

*An Issue of Suicidal Woman and Feminism in Vietnam: Situations, Solutions, and
Its Effects on Society
(Surveying the weekly Newspaper “Phụ Nữ Tân Văn” 1929-1934)*

Cao Kim Lan, Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam

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Abstract

Gender inequality is a normal and prevalent fact in Vietnam since the early years of the 20th century. However, when Viet Nam was colonized by the French this southeast Asian country was exposed to Western culture including Feminism. Although most social positions were quite varied, traditional views of woman's role and functions were equally dismal. This led to a widespread phenomenon of woman committing suicide. In this paper, we will carry out research to analyze this nationwide suicidal tendency and the movement that fought for woman's equal rights in Vietnam through the survey of the weekly newspaper “*Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*” (*Woman's Newspaper*). It was the most influential newspaper in Viet Nam from 1929-1934 and it called for contributions by the *PNTV* to significantly change society's knowledge about woman and the tribulations of the female labour force. Nevertheless, feminism is still a controversial and complicated issue in Viet Nam because of male chauvinism and Confucianism. Although Vietnamese authorities passed an equal law for woman, in reality women still have to withstand many pre-conceptions that results family violence and the lack of fulfillment of the highly-educated woman. By surveying the text of the newspaper “*Phu Nu Tan Van*” as well as some contemporary electronic newspapers, analysis of our data related to Vietnamese culture, it's sociology and the feminist theory, we hope to show a relationship between our traditional culture and its connection to feminism in contemporary Vietnam.

Key words: Feminism, Suicidal woman, An suicidal woman in Vietnam, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*.

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Introduction

In the main factors that impacted on a process of forming a general account of Vietnam's culture and society in the early years of the 20th century, the press played a very important role including contributions for changing the public's perception of the issue of woman's roles and functions. Although newspapers were published by woman and for woman are still an especial phenomenon, there were about more than ten newspapers initiated by woman in this period. However they almost existed in the short time, even some of them just existed several months¹. The weekly newspaper *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn (PNTV)* has been considered as the most successful newspaper in Viet Nam from 1929-1934 and it called for contributions to significantly change society's knowledge about woman and the tribulations of the female labour force.

In the first issue (May 2, 1929), *PNTV*'s editors made a clear statement its purpose and functions. *PNTV* is a newspaper "for women's interests", "An independent organization, working single-mindedly at women's problems, and surveying issues that concern women. That means, it will deal with issues relating to the whole nation's fate". During six years, *PNTV* represented a voice of women, and vigorously fought for woman's equal rights as well as the nation's development. Paralleled awareness of woman's rights and duties that received from feminist movements in the world, in the new context, urgent problems of Vietnamese women such as education, financial possess, and their family and social relationships were mentioned in the *PNTV* by reports, commentations, consultancies, teachings, propagandas, evaluations and constructions. All these different activities made a new face of Vietnamese society. From 1930s, women had become "the issue" that was paid attention by whole society. Most newspapers added *a column for woman*, and woman's issues were publicly discussed in the press.

Gender inequality is a normal and prevalent historical fact in Vietnam for thousands of years. However, when Viet Nam was colonized by the French this southeast Asian country was exposed to Western culture including Feminism. Although most social positions were quite varied, traditional views of woman's role and functions were equally dismal. This led to a widespread phenomenon of woman committing suicide. Increasing suicidal women victims had negatively affected all classes in society. Awoken to a dangerous nature of this tendency, *PNTV*'s activities concentrated to seek causes and put forward solutions in order to stop the depressing reality from a viewpoint of the traditional culture and Vietnamese psychology. On the other hand, this newspaper also engaged women participating activities to rescue themselves from inequalities.

¹ For example: The existed time of woman's newspapers in Vietnam.

