repair shops, etc. In the early 20th century until 1930, there were about 535 large, anonymous foreign companies, of which about 205 were French, investing a total capital of 4 billion francs. Main investment areas were in industries that served the public interest and light industries that served daily activities (such as fiber and cotton plants (established in 1890), wineries (1901), a match factory (1904), a beer factory (1909), a leather factory tannery (1912), and tobacco processing plants (1917).

In the first thirty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, enormous changes affected Vietnamese daily life and thinking. This was especially true of the intelligentsia, who no longer “engraved Confucianism deeply in their brains... [that] simple philosophy of fulfilling their duties, thinking totally about morality,” which is “the way that the former generations set before each person, as a child, a father, a wife, a husband, a daughter-in-law, a mandarin...” (Thanh Nghi, No 2-3, 1941). The new intelligentsia felt that “the West has now made it to the bottom of our souls. We could not be happy with the old happiness and sad with the old sadness and love and hate as before (Hoai Thanh and Hoai Chan, 1997: 17).

This period of significant change encouraged intellectuals to study the world and re-evaluate themselves. In this effort they strove to discover a way to integrate with the world. For Vietnamese women, one of the many changes brought by colonialism was education. It especially created a class of women intellectuals who took a lead in the reception and dissemination of new ideas. These ideas contributed to fundamental changes regarding gender and tradition. Women also became important contributors to the struggle for national independence.

## 1. Intellectual Vietnamese Women in the First Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century - Who are they?

According G.S. Ye Qizheng,<sup>5</sup> the concept “intellectual” or “intellectuals” (intelligentsia) comes from Latin and from Han, and refers to those who have mental cognition and expression. In Chinese, it refers to educated individuals who are interested in cultural values of humanity, conscious of social responsibilities, and often maintain critical attitudes towards contemporary

<sup>5</sup> Prof. Ye Qizheng teaches in the Social Sciences Faculty, University of Taiwan. [ <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/35269408> ]

politics and dissatisfaction with the status quo. In France, intellectuals were understood to be writers, journalists, and those who fought for justice or who represented themselves with strong revolutionary spirit.

In Russia, intellectuals were members of the elite who promoted new, revolutionary philosophies. In Poland they were members of the aristocracy who set up an educational system for an elite class fully aware of their leadership and responsibility to society, who led Poland's struggle for independence and freedom.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to French colonization, Confucian political institutions in Vietnam did not allow women to go to school and take exams, so women did not have an opportunity to be involved in the political system at any level. The only education permitted to women was limited to teaching them family values through textbooks such as *Gia Huan* (Family Education) or *Nu Huan* (Woman's Education) which upheld family spirit, feudalistic respect for parents, Buddhist compassion, and community spirit.

Women were required to live in accordance with the moral norms of the “Three Submissions” and “Four Virtues” according to Confucian philosophy, beginning on the day they were born, continuing to the day they left for their husband's house, and ending on the day they died (Dang Thi Van Chi, 2011: 36-37). Although many women from prestigious families were literate, and some became involved in political and cultural life (such as Nguyen Phi Y Lan, Nguyen Thi Lo, Dr. Nguyen Thi Due, Ho Xuan Huong, Doan Thi Diem, Nguyen Thi Hinh, and Ba Huyen Thanh Quan), very few could fully carry out their women's responsibilities. The concept of “women intellectuals” was formulated in Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century as a product of the French educational system a result of foreign influence

<sup>6</sup> According to Prof. Ye Qizheng, who teaches in the Social Sciences Faculty, University of Taiwan

and democratic revolutionary movements, based on the inheritance of an indomitable tradition of Vietnamese women.

At the end of the 19th century, the most critical mission of the French colonists was to open schools that favored, and did not oppose, French culture. These schools taught subjects such as French language, Vietnamese language, and mathematics. Han language and national examinations were gradually removed from the educational system, which was transformed into the so-called French-Vietnamese educational system.

Despite its cultural and educational restrictions, the new educational system created profound cultural and social improvements in Vietnam. The open-minded public authorities considered education for women to be a means to “improve women’s knowledge and morality,” “help them get the proper appreciation and respect” (Petrus Ky)-Trịnh Văn Thảo, 1995: 95), and “improve their role as wife and mother in the family” (Luong Du Thuc- Nong co min dam, 28 August 1902)<sup>7</sup>. And woman’s schools were also established in southern Vietnam. By 1886, there were seven schools for women with 922 female students in southern Vietnam and four elementary schools for women in the north.<sup>8</sup> Post-primary colleges (*Cao Đẳng Tiểu học*) with four-year programs were also opened for female students who had graduated from a six-year primary school. Their presence was limited to Hanoi (Trung Vuong School),<sup>9</sup> Hue (Dong Khanh School),<sup>10</sup> and Saigon

<sup>7</sup> <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/35269408.html>.

<sup>8</sup> According to Paullus and Bouninai in *La France en Indochine* and Paul Bonnetain in *L’Extreme Orient* (quoted by Nguyen Anh, (1967: 42-44).

<sup>9</sup> The female school, Brioux, was opened on January 6, 1908 in Hanoi. During the school year 1922-1923, 178 students attended (Dan ba Moi, special issue, 1942). The number of students during the first year at the elementary school level was 129 (Trinh Van Thao, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Dong Khanh Female School was founded in 1917 in Hue. In the school year 1922-1923, 358 students attended at the secondary level, and 35 at the elementary level. In 1930, the number of female students going to school in central Vietnam was 1,986, of whom 47 attended teacher training courses and 494 went on to elementary college.

(Gia Long or Áo Tim School).<sup>11</sup> Secondary schools which offered baccalaureates for both boys and girls were opened in Hanoi (Buoi School), Hue (Khai Dinh School), and Saigon (Petrus Ky School).

Common institutions of Indochinese Education (General Learning Regulations) were promulgated in 1917<sup>12</sup> and provided for at least one school for women in each province. Boys and girls could attend the same school with separate curriculums if there was no school specifically for women. Elementary schools were opened in large districts, however, only in larger provinces could elementary schools for women be founded.

