WOMEN OF THE SOUTH:

An Interview with Vietnamese Women

by Marsha Steinberg

Marsha Steinberg: This is *Women of the South*, an interview with women of the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam, which was founded in June 1969 and includes both the People's Liberation Armed Forces of South Vietnam and governmental structures of liberated areas of the South. The PRG is also one of the parties that prepares peace talks representing anti-American forces in the South. This interview was done in mid-July when I was in Paris meeting with representatives of the PRG and the North Vietnamese, as well as representatives of other Vietnamese groups in Paris. I spoke with two of the women from the PRG, Madame **Nguyen Ngoc Dung** and Madame **Van**.

Madame Dung: Under the feudal way of living, women are considered to be inferior beings. The myths say that if a woman has one son then she has a family, but if she bears ten girls she has no family at all. A woman was not allowed to have an education because a woman did not matter, therefore time would be wasted on education. So a woman's only duty was to do the cleaning, do the washing, and raise her children. The pressure was not only from the feudal regime but also from the colonial regime of France, so that we had to bear two burdens. Man has only to bear one.

Madame Van: Economically, a woman had no right whatsoever to anything handed down. Everything that was worth anything went to the sons.

A very common thing in our society is early marriage—we say arranged, precocious. For example, a little boy ten years old will marry a girl 16 years old because the family needs some kind of labor for work in the fields. It's just a trade for the manpower of the girl. The young girl can't have any happiness in such a marriage, and it often ends very tragically for her.

We are five girls in our family. When I grew up, I wanted to work as a militant with the NLF. Though my parents were also patriotic, they said

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that the work of the revolution was for men, not for girls. So I had to break with my family at one time because of their thought that girls cannot do anything for the revolution. But later they heard news that I was indeed doing something good and well . . . pretty well. So they accepted and forgave me because I left the house. I wrote to them afterwards and they admitted that indeed girls can do things as well as boys.

Madame Dung: Despite the beginning of a revolution of thought—mostly in the cities where things are more advanced, in terms of education especially—a family that could not afford to send all their children to school always gave priority to the men; the men they knew would have to go out and face the world. That type of thing has a very bad effect

photo: Vietnam no. 164, 1972.

on the whole spirit of women: they start thinking, "Well, maybe it's true; maybe I am inferior." It's very difficult. The work of education is not separate from the overall struggle, which demands a great, great number of people, and as many women as men. Together there is a lot of sharing and learning. Not only in the struggle against colonialism, but also in the struggle of the people's lives. When you go into the village the women will go up to other women and say, "Come on; we really need you, right now." And they say, "But, oh, I can't do it; I'm so feeble; I just can't do anything. I know I can't." And we say, "Well, yes you can do it. You must do it!"

Women before never had education, could not read, could not write. But when it was given to women to do specific tasks and to learn a certain thing, even the oldest women struggled at trying to write things and learn things, and they did. [We know] an older grandmother trying to accomplish her task the best way possible. To make her report, she had, in fact, to learn to read and write.

More difficult was the feeling of men. They didn't want women to come up to their level and take positions in the towns and districts, especially women who had done clandestine type work—the very difficult work. The women were actually much better at it than men in many cases. With both men and women doing this type of work, the men began to think that these women are doing it better, and maybe they have some good ideas, and maybe they are thinking and should be asked to share their ideas. This type of thing very much helped in raising the level of consciousness of the men.

Madame Dung: I have a brother, and, for example, in something as simple as eating a meal his wife always had to take the bones out of the fish for him. If she didn't do that, then he just wouldn't eat anything. Then my brother went away to work with the Liberation Forces, and when he came back after about a year, I was really surprised to see that he didn't complain about anything. He helped his wife and was a completely changed person.

Marsha: At this point, I asked if there were compulsory education for men in the NLF on the question of equality for women. Lee Mai, our [male] host and translator for meetings with the PRG, was asked to answer.