Nữ giới chung (1918) - the first woman newspaper	Phụ nữ (1938-1939) in Ha Noi
Phụ nữ Thời Đàm (1930-1934) in Ha Noi	Nữ công tạp chí (1936-1938) in Sai Gon
Phụ Nữ Tân tiến (1932-1934) in Hue	Nữ giới (1938-1939) in Sai Gon
Đàn bà mới (1934-1936) in Sai Gon	Đàn bà (1939-1945) in Ha Noi
Nữ lưu (1939-1937) in Sai Gon	Bạn gái (1945)
Việt Nữ (1937) in Ha Noi	

Based on feminism in the world, the movement that fight for woman's equal rights in Vietnam has been known as a persistly journey during more than one century. Until now there are a great many of social problems that concern the sexist oppression. This paper will answer the question why has "Woman" become "an issue"/"a problem" that need to be dealt with from the early years of 20th century to now in Vietnam?

1. The issue of suicidal woman in the early years of the 20th century: the situation and its causes

On the article headlined "Women Commit Suicide Again", No. 123, 2 June, 1932, *PNTV*'s columnists complained that "The suicidal tendency has been an enfectious disease in which no any powers that can stop it".

PNTV did not count the numbers of victims with a exact statistics, however by surveying two columns: *The Domestic News* and *Our Opinions of the Topical Questions*, it can realize that committing suicide became a burning problem of society. In *The Domestic News*, each report was written very short, maybe about 30-70 words including name, age and reasons why victims had to commit suicide. For instance, "Two Female Teachers Committed Suicide", "A Female Teacher Cut Her Bosom and Neck to Commit Suicide", "A Female Teacher Ty Committed Suicide at Binh Loi Bridge" (*PNTV* No. 123, 2 June, 1932), "A Mother and Four Her Daughters Committed Suicide at Truc Bach Lake" (*PNTV*, No. 118, 28 January, 1932)' "Because of the Obstacles in Love, a Girl Committed Suicide From a High Building" (*PNTV* No. 115, 14 January, 1932); "Two Female Siblings Committed Suicide at Hoan Kiem Lake at the Same Time" (*PNTV* No. 98, 3 September, 1931); "A Victim of the Constrained Marriage"(*PNTV* No. 218, 28/9/1933)...etc. Most victims are about 16-25 years old.

Besides providing mainly individual informations about suicidal victims, many *articles, reviews and comments* that related to this phenomenon were published by *PNTV*. In *Our Opinions of the Topical Questions* column, most these articles focused on searching of **reasons/causes** of woman committing suicide. They conceded that the core background of this issue proceeds from the very new development of society - a period of Western-Eastern cultural interference in Vietnam.

When the French settled in Indochina and started to cary out colonial policies in Viet Nam, an industrial economy was simultaneously begun to take shape in the nation that originated from an agricultural production. This led to many new social relationships were established and changed. The Western cuture and engineering shook the whole society from its foundations, generating a great deal of conflictions including traditional views of woman's role and functions.

Firstly, there are **pre-married unsound customs**. In articles signed Phu Nu Tan Van such as "We Understand the Reason Why Ms. Tuyet Hong Committed Suicide" (No. 83, 21 May 1931), and "Reasons Make Women Have to Commit Suicide" (No. 85, 4 June 1931); Phan Khoi's articles headlined "A Discussion of Suicidal Woman" (No. 22) and "The Family in Vietnam Has Been a Problem" (No. 83, 21 May 1931); and Thach Lan's other article titled "Woman and Love" (No. 95, 13 August 1931), it has seen that all authors concentrated on analyses of the pre-marriage unsound customs in Vietnam including a rule "where parents put baby sitting" and "exacting wedding-presents (as a challenge issued by a girl's family) from the future bridegroom's

family”. Compelling a girl to marry a person who is not suitable for her because of the property and money of the bridegroom’s family, or require wedding-presents from the future bridegroom’s poor family and separate a couple... led girls to fall into a stalemate. They had to either accept their fate with resignation or commit suicide. Specially, facing with the situation that happened 2 victims committing suicide in one week and 5-6 dead persons in two months, Phan Khoi clearly exposed that, “Vietnamese society is getting sick, Vietnamese traditional views of the family has not been suitable for society itself anymore. Hence, the family in our country has become “the problem”. We must keep our mind awaking this situation and find the way to deal with its problem” (No. 83, 21 May, 1931). And he emphasized “All deaths rise from causes in their family”(No. 83, 21 May, 1931).