Number of female students and female-to-male ratio.<sup>13</sup>

Year	Number of female students	Total number of students	Percentage
1929	30,000	112,920	24%
1930-1931	38,984	319,792	12%
1938-1939	72,000	524,322	13%
1941-1942	91,129	616,975	13%

Around this time [1930-1940] the Colleges of Medicine, Teacher Training, and Agriculture and Forestry all started to recruit female students. For example, vocational schools in the academic year 1941-1942 recruited around 900 female students (Trịnh Văn Thảo, 1995 : 152), and had roughly 1,000 female teachers (Nguyen Van Ky, 1995 : 138).

Women-only schools required students to spend one to two hours (a day) learning domestic skills. While at school, students were required to

<sup>11</sup> Áo Tim School was opened on September 19, 1915. In its first year, 42 enrolled female students came from urban cities, while others came from neighboring provinces. The school had classes from Dong Au (elementary) to Cao Dang (post-primary school college).

<sup>12</sup> Indochina Governor Albert Sarraut on December 12, 1917 issued a policy called *Règlement Général de l’Instruction Publique en Indochine* (General Regulations for Public Instruction in Indochina) which aimed at comprehensively implementing French policies throughout Indochina.

<sup>13</sup> Data compiled from many sources: Trinh Van Thao (1995), Tran Thi Phuong Hoa (2012), Dan Ba, special issue, 1942.

speak French (Association of Gia Long Former Female Students, 1-2). Textbooks and the curricula were modeled after the French educational system. In addition, content expressing negative opinions or beliefs contrary to the colonial system was banned, especially in the subjects of historical geography and literature. As a result, female students at these schools were strongly influenced by western civilization. They were labeled “modern ladies.”

Although the number of educated women accounted for only one percent of the population, and about 18 percent of that number enrolled in the French Vietnamese education system, many continued through high school and on to college.<sup>14</sup> By 1930, a few Vietnamese women even obtained doctorate degrees (Fr. *Un doctorat*), beginning with Hoang Thi Nga, according to Dan Ba Moi, 17 June 1935.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in terms of the common definition of intellectuals at the beginning of the 19th century, female intellectuals were educated individuals who participated in journalism and promoted and fought for modern philosophies. They also took part in movements aimed at bettering society. Some of these notable individuals are: Suong Nguyet Anh, Dam Phuong nu su, Huynh Thi Bao Hoa, Tran Thi Nhu Man, Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, Phan Thi Nga, Nguyen Thi Luu, Mai Huynh Hoa, Phan Thi Bach Van, Nguyen Thi Khang, Nguyen Thi Chinh, Do Thi Bich Lien, Nguyen Duc Nhuan, Le Thanh Tuong, Thuy An, Nguyen Thi Thao, Nguyen Thi Thanh Tu, Nguyen Thi Kiem,

<sup>14</sup> Henriette Bui graduated from medical school in Paris (1934), Nguyen Thi Suong (1940), Le Thi Hoang from Hanoi Medical College (1937), Duong Thi Lieu (1940), Thi Phan Lieu graduated from Hanoi Agricultural College, Pham Thi My graduated from Hanoi College of Teacher Education (1928), Nguyen Thi Chau graduated from the University of Literacy, Paris (1936), Bui Thi Cam graduated from the University of Law, Paris, and Nguyen Nguyet Minh graduated from the Hanoi Junior College of Law (Dan Ba Moi, special issue, 1942).

<sup>15</sup> In order to receive her Ph.D., she was required to write two theses: *Propertes photo organiques voltaiques des substances* and *Structure spectres et d'absorption des molecules* (Dan Ba Moi, 17 June 1935).

Van Anh, Nguyen Thi Huong, Nguyen Thi Nha, Van Dai, and Le Thi Ngoc Suong. The articles and activities contributed to the popularization of new ideas and the struggle for the advancement and equality of women. While not great in number, they have contributed to the movements for gender equality, women's liberty, and national liberty of the Vietnamese people.

## **2. Awareness of a New World, “Not Only for Men but also for Women,” of the First Generation of Women Intellectuals**

In the first years of the 20th century, New Literature (*Tân Thư*) and journalism became influential. Many thought that the new ideas<sup>16</sup> introduced through the press and magazines sparked the reform (*Duy Tân*) movement. At this time, Suong Nguyet Anh<sup>17</sup> wrote articles about women's rights in the women's newspaper for which she served as editor-in-chief. This discussion raised awareness of women's rights and roles in society. In the context of integration with the world, women started to recognize their right to be educated. The earlier, Confucian-inspired textbooks that mainly talked about women's responsibility in the family were no longer relevant within this new context because the new world, they felt, was “no longer the world for men,” but also “for women” (*The Bell Women* (Nu Gioi Chung), 19 July 1918).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Besides books by Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Khanh Huu Vi, and Luong Khai Sieu, Mill's books *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* were also well known among Vietnamese feudal scholars.

<sup>17</sup> Suong Nguyet Anh's real name was Nguyen Xuan Khue. She was the fifth daughter of Nguyen Dinh Chieu, a southern patriot and poet. At a young age she came to be called Nguyet Anh. When her husband passed away, she added “Suong” to her name and had the name Suong Nguyet Anh. As a daughter of Nguyen Dinh Chieu, she inherited not only knowledge of the Han language, but also her father's patriotic spirit.

<sup>18</sup> *Nu Gioi Chung* newspaper was first published in Saigon on December 1, 1918. Henri Blanquier was the owner of the newspaper, Tran Van Chim was the secretary general, and Suong Nguyet Anh was the chief editor. After 22 issues, Nu gioi chung stopped publishing for reasons that are not clear. Its last issue was published on July 19 1918.

After *Nu gioi chung* newspaper had been forced to stop publishing, from 1918 to the 1930s, Dam Phuong Nu su<sup>19</sup> continued to write about prejudice in journals and newspapers throughout the country. According to Le Thanh Hien's survey, during the period 1919–1928 she wrote about 200 articles for magazines and newspapers, including *Nam Phong magazine*, *Huu Thanh newspaper* and especially on *Trung Bac tan van newspaper* from 1919 to 1923, Dam Phuong Nu su also wrote 129 articles in her column "Women's Words,". She was also in charge of column "Women's Words" (Lời đàn bà) on *Thuc Nghiep dan bao* newspaper. Together with Phan Thi Lang, she was also in charge of the column, "Women's Literacy" (Van chuong nu gioi), in the *Huu Thanh newspaper* (Le Thanh Hien, 1999, 10-11).

