

Work, Family and Public Policies:
Vietnamese Migrant Women's Socio-Economic
Adaptation in Australia and Japan

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Introduction

During the last two decades there has been a substantial increase of women workers and refugees migrating from economically less developed countries to advanced industrial countries. The result of this trend is that advanced industrial countries now include a growing number of international female migrants. To promote the socio-economic integration of these migrant women into society, some democracies have come to recognise women's specific needs by providing public policies and services for them. The influence of public policies and services based on such awareness of women's needs in a new country can be an important topic of study, to ensure equitable outcomes of welfare and settlement services for these women. However, not many studies have closely examined what influence public policies and services for migrant women have had on them.

This paper aims to contribute to filling this void by providing a comparative analysis on the differing attitudes of the Australian and Japanese governments towards gender equality and needs specific to Vietnam-born women. Australia and Japan provide a good case study on this matter because these two nations have had historically contrasting approaches to gender issues with regard to welfare and settlement services for immigrants. In Australia the government has been officially committed to gender equality, whereas in Japan the government has been implicitly based on the patriarchal family model of provision of welfare services. The paper particularly focuses on the employment of Vietnamese migrant women in these two countries because it gives a good indication of socio-economic integration into the wider society.

The initial assumption of this study was that differences in gender approaches of the Australian and Japanese governments to welfare and migrant settlement services would have a significant impact on the socio-economic adaptation of Vietnam-born women. However, this study has found that despite major differences between Australia and Japan, Vietnamese women in these two nations were similarly concentrated in marginal positions in the labour market.

This situation could suggest that provision of welfare and migrant settlement services, while recognising women's needs, seems to have little influence on the socio-economic status of such migrants. A greater overriding factor may be the specific gender role of women in the family context, affecting their capacity to engage with the receiving community. This conclusion is based on evidence from taped narratives of Vietnam-born women in Australia and Japan [1].

Background

Before turning to an examination of welfare and migrant settlement services in Australia and Japan, this section briefly outlines the background to Vietnamese settlers migrating to these countries. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, a large number of people fled Vietnam over the next 20 years because of political and socio-economic turmoil in the country. Approximately 1,250,000 people from Vietnam were resettled in new countries between 1975 and 1995. Some of these settlers later sponsored other family members to leave Vietnam through the Orderly Departure Programme (ODP). The majority of Vietnamese settlers who entered Australia and Japan during the period 1975 to 1995 were associated with this exodus. The Vietnamese migrant women who agreed to be part of this study came to their new country as asylum-seekers or as part of sponsored families.

From 1975 to 1995, according to the data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Australia and Japan had accepted 108,660 and 6,383 Vietnamese asylum-seekers respectively (LCCIRDPCS 1996, 1997). In 1996 the number of Vietnam-born residents in Australia was 151,941 (75,782 women) (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). The Japanese census for 1996 shows that there were 10,288 Vietnamese residents (4,680 women) including those who were born in Japan (Japan Immigration Association 1997). Australian and Japanese governments granted permission for Vietnamese asylum-seekers and their families to resettle in Australia and Japan, and helped them adjust to new societies through welfare and settlement

services. The next section will discuss in more detail welfare and settlement services provided for Vietnamese settlers, and women in particular, in Australia and Japan.

Welfare and migrant settlement services in Australia and Japan

The Australian government developed welfare service programmes in the 1970s to ameliorate class inequality in society by improving the access of low-income earners to health services, job training and education. During this period, it also developed multicultural settlement service programmes that included English training courses, translation and interpretation services and multilingual information and advice. The government incorporated the recognition of specific needs of women into these general welfare and migrant settlement services.

The government offered a variety of public services for women as a whole and Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) women as a sub-group. In particular, from 1983 to 1996, the Hawke/Keating Labor governments developed policies and programmes to ensure access and equity to opportunities for women with regard to health, housing, freedom from domestic violence, childcaring, education and job training and income security (Office of Status of Women 1989). The government increased the number of multilingual workers conducting programmes for NESB women in order to help them access these services. In addition, the governments developed home tutoring programmes and free childcare services for those attending English classes. The governments also developed community grants for agencies and projects to focus on health care, family care and domestic violence against NESB women (Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs 1991, p. 113). These services for NESB women focused not only on health and family life but also on employment opportunities and occupational improvement.