In other article, *PNTV*’s columnists also asserted that, “In order to eliminate the suicidal tendency in society, first of all, we must abolish unsound customs, and strict and suppressive rules that are pressing the life of human beings; We must totally exclude constraining girls to marry someone without love - one of causes makes them have to commit suicide” (No. 85, 4 June 1931). Besides showing unsound customs in society, another author Thach Lan also questioned the relationship between woman and love to display one of the reasons of woman committing suicide. Why have Vietnamese women had not rights to talk about love? “Because women are a thing, they are not human beings, nobody paid attention to their emotions and feelings. Thus, when women discuss on love, speak of love, require the loved right, as a formal voice in society, will prove that “Women are not a thing that men can arrange everything on their life and absolutely obey men without question. Women are human beings, having equal rights with men, and having the free right in the marriage to select their spouse” (No. 95, 13 August 1931). Therefore, the marriage without love and the lack of respect for woman’s psychology and sentiments are one of main causes of inequality in society.

The second cause is the after-marriage situation and the multi-generational family regime. Many articles in the *PNTV* mentioned the doctrine of “Three Moral Bonds” (the relationship between King and subject, father and child, husband and wife) - an issue that not only related to the cultural tradition, concerned also politics. In a series of Phan Khoi’s articles such as “Comparing between the Family Regime in Vietnam and Confucius-Mencius’s Moral” (No. 85, 4 June 1931); “Discussion more on Three Moral Bonds and Five Constant Virtues” (No. 89, 30 July 1931), he displayed the real nature of Confucianism’s Three Moral Bonds and clearly shown that this doctrine only supports to the monarchic system. When considering this doctrine’s humanity, he asserted “People’s individual personality has been trampled on” (tư cách cá nhân đã bị giày đạp) (No. 89, 30 July 1931). Some other articles as such Dong Tung Thon Nu’s “Are Three Subjections and Four Virtues Suitable for Woman Today?” (No. 93, 30 July 1931) also commented on this doctrine’s inadequacies. However, they had to concede that all views have existed as a characteristic of the national traditional culture and it is not easy to abolish from community mind.

More to the point of traditional moral views, authors and scholars concentrated on analyses of the relationship between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law. According to Phan Khoi, the great family regime contains lots of disadvantages. The most important thing here is the human personality simultaneously can be spoiled and made

conflicts between them. In reality, basing on the traditional view “Parents are always right”, mother-in-law usually persecutes her daughter-in-law with many rules in the family. For example, in the article named “When Sons Get Married, Should They Live the Same House with Their Parents?”, he analysed three reasons that led to severe disagreements between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The first one is the change of the circumstances. Although most positions in society have changed including daughter-in-law’s knowledge about woman’s roles and duties, mother-in-law has still kept unsound opinions. These make differences from behaviours and living attitude. The next one is inconsistencies that generate from age and psychophysiological differences. And finally, for interests and responsibilities, although mother-in-law does not consider daughter-in-law as her own child, she always requires her daughter-in-law must completely have responsibilities for her husband’s family, having kind behaviours with her mother-in-law, looking after mother-in-law as her mother (Phan Khoi, No. 159, 17 July, 1932). All these are causes that generate a great many of wretches for daughter-in-law, and in some dismal cases, reaching an impasse and pains lead young girls committing suicide.

In addition, the plural marriage also made many women fall down whimsical and pain circumstances. They can be an original wife or a concubine, however both of them are functional human beings for a patriarchal system, either finding her legitimate social place in their husband’s lineage, or only being person who provide a male heir for her husband’s family. They must accept their fate with resignation and share their married relationship with other women in the same house.

The third reason is major disadvantages of the social moral standards that were considered as **customary laws**. These moral standards are a footing of inequalities because they only bind women, obliging women to have absolutely obedience of men meanwhile men are beyond all these standards and norms.