Dam Phuong Nu su also advocated for the creation of a women's only newspaper, *Phu nu tung san*, which was established in May 1929 in Hue. The newspaper was considered a tool for women to fight for their equality and human rights in Vietnam. In one of her journals, "Children's Education," published in the *Trung Bac tan van* newspaper, she wrote, "education for women is critical for national development as a necessary means to guide women to successful lives. During the same period, Huynh Thi Bao Hoa<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Dam Phuong nu su's real name was Cong Ton nu Dong Canh, and her nickname was Quy Luong. She was born in 1881 in Ton Nhon, Hue. Her father was Nguyen Mien Tien, the 66th prince of Minh Mang King, who later became Hoang Hoa Quan Vuong. Descended from royalty, Cong Ton Nu Dong Canh received a royal education which was serious and traditional. She mastered Chinese, French, and the national language. She was also good at women's arts and household arts. Having the advantage of knowing both Chinese and French literature, Dam Phuong nu su soon had access to the modern ideologies of human progress, especially democracy, freedom, and equality that originated from the French and Chinese bourgeois democratic revolutionists, such as J.J. Rutxo, X. Ximong, Luong Khai Sieu, and Ton Dat Tien.

<sup>20</sup> Huynh Thi Bao Hoa (1896-1982) was born in Da Phuoc village, Hoa Vang, (Da Nang). As a child she was named Huynh Thi Thai; after beginning to write articles she took the pen name Huynh Thi Bao Ho. Her father was a martial royal official who worked under the Nguyen Dynasty and who was in the *Can Vuong* movement in Quang Nam. With a strong educational background, she was intelligent and eager to learn. She was considered the most progressive woman of the province at the time.

started writing for the newspapers *Thuc nghiep dan bao*, *Nam Phong*, *Trung Bac Tan van*, and *Tieng dan*, and by 1927 she initiated a discussion about the creation of a women's only newspaper.

Suong Nguyet Anh, Dam Phuong Nu su and Huynh Thi Bao Hoa represent the first influential intellectual Vietnamese women, who not only wrote journals and advocated new ideas for women's roles in the family and in society, but also promoted women's rights by exhortation for women's education and employment. It should be pointed out that these values comprised two of three main topics of liberal feminism. Literary works by Suong Nguyet Anh published in *Nu gioi chung* newspaper evoked responsibilities of women for the destiny of nations<sup>21</sup>, by following the paths taken by the national heroines Trung Trac, Trung Nhi and Trieu Thi Trinh.

Dam Phuong Nu su also wrote the novels *Kim Tu Cau*,<sup>22</sup> *Chung Ky vinh*,<sup>23</sup> *Hong phan tuong tri*,<sup>24</sup> and *Dam Phuong thi van tap*. These literary works criticized the old marriage and family regime, and exhorted young people to self devote their life, to fighting for a just society and civilization.

<sup>21</sup> Meaning that women had the responsibility to struggle for national independence against the French colonization.

<sup>22</sup> *Kim Tu Cau* was published in *Luc Tinh Tan Van newspaper*, from issue 1,460 (15 July 1922) to issue 1,567 (22 October 1923), and was reprinted by *Trung bac Tan Van newspaper*, from 25 May 25, 1923 to 21 Jul. 1923. This novel tells the story of a beautiful, talented girl called Tu Cau who had to go through the painful experiences of an arranged marriage with a man she never loved who was chosen by her parents.

<sup>23</sup> *Chung Ky vinh* was published in *Luc Tinh tan Van newspaper*, during the years 1923-1924, but never as a book. The female figure, Ngoc Yen, was somewhat similar to Ngoc Lan in *Kim Tu Cau* in that they could not marry the ones they loved due to arranged marriages, and both had to leave their homes.

<sup>24</sup> *Hong Phan Tuong Tri*, written by Dam Phuong, was published in *Luc Tinh Tan Van* from 1922 to 1929. It was later published in book form by Phan Thi Bach Van's Go Cong Women's Bookshop in a printing of 10,000 copies. In this book, the two characters, Que Anh and Nam Chan, represent a new model of modern youth who fight for a new progressive society.



Huynh Thi Bao Hoa, at the age of 31, in 1927 wrote the novel *Tay phu'ong my nhan* (*Western Beauty Woman*). It was published by Bao Ton Printed House. The book is about a French woman who falls in love with a Vietnamese man and must overcome many obstacles for them to be united and happy. The story presents a message of gender equality and liberalizing women from the narrow prejudices of Vietnamese society at the time. The right to pursue one's happiness and the right of each woman to decide how she should live are part of the tolerant attitude in the era of global integration.

In general, the first generation of intellectual women appeared in the transformative period in Vietnam. Born into upper-class feudal families and educated in a Confucian tradition, these women soon recognized that society was changing. In order to catch up, Vietnamese people, and women in particular, had to embrace change. As a new generation was becoming educated in the spirit of the West, these women were quick to learn and they used their pens to affirm the new role of women in society. They criticized the way society had been treating women. Each wrote in her own style and approached these issues differently. Of special note is Huynh Thi Bao Hoa, who wrote *Tay Phu'ong my nhan*, a cross-border love story that pioneered in changing the socio-cultural perspective that remains the focus of debate until today.

### 3. Changing Minds and Joining the World of Women Intellectuals after World War I

After World War I, the worldwide women's movement influenced women and public opinion in general in Vietnam. Vietnamese women intellectuals at this time realized that in order to integrate into the world, they must first change

public perceptions. Following in the footsteps of several international feminists, Vietnamese intellectual women published books and journals, delivered lectures, and organized women's fairs to spread new ideas throughout Vietnam.

In 1929, after many positive movements led by intellectual women, such as Dạm Phuong Nu su, Huynh Thi Bao Hoa, the *Phu nu Tan van*<sup>25</sup> newspaper emerged, providing a mouthpiece for women in the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> Women's newspapers have become a channel for conveying the message of women's issues. In this way women authors not only opened the doors to the new world, revealing what women in other countries had been doing, but also connected women throughout Vietnam through common interests. These publications enabled them to form a social force and have a voice in the political life of the country, thereby becoming part of the global community of women.

#### Discovering the World and Choosing a Path

Female journalists contributed by writing in journals and columns about women's movements throughout the world.<sup>27</sup> Several international women's

<sup>25</sup> *Phụ nữ tân văn* newspaper, printed 1929-1935 in Saigon.

