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Vietnamese women urged to discover their own value

by Joachim Pham

Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam — On the occasion of International Women's Day, a Vietnamese sister who is a psychologist urged women to have self-confidence in their abilities and values. She encouraged them to enhance their confidence to gain more respect from society.

“Vietnamese women have the strong character of withstanding sacrifices and hardships and having a strong will to overcome challenges, even though their muscles are not as strong as others,” Sr. Thecla Tran Thi Giong of Our Lady said.

Sr. Giong was the main speaker at a special seminar themed “Discovering women’s potential,” which drew more than 200 women participants to the Pastoral Center based in Ho Chi Minh City March 8. Sister Giong spends her time providing psychological advice and humane education for women, especially the poor.

The United Nations designated 1975 as “International Women's Year,” and since then, women's organizations and governments around the world have observed March 8 with events celebrating women's advancement. The IWD website says that meanwhile, these events remind us “of the continued vigilance and action required to ensure that women's equality is gained and maintained in all aspects of life.”

Sr. Giong, who has her doctoral degree in psychology, reminded the women at the seminar that during wartime, many Vietnamese women “worked as soldiers, provided food for soldiers and shouldered the double burden of childcare and making a living while their husbands were at war.”

In peacetime, this strength continues. She told a story about a woman whose husband had died when their 10th child was three months old; she since has brought up her 10 children all on her own. They all have graduated from university, and some have become priests or nuns.

Noting that women are ready to sacrifice everything for their families, the nun said up to 70 percent of Vietnam's women decide to spend their lifetimes in rural areas working on farms and looking after their homes and children.

The 66-year-old sister admitted that the belief that men are more important than women still exists in their culture and that it buries women's character and potential. For example, she added, rural girls have no access to education and are expected to concentrate on doing housework.

She said in reality many women have strong leadership abilities. She noted that Vietnam's current vice president is a woman, as is the country's health minister. Sr. Giong cited others who operate large local businesses.

"Although women today take responsibility for various duties, few men have recognized and appreciated the values and dignity of their mothers, wives and sisters" or have shared their work."

Sister Giong told *NCR* that there is a change in nuns' roles in the local church, too. "Some nuns are invited to teach at church institutes," she said. "In the past nuns worked as domestic servants in churches, and only priests taught at institutes."

During her talk, she told the audience several times that, "You should be proud of your character and values and try to improve them to get respect from society."

"Your potential is essential to supplement men's roles. For example, in a family the father makes rules and the children follow, while the mother gently comforts and consoles her children. Both have roles to make their family happy," she said.

She said Catholic women can set a shining example of morality to their children and also encourage them to pursue religious life in the future.

She warned the women in attendance that the pursuit of money could have a bad influence on their dignity.

One participant, whose husband is Buddhist and well-off, told *NCR*, "I have been treated as a domestic servant since I married six years ago." Ms. Trang, who has a degree in sociology, said she is banned from meeting with her friends, attending liturgical services or having her children baptized. She is forced to do all the housework.

"I have to stay up looking after my children every night while my husband ignores me and sleeps. His only interest in me is purely sexual," the 34-year-old said in tears.

She heard about the seminar from a friend; to get to it, she told her mother-in-law she was going to the doctor's instead.

"I came here to seek a solution to my problem. And I decided to return to my parents and look for a job for a new life," she said.

Also on March 8, some 220 women, regardless of their backgrounds, attended a cultural performance marking International Women's Day at St. Nguyen Duy Khang Church. They were also given gifts.

Fr. Joseph Nguyen The Manh, the parish priest, said the event aimed to highlight local women's efforts in

building happy families, giving their children faith education, and working for a better society. Local women take active part in Catholic associations, Legions of Mary and choirs and they clean the church and prepare food for the Clergy of God's House Society.

[Joachim Pham is an *NCR* correspondent for Asia based in Vietnam.]

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