When carried out to analyse a glaring injustice of Tuyet Hong’s death and woman’s virginal issue, Nguyen Duc Nhuan emphasized that “The social ethics only ties one side, only for women”. From past to now, no man have been punished by losing their virginhood. Meanwhile, many girls have been tyrannized with many different ways if she did not keep her virginity before wedding. The bride’s ignoble feelings and a persecution in her husband’s family made many women to reach deadlock and choose the way committing suicide. In reality, “from poor girls who are cheaper than a zinc coin to educated girls who were born in the rich family, all of them were compelled to marry someone, or were sold to someone as a goods”. Facing with this situation, “Energetic girls leave home beyond being aware of their future. People accepted their fate resignedly will be a child-servant/child-bride, or a concubine, or marry with someone who are not worthy of their ages and feelings. Some persons go to pagodas in order to forget their young age. Some persons commit suicide”(No. 110, 26 November, 193). Thus, this moral standard is one of crucial causes making inequalities in society. Exposing this serious and painful phenomenon, *PNTV* engaged all women and the whole society must abolish unsound customs, eliminating the difference between men and women, for a equal society.

Finally, above and beyond external elements that impacted on woman’s destiny, the suicidal tendency rises from other internal reason, that is, woman’s perception and knowledge. Lacking of education caused women to destroy themselves. Nhan Viet in

his article “A Weak Mind, A Spiritless Energy” displayed that “Committing suicide generates from narrow-minded thoughts, the spiritless will. Thus, women need to participate in movements that fight for equality of women themselves with the stronger mind, giving up weak thoughts and committing suicide” (No. 135, 6 June 1932). Especially, he emphasized that if educated women also commit suicide, they will only illustrate that they are coward and fool. Women must to find some ways, some solutions in order to rescue themselves from inequalities in society, must participate in movements that defend and protect themselves from public unequal opinions.

In summary, the suicidal tendency is the widespread phenomenon and from this gloomy reality, it can be realized that woman has really become the serious “issue” of society and it requires to be dealt with by all people. In the process of looking for solutions to deal with this problem, *PNTV*'s activities attracted the attention of many scholars and thinkers, and gained an agreement of many different social classes in society. They became a motivation that encouraged the community in fighting for woman's equal rights, impulsing the development of society in Vietnam.

2. The movement that fought for woman's equal rights in the newspaper *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*.

In this part, we only concentrate on activities and solutions that *PNTV* carried out to drive back a suicidal “plague” and from that moved toward fights for woman's equal rights in Vietnam. This newspaper's other activities such as organizing women's delivering speeches, establishing women's associations, holding referendums on the women issue from many different scholars, thinkers and women's views as well, showing the relationship between women and education, women and literature, women and domestic issues' state affairs, women and looking after children, women and science.. etc, will be dealt with in another works.

Based on causes that led to the suicidal tendency in Vietnam, articles in the *PNTV* focused on analyses to expose *Confucianism's real nature that has existed as Vietnamese people's customary laws and traditional cultural characteristics and its influences on the communal psychology*.

First of all, being one of Asian countries that is quite heavily impacted by Confucianism, the gender oppression might be interpreted as being interconnected with filiality, patrilineality, and ancestor worship (Li-Hsiang, 2006). These three cultural imperatives and Confucian virtue ethics take familial virtue of filial piety as the root of civic virtue. But, in the theory as well as in practice, Confucianism's many views bear hard upon woman as such the doctrine of “Three subjections and Five constant Virtues”, and the view of an ideal woman's “Four virtues”². Scholars and journalists such as Phan Khoi (No. 89, 2 July 1931; No. 85, 4 June 1931; No. 135, 6 June 1932; No. 159, 14 July 1932; No. 117, 21 January, 1932), Nguyen Duc Nhuan (No. 104, 15 October, 1931), Dong Tung Thon Nu (No. 93, 30 July, 1931), A.C (No. 159, 14 July, 1932) in their articles vigorously againtsted these customary laws. They analysed both advantages and disadvantages in Confucian thoughts, and indicated

² Four virtues (Tứ đức) includes Công (Household Skills/Arts), Dung (The beauty), Ngôn (Words, Speaking Arts), Hạnh (Virtue Ethics).