<sup>26</sup> Since 1929 when *Phu Nu Tan Van* newspaper was established, more than ten other women's newspapers were published, including *Women in the Information Era* (*Phu nu thoi dam*), 1930-1934 in Hanoi; *Modern Women* (*Phu nu tan tien*), 1932-1934 in Hue; *New Women* (*Dan ba moi*), 1934-1936 in Saigon; *Women* (*Nu luu*), 1936-1937 in Saigon; *Vietnamese Women* (*Viet nu*), 1937 in Hanoi; *Women* (*Phu nu*), 1938-1939 in Hanoi; *Female Art Magazine* (*Nu cong tap chi*), 1936-1938 in Saigon; *Females* (*Nu gioi*), 1938-1939 in Saigon; *Woman* (*Dan ba*) 1939-1945 in Sai Gon; *"Girlfriends"* (*Ban gai*), 1945 in Ha noi; and *Vietnamese Women* (*Viet nu*), 1945 in Hanoi. In the early 1930s, newspapers for women were established in all three regions (Dang Thi Van Chi. (2006 : 48-61).

<sup>27</sup> Women's movements in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Iran, Japan, China, Malaysia (TB, 15-16 January 1931).

conferences, especially in the Soviet Union, were reported in Vietnamese news. The newspaper *Phu Nu tan van* on 4 June 1931 ran an article on the conference of Asian women held in La Hore, India nearly six months earlier on 19-25 January 1931. The article revealed that the conference attracted female participants from such Asian countries as China, Tibet, India, and Siberia. It described the absence of Vietnamese women as “pitiful” and “shameful”. The article also presented the goal of the conference, the agenda, and the decisions on issues relating to women such as education, health, children’s right, labor rights and prostitution.

Coverage of two conferences on women in France on 4-8 August 1934, campaigning for women’s liberation, especially on the struggle against fascism and war was carried by the newspaper *Hoan cau tan van* on 20 November 1934.<sup>28</sup>

Statistics about Russian women working in various fields, including politics were published in the journal *Trang An* on 2 Jul , 1935 and in the journal *Dan Ba Moi* on 8 June 1936. It was also remarked that Russian women gained high achievements in sports and scientific research. Newspaper articles about international women’s conferences attracted the attention of Asian countries including China, India, Tibet, and Persia. However, the inexplicable and tragic truth was that Vietnamese women did not actually attend any of these conferences. One newspaper stated, “It is miserable and shameful for the destiny of Vietnamese women,” (*Phu nu tan van*, 4 June 1931).

<sup>28</sup> This conference met on August 7 and 8, 1934 at Monges Road in Paris and had slogans such as: “All women unite again against fascism and war,” “Women are completely free” (*Hoan cau tan van*, 20 November 1934).

Significant women involved in the worldwide women’s movement were introduced in the journal *Tan Thoi* on 11 April 1935. Among them were Macgorit, Irène Joliot-Curie, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nadezhda Krupskaja, Trinh Duc Tu, Tong Khanh Linh, Rose Lacombe, Olympe de Gouges and Theroinge. It highlighted women who worked in the press, like Louise Weiss, who was described as “a woman considered to be perfect as she has both talent and virtue” because of her popular literary magazine, *New Europe (Europe nouvelle)*. Next the press mentioned Cécile Brunschvicg, manager of *La Francaise* journal, who was well known for creating the The French Union for Women Suffrage (UFSF),<sup>29</sup> a women’s union calling for elections. In addition, lawyer Maria Verone encouraged French women through influential journalism in the newspaper *L’Europe* (*Dan ba moi*, 2 March 1935).

In these articles, the journalists often referred to what they saw as the backwardness and inferiority of Vietnamese women’s situations and encouraged them to change in order to break free from a historically inferior status, and thereby integrate into the world.

### **Re-evaluating Women’s Role in Society and Promoting Feminism and Feminist Liberation through Publishing Activities**

Women intellectuals’ newspaper articles analyzed the changes in Vietnamese society and relayed the importance women play in their own families. They also emphasized that women must improve their education “in order to adapt to the new economy [...] if they want to survive and evolve, they must have education which is adequate for the new society” (*Phu nu tan tien*, 1 January 1933). Women need to have the right to vote because “they serve the

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.pedagogie.ac-nantes.fr/lettres-histoire/le-groupe-angevin-de-l-union-francaise-pour-le-suffrage-des-femmes--863612.kjsp?RH=PEDA>



country and have the same responsibilities as every other citizen [...] but, they do not have any rights, not even the right to vote.”

Similarly, the paper *Phu nu tan van* in 1933-1934, published “strong messages”<sup>30</sup> of radical-minded people about the class struggle and the national liberation struggle, maintaining that to question women’s liberation was tantamount to questioning national liberation. They also criticized the ineffectiveness of the feminist movement in the capital because it was limited to promoting women’s education and careers.

Women intellectuals also wrote articles in that diatribe misconceptions of gender equality issues and the emancipation of women. For instance, Nguyen Thi Khang<sup>31</sup> criticized Nguyen Van Vinh for his denial of women’s liberty, which was clearly stated in the French newspaper *Le Monde* on 21 Dec. 1933 and in *Phu nu tan van* on Jan, 13, 1934. Nguyen Van Vinh said there was no need for women’s liberty because women already had opportunities for higher education and power. In rebuttal, Khang asked, of ten million Vietnamese women, how many were educated? She then argued:

Women are discontent because of polygamy, which proves that women were oppressed and miserable....Vietnamese women ask for education and employment opportunities in public and private sectors. We ask for equal salary, the same as men are paid, and we also ask for paid leave for maternity and sickness. We also deserve special incentives for taking hard jobs with difficult conditions, such as mining or manufacturing.... (Phu nu tan van, 13 January 1934).

<sup>30</sup> “What is feminism or women’s rights?” (Phụ nữ tân văn, 10 July 1933), “Who do women fight against?” (Phụ nữ tân văn, 18 November 1934), “Can working women gain the absolute female liberation?” (Phụ nữ tân văn, 9 June 1934), “Tiếng Oanh kêu đàn (Bird calls the birds)” (Phụ nữ tân văn, 12 June 1934). By 1936, Dan Ba Moi also asked for “women’s right to vote.”