Lee Mai: Every cadre of the NLF and every person in the liberated zone in South Vietnam has to study the question of the equality of women. Women account for at least one half of the nation; and we cannot say that we want to liberate our people without liberating the wives and the mothers who are living together with us, who are working very hard for us, and who are suffering most in this war and in the feudalism (futilism) of the colonial regime. That is why every man in South Vietnam or in Vietnam as a whole understands the significance of the question of the equality of women.

What do we study? We study the tradition of women, the heroism of women in our country—the story of women—to understand the capacity of women. We also have to study the limitations to the women's power in the colonial regime, in the feudalist regime, so that in the Revolution when we get rid of these, then we can uphold the capacity of women—develop the capacity, the ability, of women. That becomes fairly true now because in South Vietnam, women can do everything that men do, can do; and sometimes do it even better, I have to admit.

Madame Van: I welcome very much what brother Lee Mai has just said, which proved that he's pretty poetic minded, like every man in the liberated zone. But I have to tell that there are many cadres in the NLF who indeed, in courses, in big meetings, on big forums, when they take the floor, make very beautiful speeches about the equality of women. Beautiful, marvelous speeches. But in reality, at home, he is behaving with his wife like a feudal lord: giving orders and asking to be served like a lord, a feudal lord. So his colleagues have to practice criticism to remind him that he should bring together his words with his deeds, and also the women in the organization of women have to wage battle against them. It's not a very easy job.

Madame Dung: It's always difficult to struggle against hundreds of years of myth and culture that always has to be struggled with and is at the very base of our problem. Our horizons have been basically our house, and it is more necessary for us to learn new things, and for that education that usually goes to men to go to women more than to men. In the cadres, in schooling for example, the regulations or the specifications are more lenient for women in order that women may continue that struggle upwards. So there are two things – not only must we think in terms of broadening our struggle and keeping that very much in the limelight in the revolutionary life, but also we must continue to build ourselves, to learn, and to overcome the difficulties ourselves. In some cases, when the families were very, very conservative, women would get together and help another woman—make sure that everything was clean and spotless—so that she'd have time to do the militant work that she was doing. On the other hand, of course, there are families who are totally devoted—who do everything in their power to aid the struggle, and whose children are encouraged to join the Liberation Forces. This type of a family is very much an example for the rest of the people.

Madame Van: The Vietnamese are an agricultural people and mostly peasants. The peasant is extremely attached to his land which is given to him by his ancestors who won it inch by inch from the sea and from the natural calamities. But now, with Vietnamization, which means bombing to the ground all vestiges of the land, all vestiges of the villages, the peasant is uprooted from his own family. Nothing is left to him to bring to the tombs of his ancestors. Traditionally the Vietnamese peasant is very attached to the remains of his ancestors. I can tell you, for example, after a bombing, the Vietnamese peasant looks for the remains of his ancestors because it is a very sacred thing. But now with the wicked plan of Vietnamization, there is nothing left to the peasant. And all the countryside, his native village, is changed; he cannot recognize his home. He has to flee to towns or to so-called refugee camps where he's kept in virtual cages—big places surrounded by barbed wire, with no trees and no plot of land which he can till. And he can't bear it; just the nostalgia of his own village makes him want to die. So it is a tragedy for the peasant—without much cause [brought] by the American government and Nixon to mentally and physically damage our people. The mental and physical damage can be repaired if peace comes one day. It can be repaired with the help of other friends in other countries. But the moral damages and the spiritual damages to the fabric of life, of society—it is a very long-range damage. It's for generations to come. For our people it's an unforgiveable crime caused by President Nixon's policy of Vietnamization in our country.

In every family in Vietnam, there's a tragedy of division—one child goes with the Liberation Army, the other has to be compelled at gunpoint to enroll in the Saigon puppet army, and the mother is torn apart between her two children. In her inner feelings she is for the Revolution—she is for the child who has gone to the Liberation Forces. One day she has to mourn for the death of her second child who has been driven to a faraway battlefield in Laos or Cambodia. It is a tragedy in every Vietnamese woman's heart.