Confucianism's core principle that loses the human dignity of women. That is, "Confucian personhood", it coincides with the male self. Thus, it makes Confucianism become a total incompatibility with feminism and woman's liberation. In addition, these customary laws' power glues the philosophical foundation of Chinese people's *Yin-Yang* principle, displaying woman's roles and functions in society as an inevitable thing that appreciates to the natural laws. By keeping the three cultural imperatives - the continuity of the family name, ancestor worship, and filial piety, the social practices bear hard upon women and compel women to accept their fates with resignation.

On the other hand, these led to the second issue, that is *the community psychology*. We can not deny that Confucian thoughts formed Vietnamese traditional virtue views and a specific evaluative system of woman's role and duties. However, the anxious thing is that views of Confucian virtue ethics are conceded by both men and women. This reality built a stable and inherent "wall" as if persist obstacles that any innovations or alterations also meet lots of difficulties to overcome. In fact, these traditional views deeply penetrated in public mind and each individual psychology. In Phan Khoi's articles named "The Reformed Issue for Woman" (*PNTV*, No. 118, 28 January, 1932), and "An Issue of Woman's Liberty and the Philosophy of life", he dealt with this issue from the philosophical foundation, and displayed that an emancipation of woman does not base on the history's evolutionary process and each individual's financial independence, but needs to be founded on philosophical thoughts of life. In the situation that many fierce debates were appeared and made lots of confusions between two old-new, conservative-progressive outlooks in the society, considering the emancipation of woman from the philosophical foundation would help people to recognize feminism's real nature as well as avoid unnecessary disputes. Also, the philosophy of life has related on the individual knowledge and social cultural levels, thus, in order to deal with this issue from the root, author asserted again that society must consider women as human beings and they must equal with men in all interests. However, the necessary precondition is women' self-awareness of their own issue. The movement that has fought for woman's equal rights must to be risen from woman's requirements and perception.

3. Feminism and Vietnamese woman's place in society today: situations and solutions

Although Vietnamese authorities passed an equal law for women (2016), in reality women still have to withstand many pre-conceptions that results social problems such as family violence and the lack of fulfillment of the highly-educated woman.

Mrs. Le Hoa, deputy for Oxfam in Vietnam said, "we are educated and grown up with the beliefs that men are stronger and they have rights to do violent behaviours towards women. Conversely, women also are certain about this normality as if it is part of our life. However, the more dangerous thing is that it does not considered criminal actions" (Nam Phuong, 2014). This is one of causes that have made family violence increased continually in Vietnam. According to *The National research on Family Violence for Women in Vietnam* that was proclaimed by Vietnam government and United Nations dated 25 November 2010, 58% Vietnamese women confirmed that they were victims of one of three family violent forms including the body, sex, and the mind. "Although family violence is very common, this situation has mainly been

hidden”, Mrs. Henrica A.F.M. Janse - the head of the research Group announced. “Besides a discrimination and shame, many women have still thought that family violence is a normal thing, and women need to accept their fate with resignation in order to keep the peace in their family” (Pham Thu Huong, 2016). According the latest statistics (2016), most Vietnamese women have been living in a latent danger of family violence at one or some certain periods in their life. In some regions in Vietnam such as the southeast of Vietnam and mountain regions, for every 10 women, there are 4 victims of family violence and they recognized that family is not a safe place for them (Pham Thu Huong, 2016). In addition, according to Mrs. Shoko Ishikana- the head of representative for Institution of United National Woman, “87% Family violent victims have not found the authority’s helps - a orthodox service”. This indicated that the judicial system in Vietnam has not provided a guarantee and giving appropriate solutions.

These figures demonstrated that the movement that has fought for woman’s equal rights is still a very complicated issue and have lots of challenges. Sexist oppression has been occurring in the another face, not being explicitly appeared in public activities. In this time, committing suicide does not exist, and women are equal with men in education, work and other social interests today, but many women can not escape from a gloomy life. Gender inequality has existed as a unspoken power and betrayed in family relationships. Still, it was normally hidden by very women who want to keep a peace and tranquility in their family.