<sup>31</sup> Nguyen Thi Khang, a female intellectual who had studied in France, was a regular writer in *Phu Nu Tan Van*. She was also Cao Van Chanh’s wife.

Journalist Nguyen Thi Lan (Binh Tay) suggested “women’s liberation needed to express its main purpose” and “not to rely on other people, many of whom oppose equal rights. We can only help ourselves,” (Cong luan, 25 May 1932).

Also relevant at the time was an academic discussion between Phan Khoi, an opinionated journalist, and Nguyen Thi Chinh hosted in *Phu nu tan van*<sup>32</sup> newspaper and titled, *The Outlook towards Women’s Liberation*.<sup>33</sup> It considered “the foundation for the two new topics of ‘the new girls’ and ‘the family,’ which became hot topics for discussion among contemporary upper-class women,” (Shawn Frederick McHale, 1995: 188).

In the book, *Women’s Issues* published in 1938, author Nguyen Thi Kim Anh<sup>34</sup> gave her perspective on Marxist-Leninist ideology regarding the role of women in human history: from primitive society to slavery, through

<sup>32</sup> This discussion stemmed from a debate in the media about women’s issues when Nguyen Thi Chinh critiqued the book *The Issue of Women in Vietnam* (Tran Thien Ty and Bui The Phuc, 1932). From the comments in this article, and the opposing comments in Phan Van Gia’s speech at the Women’s Fair Woman, Phan Khoi wrote an article titled, *An Outlook on Women’s Liberation* in *Phu Nu Tan Van*. According to him, there were two kinds of women: modern and neutral. “Nobody is totally modern, or conservative, or neutral” (Phụ nữ tân văn, 7 July 1932). “What matters is how you solve the problem.” Nguyen Thi Chinh then argued that in order to understand these concepts, there is a need to look at women in reference to common social development on the basis of economy, but it is not enough. It takes changes in attitudes and prejudices to address and solve women’s issues (Phụ nữ tân văn, 8 April 1932). Ultimately, Phan Khoi agreed with this opinion.

<sup>33</sup> Nguyen Thi Chinh (also known as Nguyen Thi Anh) was the daughter of a wealthy family in An Hoa (My Tho). She studied in France before 1930 and received her diploma. While going to school, she met and married Ta Thu Thau, a revolutionist, and therefore was abandoned by her family. She, together with her husband participated regularly in patriotic activities when they were in France.

<sup>34</sup> According to researcher Phan Khoang, Nguyen Thi Kim Anh is the pseudonym for Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, a prominent female intellectual politician during the revolutionary national liberation movement in Vietnam before 1945.

feudalistic, capitalistic, and democratic societies. She emphasized the role of women in Soviet society and then evaluated the situation of Indo-Chinese women. In the conclusion she stated: "The issue about women is also an issue for the whole community. It needs to be solved on a national and societal scale," (Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, 1938: 53).

In addition to Nguyen Thi Kim Anh's book, there were others that touched on the same topic, such as Do Thi Bich Lien's *The Issue of Freedom of Equality*, which introduced basic Marxist-Leninist ideology. In the preamble, the author claims that everyone desires freedom and equality; however, "if we want to understand precisely the meaning of freedom and equality, we need to comprehend it by the ideas of Marx and Engels, two people who invented Scientific Socialism, two people who will lead us to the right path, to fight for a flourishing and humane society," (Do Thi Bich Lien, 1938: 3).

During the People's Front Movement from 1936-1939, many female intellectuals such as Nguyen Thi Luu (1985) Mai Huynh Hoa (1983) wrote about the Communist Party's view of women's liberation. In addition, they fiercely debated opponents of women's liberation. In particular, the articles by Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, under the pseudonyms of Nguyen Thi Kim Anh and Kim Anh, contributed greatly to the spread of feminist ideology and women's liberation. Their articles also argued that even though such countries as Vietnam were currently colonies, the issue of women's liberation should be combined with national as well as class liberation.

### **Speeches, Propaganda of Feminism, and Women's Liberation**

Speeches are often used as tools of propaganda, a means to convince the public to act a certain way, and are quite common in Western countries. Throughout the world in the early 20th century activists for feminism also

used lectures and speeches to propagate their ideas and mobilize the public, except in the case of Vietnam where women had been discouraged from raising their voice at community events. As can be seen, women intellectuals in Vietnam not only had to overcome the press in order to express their views in print, but also had to overcome themselves. They had to overcome their shyness about giving public speeches before many people not only on issues related to women's rights, but also on other important issues.

The first important speech delivered by a Vietnamese women to a large audience was at the Saigon Women's Fair, 4-7 May 1932. During the fair, many women intellectuals spoke publicly about critical social issues such as "Women with *Hoi duc anh*" <sup>35</sup> (Phụ nữ với Hội Đức Anh), delivered by Ms. Ngoc Thanh. Another speech was on "Women in Literature" (Nữ lưu với văn học) (delivered by Nguyen Thi Kiem, the following evening, May 5). Other topics were: Women and Physical Exercise (Phụ nữ với thể dục) (delivered by Bui Thi Ut, evening of May 6), Women's Liberation (Phụ nữ giải phóng) by Phan Van Gia), and The Issue of National Literature (Văn đề quốc văn) (delivered by Ms. Thuy An, May 8). Ms. Thuy An was considered "best overall speaker" (Phu nữ thời đàm, 29 October 1933).

A series of other lectures was organized in 1933, one of which was given on 26 July by Nguyen Thi Kiem at the Saigon Education Promotion Association (Hội Khuyên học Sài Gòn). Other such speeches were: "New Poetry" (Thơ mới) by a journalist from *Phu nu tan van* newspaper, "Women's Physical Fitness" (Phu nữ với thể dục) in Hanoi by Nguyen Thi Nga, as well as "Should Polygamy be Banned?" (Có nên bỏ chế độ đa thê

<sup>35</sup> *Hoi duc anh* is an association which was established by *Phu nu tan van* newspaper and a group of women in Sai Gon with the aim to help orphans. The women's participation in this association is considered to be the first step for them to step out of their kitchens to join in social activities.

hay không?), and “Women’s Morality” ( Nhan cach phu nu) given by Le Du in Hanoi on 31 March.