The dignity of Vietnamese women has also suffered tremendously during these five, six years since the arrival of the American troops. The women who have been driven from the countryside because of the heavy bombing have to flock into the towns, can't find any jobs, and so have to prostitute themselves. It's the only way left to them—they are sold as sex objects. The families with daughters who have gone to that point suffer. Even the husbands have to shut their eyes when their wives have to prostitute themselves in order to feed the children. And it's moral torture for the

husbands. There are cases where women who have been dragged time and again by GI's are found. And the Saigon papers publish such news: One morning the naked corpse of a Vietnamese woman is found in big garbage pits, on the side of a sidewalk, in a silent street. And it's a quite terrible thing for our people.

Marsha: It's time to talk about the women within the PRG—how they work in maintaining and in helping people live, especially among the women and children.

Madame Van: When there are bombings in our towns there is always a problem of having enough food and shelter, since our homes are destroyed many times. The first and primary victims of these actions are the children, and we have several ways of dealing with the bombardments and destruction of our society. One of the first tasks that we have is to make sure that if there is bombardment and destruction, women do not become panicky.

We make trenches, for example, from our house to the rice field or from our house to where we gather water. The trenches are not only for people but also for the things we need: our clothes, our food, our supplies. We are an agricultural country and a lot of our plowing is done by big water buffalo, so we have to make giant trenches for the poor water buffalo. It goes to a point now that when the water buffalo hear the sound of a plane, they don't have to be pushed into the trenches, they go for them.

Just as in the winter we wear a coat and in the spring we wear a sweater or something, for us it's a part of our everyday life to camouflage ourselves. The people who work in the rice fields, for example, make themselves look like the rice field from the air. We have to realize now that many times the Americans send reconnaissance planes over. Sometimes they are B-52's, but they are reconnaissance planes, and we have to know that after them soon will follow B-52's bombing.

One cannot stay in the trenches all the time; one has to go out to work in the field and carry out one's everyday life. We have our schools held underground in the trenches. A lot of times, and especially for schools, the trenches are open in order to have air. To be safe with the children at various points along the trench, there will be little entryways of covered trench that the children can escape into. In an alert, the children can all disappear within these trenches. Much education has to be done around the use of toxic chemicals. We have to teach the people not to eat the vegetables and fruits that have been contaminated, and the water we use to cook with and to drink should always be covered fairly well; we have to teach that one should not go down to the river and just pull out water to drink. The sanitary service—the health service—of the PRG has organized so that in every town there are people who know medicine comparable to a doctor and to a nurse or a nurse's aide. In case of an emergency there are people there who can help in every village. The three elements of aiding oneself—preparing oneself, the help of the PRG, and helping each other with the various organizations, the women's unions, the soldiers of the militia units—those three things are a way of helping that we are able to continue. In terms of the politics of it, after a bombing, for example, the people go with demonstrations to the chief of the village and they say, "How could you do this? You represent the government of the people. What are you going to do for us? We have children that are hurt, and people that are killed and our houses are down." This is a way of getting the aid from the Saigon government; of getting as much aid from them as possible.

We Vietnamese women have no higher desire than to be able to live in peace and beside our loved ones, among our families, our husbands and children, like any other women in the world. We do not want to continue that war which has caused countless suffering to our people, especially to women. We want to be friends with the American people. ♀

Mwa Ton Ta—
just turned twenty,
leader of 300 struggles,
one leg left,
you stand erect,
a beautiful flag wrapping your body.

Nwin Ti Dinh—
in the assault
you command 100 squads.
Night returns,
you sit mending fighters' clothes.
Woman-general of the South,
descended from Troc and Ni,
you've shaken the brass and steel
of the White House.

Ta Ti Ku—
with a beautiful name from ancient times,
you're a faithful niece of Uncle Ho.
Striking the enemy, you're strong as a tiger.
Speaking of it, you smile like a flower.