The Japanese government has been developing welfare services since the end of the Second World War, but its approaches and goals in regard to women are very different from the Australian experience. For example, the Japanese government has conceived of welfare rights as a favour of the state rather than the rights of citizens and a responsibility of the state (Ito 1994, pp. 174-192). Self-reliance, family-reliance and employer-reliance are emphasised in welfare provision (Ito 1994, p. 215). The government provides social benefits on a household basis. Its implicit view of 'desirable' household model – ie. men as breadwinners and women as caregivers within the family – has been applied to public welfare [2].

In Japan, settlement services for immigrants began when the government started permitting resettlement of Vietnamese asylum-seekers. In its treatment of these new comers the government focused on making refugees financially self-sufficient as soon as possible. Most services were directed to securing employment for refugee settlers to achieve this goal. On-arrival services programmes for refugee settlers included temporary accommodation (the Resettlement Promotion Centre or the International Refugee Reception Centre). Other services were provided in these centres, subsidised by the government (Refugee Resettlement Assistance Headquarters 1994) [3]. These services were health services, Japanese language training, guidance in the Japanese way of life and advice on finding employment. During the first four months in the centres, refugee settlers spent their time learning Japanese language skills. The Japanese language courses were followed by social life adaptation guidance courses. These provided refugees with basic information about Japanese customs, lifestyle, health services and institutional and legal systems. At the completion of the course, the staff in the centres assisted refugees in finding employment.

In these settlement service programmes, the government paid scarce attention to anything other than the establishment of basic financial stability for

Vietnamese settlers. There were very few public services to improve their life opportunities through acquiring educational and occupational qualifications. Vietnamese migrant women's specific needs according to ethnic background and gender were not on the agenda in the resettlement service programmes.

To summarise, Australian governments are concerned with promoting gender equality in both general welfare services and migrant settlement assistance programmes with regard to employment and the socio-economic status of women. In contrast, the Japanese government focuses almost exclusively on achieving financial self-sufficiency of refugee settlers in their new country. Little official recognition has been given to gender equality in welfare services and settlement assistance programmes in Japan.

Vietnamese migrant women's experiences in Australia and Japan: employment and household responsibilities

Generally, despite differences between Australian and Japanese welfare and settlement services with regard to treatment of migrant women, Vietnam-born women in Australia and Japan have lived similarly in the lower sectors of the labour markets.

In Australia the employment of general Vietnam-born women has had three characteristics: a high rate of unemployment; downward occupational mobility; and a concentration on menial work in the manufacturing industries. The unemployment rate of the Vietnam-born women (29.2%) was much higher than that of the total Australian women (8.3%) in 1996 (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). The difference in the unemployment rate between the sexes in the Vietnam-born population (29.2% for females and 22.3% for males) was the reverse of that between the sexes in the total Australian population (8.3% for females and 9.8% for males) (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). For Vietnam-born women, the most common occupations were Intermediate Production and Transport Workers and Labourers and Related Workers that included labour work in the manufacturing

industries. This occupational category accounted for 19.7% for Vietnam-born females in 1996. This rate is very high considering the proportion of the equivalent occupational categories for the total Australian females (3.1%) (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1999). Downward occupational mobility was commonly experienced among former professional female workers in Vietnam when they entered the labour market. The employment that Vietnamese women first gained in Australia was likely to be low-paid unskilled work regardless of their former occupations and level of education in Vietnam (Tran and Holton 1991). Although some had regained their former occupations, the majority of Vietnamese workers have stayed in the same or similar occupations.