Nguyen Thi Kiem hosted her own lecture tour about women’s issues from South to North Vietnam<sup>36</sup> in 1934. In May, she came from Sai Gon to Hue and discussed there about “Men’s Opinions about Modern Women.” (Quan niem cua nam thanh nien vói phu nu tan tien) Then she again lectured on the subject “Opinions of Men and women about Modern Women” (Quan niem của nam nu thanh nien đoi voi tan nu luu) in Quang Tri on 8 May. In Nam Dinh on 8 September, she lectured on the topics, “A Day of a Modern Woman,” ( Mot ngay cua phu nu tan tien) and “Should the Freedom to Forego Arranged Marriage be Accepted?( Co nen tu do ket hon?) “on 3 November in Hai Phong.

*Dong Phap* newspaper described these speech events as being quite popular: “a flock of audience including old men, old women, girls and boys poured into the speech event place in Hang Trong street, which puzzled rural people with the question “Which festival are such a crowd of people attending?” At this point, women’s public speaking had left a sizeable imprint on the center of Vietnam society.

<sup>36</sup> In 1884, the Nguyen had another agreement with the French, the Patenotre Agreement of 6 June 1884, which recognized the French authority over the entire territory of Vietnam. This Agreement divided Vietnam into three parts: Tonkin- Bắc Ky (the norther region), Annam – Trung Ky (the central region), and Cochinchina- Nam Ky (The Southern region). These three regions were placed under different types of administration as if they were three separate countries. The southern region (Cochinchina) was a French colony; the northern and central regions were French protectorates but were still under the rule of the Nguyen. In 1887, the French established the entity known as the “Indochina Union” consisting of Tonking, Annam, Cochinchina, and Cambodia. In 1893, Laos also became a part of Indochina.

## Establishing Women’s Organizations

In addition to promoting new philosophies, female intellectuals mobilized their involvement in women’s organizations such as the Association of Household Arts and Women’s Literary Associations, which were founded in affluent population centers like Saigon, Hanoi, Da Nang, Hue, and Nam Dinh.

The Association of Household Arts, founded on 15 June 1926 in Hue City, is considered the first women’s organization in Vietnam. It was led by Dam Phuong Nu su, the chair of the organization, as well as Tran Thi Nhu Man who served as secretary general. Specific regulations, as well as functions and purposes were established and clarified.

In her opening speech, Dam Phuong stated that the association aimed at “raising the spirit of independence among the female community, encouraging them to gain wealth via profession, capability, morality, as well as both Western and Eastern knowledge. Finally, it aims at connecting individuals to form a strong union that can protect each other’s rights.” (Dao Duy Anh, 2004: 507).

The association’s periodical and activities attracted many members from North, Central and South Vietnam and Laos. Literacy classes were opened for illiterate members; workshops were opened for literate members to improve their knowledge. Vocational classes were also offered, such as Vietnamese and western sewing and embroidery styles, cooking skills, Vietnamese and western cuisines, baking skills, laundry and ironing skills, accounting; and financial management skills in business and family, family education, pregnancy education, and child care.

The association also published its own books to provide knowledge to members in the areas of family organization and child education. At the same time, it created opportunities for members to participate in community

activities and become a powerful support for female movements lead by Dong Khanh and Quoc Hoc Hue schools. The association's influence encouraged women to participate in social activities, and this effort targeted women in the cities of Hanoi, Vinh, Thanh Hoa, Hai Phong, Hoi An, Nha Trang, Saigon, Gia Dinh, and Can Tho. Women intellectuals played an important leadership role in these household associations; the women who led this effort were Huynh Thi Bao Hoa in Hoi An, and Pham Tuan Tai and Dang Vu Le in Nam Dinh. In general, public female associations focused on educating women about life, rights, and developing technologies. They served as the backbone for patriotic movements and women's organization fairs, and they even provided aid for natural disasters.

An addition to Dam Phuoc nu su's association was Phan Thi Bach Van's Women's Bookshop at 24-26 Chu Phuoc, Go Cong,<sup>37</sup> which issued a publication called *Nu luu tho quan* three times a month. A framing of the publication said, "These publications aim to provide women with helpful knowledge about ethics and morality, and with more opportunities for further education. Publications include novels, short stories, books on household arts, and fiction, along with translated documents and literature that has high political and historical value. Books about sex or books that go against traditional values, however, are always refused," (Nguyen Kim Anh, 2003: 88-94). Popular subjects and titles included the following: an introduction to Liang Qichao's "brief surveying of the doctrines," Darwin's theory of evolution, Montesquieu's political theory, Rousseau's political theory, and

<sup>37</sup> Phan Thi Bach Van's real name was Phan Thi Mai. She was born in 1903 in Binh Phuoc, Bien Hoa province (Thanh Binh District, Bien Hoa city now). She was the fifth child in a powerful family but chose to have a simple lifestyle. She started her writing career at the age of 17. Her first articles were published in *Dong Phap* newspaper in 1928. She moved to Go Cong with her husband, Vo Dinh Cong, in the same year and founded the Women's Bookshop.

books such as *The Southward History of Our Nation*, *The History of the American War*, *Vietnamese Superwomen*, *The History of Gandhi*, and *Hong phan tuong tri* (Beautiful woman intimates). Family education and child care books, such as *San duc giam* (book of maternity) *New Female Students*, *New Women Textbooks*, and *Everyday Women's Arts*, were also in demand.

The Women's Bookshop was widely known. Writers such as Mong Tuyet, and Dong Ho admitted in their memoirs that they lasciviously read *Nu Luu Tung Thu* by Phan Thi Bach Van, along with other banned books. Writer Nguyen Vy (2006) wrote in his book, *Tuan: a Vietnamese Boy*, that the books *Nam Dong Thu Xa* by Nhuong Tong, *Quan Hai Tung Thu* by Dao Duy Anh, and the works of Tran Thi Nhu Man were the three types of books that had "formed a revolutionary spirit and fostered patriotism among young people," and they became very popular within the early 20th century collegiate community. The woman writer Phan Thi Bach Van also wrote poems, essays, and novels in addition to translating books.<sup>38</sup>

Phan Thi Bach Van was prosecuted by the French colonizers on 2 October 1930 due to her promotion of patriotism. She was charged with "using literature to disturb national peace." On 14 February 1930, according to *Than Chung* newspaper, Phan Thi Bach Van was subpoenaed by the My Tho court for publishing the book *Nu Anh Tai* (*The beautiful and talented women*). She was convicted of "using literature to encourage woman to interfere with national business."