On the other hand, a huge number of women have continually kept the attitude that the woman’s happiness will be contingent upon a certain man. They have not broken out of men’ shadow, depending on men both mind and body. Happiness of women is to find themselves legitimate place in their husband’s family, ensuring their permanent social place in their husband’s lineages. This leads to the fact that independent and highly-educated women become the unusual phenomenon and difficulty in finding a ideal husband. Patriarchal behaviour caused men normally flinch to get married with highly-educated women. Even if they can get married, a divorced rate is higher than non-educated or less educated women.

In addition, the standards of the ideal woman seems to be not changed very much. “Four virtues” are important criteria for evaluating women. In David Marr (1984), Shawn Mc Hale (1995), and Van Chi (2008)’s researches on Vietnamese “women issue” in the early years of the 20th century, although authors referred to changes in women’ perception about their own role and place in society and family, and considering this as a necessary precondition to emancipation of women from gender inequality, in fact, it can be seen that this shifted process was not in proportion to a full-scale revolutionary upheaval of Vietnamese society in this period. Until now, even though it can not deny that feminist movements has significantly changed Vietnam society during nearly one century, the protracted existence of the traditional views and customary laws have negatively influenced on many aspects of Vietnamese people’s living. In the past as well as in the present, gender oppression is part of community psychology concerning Confucian moral system, and existing as a solidified stronghold that is not easy to overcome.

Conclusion

Being colonized by the French, economy, politics and culture of Vietnam deeply changed and these strongly influenced on most positions in society. In this transitional period, many social issues generated and required to be deal with including the issue of woman's equal rights and an emergence of the tendency committing suicide of women as the plague. Facing with this dismal reality, *PNTV* investigated and exposed causes and solutions of this phenomenon. Unsound customs of the pre-marriage period, the multi-generational family regime and the after-marriage situation, and Confucian ethics were considered main causes that led to suicidal "disease" in Vietnam. Although there were a great deal of vigorous debates and conflicts between conservative and avant-garde people, feminism and the movement that fought for woman's equal rights gained certain achievements. Suicidal trend diminished in the late 1940s and significantly changed social awareness about woman's role and functions. However, these initial accomplishments are relatively minor compared feminist movements in the world.

In fact, traditional views of women have been toughly influenced by patriarchical system and Confucianism and these make feminism become a complicated issue in Vietnam. Committing suicide, or family violence as well as difficulties in the career and family of high-educated women originate from the obviously sexist oppression of social practice. Nevertheless, this gender inequality has been hidden underneath other social practices in new circumstance, and it is a serious public psychology that is not easy to eliminate.

Paralled passed the equal law for women, Vietnamese authority promulgated many different policies and decrees to reduce the gender inequality in Vietnam, but traditional culture and community psychology are making Confucianism become a implicit power in society that comes into conflicts between theory and practice, laws and law enforcements. It is very clearly that Vietnamese feminism needs to find a special way to deal with its proplems. If not, feminism will be fallen down anti-feminist situation and gender inequality has moved on more sophisticated forms, being beyond the control.

Consequently, Confucianism is refered to a whole fundamentally incompatible with Feminism, however in evolutional trend of human beings, equality and freedom for women are an unavoidable requirement. In reality, it is not easy to reconcile between Confucian legacies and woman's freedom. However, according to Li-Hsiang's research on *Confucianism and Women*, we might partly hope about "confucian feminism" in Vietnam as well as some other Asian countries:

"Despite its emphasis on reciprocal inequalities of social roles and its emphasis on the familial virtues of filiality and continuity, Confucianism is assumed to be able to inform feminism with an alternative theoretical ground for women's liberation. A fully articulated Confucian feminism will be reserved as a future project in order to do justice to contemporary feminist theories. For now, to provide an outline for this future project shall be sufficient to demonstrate the possibility of the convergence between feminism and Confucianism, or that a possible "feminist space" can be created within the Confucian tradition" (2006).

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Contact email: caokimlanvvh@gmail.com