In Japan there was no available equivalent published statistical data to indicate the economic positions of Vietnam-born women. However, previous research suggests that Vietnamese women in Japan experienced a low occupational status (LCCIRDPCS 1996, 1997). Although they found it relatively easy to find employment within the first six months of living in Japan, most Vietnamese women could gain access only to unskilled work. Over 80% of employed Vietnamese women who obtained work through the resettlement centres by the end of 1995 started as plant and machine operators in the manufacturing industries (LCCIRDPCS 1996). The majority of these women were likely to remain in similar sorts of occupations. For example, in 1996 Plant and Machine Operators and Construction Workers, which represented labour work in manufacturing industries, accounted for 63.1% of employed Vietnamese women [4].

In comparing Australia and Japan, it can be said that Vietnamese migrant women in these two countries were similar in that both populations were highly concentrated in unskilled labour work. This similarity in the general employment patterns of Vietnamese migrant women makes ambiguous the effects of special welfare and settlement services for women, especially the promotion of migrant

women's employment opportunities and upward occupational mobility. The question now arises: why have Australia's gender specific welfare and settlement services failed to make major improvement in occupational achievement for Vietnamese migrant women?

The interview data of this research on the experiences of individual Vietnam-born women in Australia suggests the roles of these women that they have in their families as wives and mothers as a possible factor that contributes to their low position in the labour market. In Australia, Vietnamese women were likely to regard themselves as family-orientated and usually placed a high priority on the well-being of their families. These women were more likely to devote themselves to their families as caregivers (as mothers and wives) than to their own personal growth. Some of these women also undertook unskilled paid work to contribute to their families' well-being even when they wished to improve their occupational opportunities by acquiring academic or professional qualifications. They perceived this selfless devotion as a cultural 'virtue'. This factor seems to have hindered Vietnamese women from gaining access to settlement services to support such a wish to improve their occupational opportunities, and thus made them ineffective. The following examples from three Vietnam-born women in Australia, who used to be professionals in Vietnam, support this assumption to some extent.

The first example is Chau (46 years old). She was 39 years old when her husband sponsored her to leave Vietnam. This was seven years after he had left Vietnam. Soon after settling in Australia she had two children. Although she hoped to regain her occupation in a new country, her studies in an English course and Technical and Further Education college were interrupted by pregnancy. She did not complete either course and has been unemployed since.

The second case concerns Thao (44 years old). She came to Australia with her

husband and child when she was 31 years old. She had been unemployed for five years after she entered Australia. While Thao was unemployed she studied to regain her former professional qualification. However, she was unable to use it for full-time employment because of the conflict with household duties, especially child-minding. In her words:

I think it is difficult for women like me to look for job I can work and I can look after the children. ... [With regard to work which I applied for] you have to do a shift work from seven o'clock at work, so you have to come there before seven. And that mean you get up at six o'clock. I have to take the children to go to school. You know? It's difficult. And late shift start two thirty. So you ready to leave home at two o'clock. Already to pick up the children and cook dinner for the children. And late shift work from ten o'clock to seven o'clock at night [shift] day, if you are, children, your children sick, who look after? Who, who look. That is difficult. ... And if you work only few days, they don't employ you, because like that, you, if you work very busy work like that, you don't know what happen there, when you were not at work, and you have to ask everyone, everyone, it's difficult for me. They don't want that.

After her youngest child started primary school Thao managed to find two part-time jobs in which she could use her qualifications.

The third and final case concerns Xuan (40 years old). She came to Australia with her husband and child when she was 21 years old. She has worked as an unskilled labourer for about 10 years since her arrival. While she worked full-time she also undertook all household chores at home. In the early years of resettlement in Australia she started an English training course in order to enter university. She wished to improve her occupational status by regaining her professional qualification in an Australian university, but her husband made her give up this goal. She said:

When I lost that job, I intended to go back to university. And, during all this time, my husband was in the university, because as soon as we arrive, he enrolled himself in university straight away. And I was the only one that support the family. So when I lost that job, I thought, "Well, now is the time that I concentrate on my English skill so that I could get back to university." But, I got back to the English course, I think, about two or three weeks, and my husband said to me, "No, we cannot survive. You'd better get back to work." And so I started to go out to look for work again.

She eventually acquired some professional qualifications and got promoted to office work. However, Xuan did not have a chance to study in university to acquire a professional qualification related to her former occupation.