Less than two years later, the Women's Bookshop was able to publish literary, scientific, and educational books by several progressive

<sup>38</sup> As the assistant editor of *Dong Phap* newspaper, she wrote about a variety of topics. She encouraged Vietnamese women to "try to found a few scholarships" (*Dong Phap*, Article no. 650, 1927).

authors. It also contributed to spreading ideas of democracy, progress, and scientific knowledge for young people, especially women. At the beginning of the 20th century, Phan Thi Bach Van became a convincing example of “a competent female role model” that could compete effectively in professions that had been historically practiced exclusively by men.

Around the same time, another bookshop was established in Saigon, which was led by Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa. In other locations too, women’s bookstores set up shop, such as Nguyen Thi Trang’s in Saigon and Hoang Dac Vinh’s in Faifo (Hoi An) (Hoan Cau Tan Van, 15 Sept 1934).

In addition to the women’s bookshops, literary salons were opened for women intellectuals to discuss new ideologies, literature, and art, and thus perpetuate and spread the revolution.

### Women’s Fair Organizations

Many authors considered having careers an way to achieve equal rights for women. Zan Bao, for example, saw it as “a key to open the door to women’s liberation” (Zân, 14 October 1933). It was an important goal of the feminist movement and women’s liberation. To promote this belief, Vietnamese women intellectuals, journalists, leaders of the Hue Women’s Union, and especially the editorial board of the *Phu Nu Tan Van* newspaper made an effort to host several women’s fairs. In preparation for a fair, *Phu Nu Tan Van* newspaper emphasized the important role of women and their contribution to the event.

The art competition held in Hue from 22-23 December 1931<sup>39</sup> was the first Women’s Fair organized on the international model created by

<sup>39</sup> On *Trung Lap* newspaper, 4 January 1932: “In the competition, there were twelve trading booths representing different organizations, such as Hue Association of Women’s Arts, and Dieu Vien Female Monks from Hue. Mong Hoa, a female artist, also had her own gallery booth.”

international women intellectuals. The event was attended by women representatives from all three regions of Vietnam.

The large success of this event motivated the *Phu Nu Tan Van* editorial board to hold another fair the following year from 4–8 May 1932 in Saigon. The sheer size of these fairs drew public attention from far and wide. There were multiple strategic purposes set by these fairs, such as the promotion of women’s products, encouragement of culinary arts, and traditional crafts as a way to ensure important historic practices did not become “lost arts” in the new world (Phu Nu Tan Van, 7 April 1932). The fairs also served philanthropic purposes to fund recovery efforts for flood victims in Nghe An, as well as to help develop the Duc Anh Association.

### “The Right Path to Catch Up with the Modern World Is to Participate in the National Liberation Movements.”

The “second wave of national awakening,” when the national liberation movements took place in many countries, helped Vietnamese women not only with their liberation, but also to contribute to the national independence efforts. In a colonial society, several women intellectuals chose to get involved in the national battle for independence. One notable example was the volunteer Tran Thi Nhu Man. After graduating from elementary college, she was recruited to be a teacher in Dong Khanh Dchool. In her memoir, she gave thanks for the close relationship that had developed between her and Dam Phuong nu su, and other patriotic youths. These connections were a catalyst to her involvement in the nationalist movement. She wrote a letter to the governor general of Indochina, Alexandre Varenne, and requested a pardon for Phan Boi Chau. This effort was in addition to the efforts of other women who dared to face the Governor General of Indochina “to seek pardon



for our heroes" (Dao Duy Anh, 2004: 503). After this political activity, Tran Thi Nhu Man became more involved in political activities. She became one of the founders of the Hue Female Association for Household Arts, and together with Dam Phuong nu su, supported "the memorable funeral ceremony for the patriot Phan Chau Trinh" in 1926. She was then fired from Dong Khanh School for leading a strike. She continued to work for *Phu Nu Tung San* magazine, and for the New Vietnam Revolutionary Party (*Tan Viet Cach mang dang*). She was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison for having Cong San (communist) documents in her residence. Along with Tran Thi Nhu Man were other women intellectuals who actively participated in patriotic movements, and were active party members, such as Tran Thi Huong, Nguyen Thi Hong, Vo Thi Trang, Do Thi Tram, Hoang Thi Hai Duong, and Hoang Thi Ve. These women not only promoted patriotism through writing, but advocated for women's participation in organizations such as the Women's Association of the New Vietnam Revolutionary Party.

Data from the French National Storage Center report that three schoolgirls<sup>40</sup> were expelled from elementary colleges in Hanoi for engaging in "political" activities in school. These activities were deemed political because they were organized by the Vietnam Association of Revolutionary Youth. Several other students were arrested for participating in the Vietnam Nationalist Party.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> The schoolgirls were Phung Thi Vy, Nguyen Thi Tu, and Le Thi Chat.

<sup>41</sup> Le Thi Gam, a young woman who was arrested in 1930, also testified that she began participating in political activities while studying at school. A friend of hers, Nguyen Thi Van, participated in the murder of a man considered anti-governmental; Le Thi Mai, another student, also admitted to being politicized while she was at school in Quang Ngai where she had access to French Revolutionary publications such as the People's Voice newspaper (*La Voix du Peuple*). In 1930, two students teaching at the elementary College Women Saigon, Dang Thi Lang and Tran Thi Sanh, were expelled for participation in subversive activities (Lessard, 2007).

Along with writing articles in the press, women officers who were trained through Nguyen Ai Quoc courses in Guangzhou, such as Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, also distributed pamphlets that promoted the party's female staff members living in the Truong Thi and Ben Thuy areas. Nguyen Thi Hoi was one of the speakers who advocated the support of the Soviet Nghe Tinh movement in Hanoi. In Nha Be, Saigon, a student named Tran Thi Han led an effort to protect 400 workers of Socony Oil Company on 23 March 1931. Han also made a speech to encourage workers to stand up for their rights.