These three cases from Chau, Thao and Xuan show different ways in which these women were hindered from achieving their own occupational success because of their dedication to their families. Chau's case suggests that the early stage of settlement was important for her to establish a family life after a long absence from her husband. Although she wished to have her former profession, she chose to concentrate on rebuilding her family instead of pursuing a career. Thao's case presents an example of the difficulties in dealing with both full-time employment and young children who need care. In the third case, Xuan's case provides an example of a woman sacrificing her occupational aspirations for her family members' success. In the Vietnamese community in Australia, in my observation, it was common for women to sacrifice their pursuit of academic qualifications in favour of male family members, especially when household resources were limited.

In Japan, Vietnam-born women interviewed for this study felt similar obligations to their Australian counterparts with regard to the perception and practice of their role within the family. This point was expressed by Lan, who was 21 years old and single, talking about her wish to be committed to her family as a wife and mother in the hope of being a good role model to her future children. In her words:

I think that family is important, especially the role of mother. I believe that my children's happiness will be my happiness, so I would like to be committed to my family and raise my children sincerely. Don't you think that children are like pieces of white paper when they are small? If mothers were selfish, such an attitude would be reflected in their children's personality and these children would not be able to change it forever.

The following quote from Diep (33 years old and married to a Vietnamese man

who she met in Japan) is another illustration of the strong commitment of a Vietnam-born woman to her family over her own needs:

Once you marry, you will not be able to do what you would like to ... because you have to do many things for your family. You know, I don't want to buy [ready-made] food from a convenience store or a supermarket for my family. I should cook all by myself. It takes time. So I cannot have my own time.

By prioritising her homemaking role, Diep felt that she could not pursue her own goals in employment and education. However, many Vietnamese women in Japan, including Diep, did not feel strong conflicts between their aspiration to improve their occupational opportunities and role as wives and mothers. These women were more concerned with perceived deficiencies in public policies and services for immigrants as factors barring them from improving their occupational opportunities, rather than their role in the family. The following anecdote from Sau expresses this point:

Sau came to Japan with her husband when she was 28 years old. In the early years of her settlement in Japan, she decided to study the Japanese language in private school in order to solve problems in communicating with non-Vietnamese speakers and to improve her occupational status in this new country. Sau had two children by then and needed to organise childcare while she studied. She went to the city office with her Vietnamese friend as interpreter to apply for the use of public childcare. The staff did not accept her application. Sau described the conversation between her and the staff:

I went to the city office, I wanted to apply for childcare by saying, "I would like to have someone to take care of my children in order to go to Japanese school. Now I would like to go to Japanese school because I need to speak Japanese to make our life easier." But then the staff said, "No". He said to me, "Well, it's not only you who would like to study languages. Other Japanese people also would like to learn English or other foreign languages. But we cannot grant those who don't work the use of childcare". Then I said, "Perhaps I should not say so, but our situation is a bit different from that of Japanese people. Well, if I had been Japanese I would not have asked for childcare in order to study languages. But now I am going to live here for a long time and would like to adapt to the Japanese life. So would you please help us, would you please do us favour." ... Well, that man was probably so cold-hearted. He said, "No", although I asked him once, twice and three times.

Sau gave up her plan to study and continued her employment. It took two years for her to start studying Japanese full time when the city office accepted her application for childcare services while she was studying. She felt that her chances to improve her Japanese language skills were deterred because of the lack of sensitivity of the Japanese government with regard to the specific needs of migrant women.

The following quotes from May (28 years old and single) also describes her concern with deficiencies in public policies and services for refugee settlers in Japan:

Those who were a little bit younger than us could have entered junior high school or high school. But I don't know if it was because I was too old to go to school, they just said to me, 'You would not be able to do anything much but work', 'You are at the age to think about marriage', or 'Even though you go to school a woman cannot do much in Japanese society'. They said only such things. ... I wish I could have had someone to support me a little bit more, because I would like to have used such a precious time of life more usefully. After sending us from the (resettlement) centre, the Japanese government was almost dismissive of us.

The word 'dismissive' was frequently used in the Vietnamese women's descriptions of general attitudes of the Japanese government towards Vietnamese refugee settlers. Vietnam-born women in Japan considered that the government did not recognise their needs according to their financial limitations and linguistic backgrounds.

Welfare and conflict between employment and household responsibilities

The experiences of Vietnamese migrant women in Australia presented above illustrate conflicts between women's individual aspirations for academic and occupational achievement and their family responsibilities. Despite the recognition given by the Federal government to the special needs of migrant women, Australia's welfare and settlement services for women appear to have been ineffective in solving these conflicts.

As illustrated in the case studies, Vietnamese migrant women did not always undertake their socio-economic activities for their own benefit but for the benefit of the household as a unit. The influence of patriarchal ideology is evident in the ways that these women were committed to their families. They followed patriarchal principles: a) the husband is the main breadwinner and the wife undertakes a caregiving role; and b) the husband makes the decisions in the family. Under these patriarchal pressures, public policies and assistance programmes for women to gain higher academic and occupational achievements, could not effectively help Vietnamese migrant women develop their own occupational opportunities. Such Vietnamese women's dedication to the family in the process of establishing their socio-economic position was not fully taken into consideration in gender specific services provided by the Australian government.

In Japan, during interviews with Vietnamese women they did not mention conflict between their roles as caregivers in the family and their own academic or occupational ambitions in relation to welfare and settlement services. It seems reasonable to say that because there were very few public services to support them, these women did not notice conflict between these matters [5].

Conclusion

This paper has explored the impact of welfare and settlement services for migrant women on their socio-economic adaptation to new society, focusing on the experience of Vietnamese migrant women in Australia and Japan. Based on the anecdotal evidence, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of Australia's welfare and migrant settlement services in creating socio-economic integration of Vietnamese women were insignificant. The subjective experiences of such women in Australia are evidence that the role of women within the Vietnamese family as wife and mother has limited the influence of Australian welfare services. Australia's welfare and migrant service

programmes were concerned with gender equality for migrant women but they appear inadequate in solving conflicts between women's responsibilities at home and their personal ambitions outside the home.

In Japan, Vietnamese women did not seem very concerned with gender issues in welfare and settlement service programmes. These migrants were more concerned with the lack of official consideration on financial limitations and language barriers. However, this does not mean that Vietnamese women did not experience conflict between their household duties and socio-economic goals. As stated earlier, they may have simply given up their personal pursuits because of the very few public services to support them.

Based on these findings, I would like to conclude that in order to make public policies more effective in assisting migrant women to improve their socio-economic status, it is necessary to develop policies and services based on an adequate understanding of women's experienced gender norms and family roles. Without such an understanding gender specific public policies and services may become perfunctory and perpetuate migrant women's marginal socio-economic position in society.

Notes

[1]. The paper is drawn from a Ph.D research project studying the integration of Vietnamese refugee women into Australian and Japanese society. The main data used in this paper was collected in Australia and Japan in 1996 through intensive interviews with 31 Vietnam-born women. The statements of the research participants in Japan are the author's translations into English. The names have been altered to protect the confidentiality of the women concerned.

[2]. Housewives are favoured in taxation, pension, living allowances and health insurance compared with full time working women (Sugii, 1995).

[3]. The government established the Welfare and Education of the Asian People, a non-governmental organisation, to run resettlement service programmes for new arrivals.

[4]. Overall, Vietnamese male and female populations were both overrepresented in unskilled labour in manufacturing industries.

[5]. It may be worth mentioning that many Vietnamese migrant women in Japan commented that Vietnamese men and women were equal in both public and domestic spheres. This perception on gender relations in the Vietnamese family and society makes a sharp contrast to that of Vietnamese women interviewed in Australia, many of whom said Vietnamese women were unfairly treated in Vietnamese society and family. It seems that for Vietnamese migrant women in Japan their relations with Vietnamese men appeared relatively equal compared to gender relations in Japanese society. Vietnamese migrant women generally perceived gender relations in Japanese society were on a stronger influence of patriarchal ideology than that experienced in Vietnamese society.

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