The advocacy and women's motivation activities had a major impact on promoting women's participation in the struggle for independence. A *Nguoi Lao Kho* newspaper article dated 18 Sep. 1930, no. 13, wrote: "As many others fight in Thanh Chuong, Ben Thuy, Can Loc, Ha Tinh, this fierce fight is led by women who are so brave and willing to sacrifice."

In 1936-1939, facing threats of fascism, the National United Front was formed to mobilize all forces in opposition of the war. Several articles targeting women to discourage fascism were written by Vietnamese women intellectuals. Women were considered a special political resource. The women's conference to discuss women's opinions was highlighted as "the first time women of the three regions of Indochina had united for one political agenda" (Dan ba moi, 26 October 1936).

Vietnamese women intellectuals also showed their enthusiasm in participating in the Vietnam Independence Ally Front, and joined the international democratic forces to oppose fascism.

The August Revolution Movement also received strong support and active involvement from female students and women intellectuals. In her memoirs, Hoang Thi Ha said: "In groups of three, women formed small businesses to buy fabric, sew flags, buy weapons, and raise money for the



Viet Minh. They also scattered leaflets, gave *ad hoc* lectures at various venues such as train stations and theaters, and organized meetings” (Nguyen Van Khoan, 2001: 430). Le Thi was said to have delivered National Defense (*Cuu Quoc*) newspapers for female friends and sisters that called upon their unanimous support of the Viet Minh (Doan Trang, 18 August 2009).

In Hanoi and other locations, women intellectuals played important roles in the success of the August Revolution. Female student members of Viet Minh went door-to-door encouraging people to bring national flags made from paper to the Opera House for a meeting. At this meeting, two women intellectuals representing the Viet Minh Front organization, Nguyen Khoa Dieu Hong, a member of the Democratic Party, and Tu Anh Trang, a member of the National Association for Patriotic Women to Defend the Country, introduced the crowd to the Viet Minh Front organization in an effort to establish the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. They did this by calling for a general strike with the slogan: “Support the Viet Minh!” Le Thi who joined the strike, reported that there were many women there, from Hanoi schoolgirls in traditional dress and white pants, to business women in tunics and dark pants. Never before in Vietnam’s history had there been so many women on the streets. They were waving flags while walking and shouting, “Support the Viet Minh!” They sang the song, “Kill the Fascists” (Du Kich Ca), and the national anthem (Tien Quan ca) during Vietnam Week (Doan Trang, 18 August 2009). Women such as Ha Thi Que, Truong Thi My, Phan Thi Ne, Nguyen Thi Dinh, and Tran Thi Nhuong were able to lead the movement and won over the local governments (Nguyen Thi Thap, 1981: 118-120).

The victory of the August Revolution freed the Vietnamese from decades of French colonial rule. Ironically, it was French colonialism that first

introduced the legal foundation for gender equality, human rights, and national independence. The participation of women in the revolutionary struggle contributed to the success of the August Revolution and as a result, the first constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam recognized gender equality. Vietnamese women intellectuals indeed had found an appropriate path to integrate into the world’s development.

## Conclusion

Nearly thirty years after Vietnamese women first asked, “What is feminism?” in *Nu Gioi Chung* newspaper in 1918, Vietnamese women intellectuals celebrated their new national independence and their own liberation. On this way, some women succeeded in reaching the end of the road, but some stopped on the halfway. Obviously, it is not a smooth road. They were in a dilemma about which heritage to give up and which new things to receive. They were wondering if they should still be “traditional women” at great personal sacrifice for their own families like the women who “led a quiet and tolerant life day after day, year after year until they were buried deep into land in deserted rice fields” (Chung Thi Van, Dan ba moi, 24 August 1936) and whose life “touched the hearts of other people” (Chung Thi Van, Dan ba moi, 24 August 1936). They were also thinking about whether they should become “new-age women” with an acknowledgement of their social duties and their existence. Their key duty is the duty of being humans. The “new-age women” are not as bad to do the domestic chores and take care of their own families as traditional women; on the contrary, the “new-age women” are more broadminded, more knowledgeable and more aware of their social status and responsibilities than the traditional women. Women

also had to overcome negative public opinion and defend themselves against criticism from both society and the media for changes in dress and lifestyle.<sup>42</sup> Although experiencing confusion when first engaging in political activities, they still held their ground effectively. A newspaper published a sarcastic article with a caricature of a women meeting held in Ha Noi on 24 September 1936 and aimed to call on the colonial government for rights of women such as the rights of working time, educational opportunities, giving birth to children and voting. This meeting along with two other meetings (one held in Hue City on 20 September 1936 and the other held in Saigon in mid September, 1936 with the same topic were called “The First Vietnamese women to speak about politics” meetings by media. One of the women attending the meetings said, “[T]aking advantage of our lack of qualifications to entertain readers is always unacceptable....” (Tan Xa hoi, 10 October. 1936).<sup>43</sup>

When President Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam’s independence to the world in Ba Dinh Square on 2 September 1945, National Day, two women had the honor of carrying the national flag. After the August Revolution, Vietnamese women were finally able to carry on with their civic duties with the benefits of gender equality. They were able to vote and run for election to the National Assembly – the highest governmental body.

The country’s political system promotes human rights, which had been proclaimed in the *1776 Declaration of Independence of the United*

<sup>42</sup> “We are replacing pigtails with a new hair bands, showing white teeth instead of dyeing them black. We use lipstick to redden our lips instead of chewing on betel. ... We prefer soft, white silky pants to the thick hot ugly ones which would not let you know if they were dirty or not but the old women and old men said it was clean because it’s black....” (Phong Hoa newspaper).

<sup>43</sup> This was the reply of Tam Kinh Tran Thi Trac after *Ngay Nay* newspaper published the article and the caricature. Forty women attended the meeting on 24 September 1936 at Tri Tri headquarters, which was led by Doan Thi Tam Dan, as president, and Tran Thi Trac and Dinh Thi Phuong as secretaries.

*States*: “We hold these truth to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In the first congress, there were ten female parliament members who represented Vietnamese women and who voted for the approval of the first legal Constitution, which states: “*The country’s power lies in the hands of the people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, wealth, class, religion.... Women are equal to men in all professions,*” (Article 9, italicized for emphasis). This was an unprecedented milestone marking full accommodation to, and acknowledgement of, women intellectuals in Vietnam and, in particular, their acquisition of equality commensurate with the leading global human rights movements.

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