

Vietnamese Women's Museum activities targeting marginalized women groups for gender equality and development

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I. Overview on Vietnamese Women's Museum

Vietnamese Women's Museum (VWM) is affiliated to the Vietnam Women's Union. Opened to public in 1995, VWM has organized many successful exhibitions, serving millions of Vietnamese and foreign visitors. The Museum has collected, preserved and developed a collection of more than 25,000 valuable objects to realize its mission of improving public knowledge of cultural heritage and contemporary life of Vietnamese women, contributing to achieving the objective of gender equality.

In October 2010, Vietnamese Women's Museum completed its major project on upgrading and renovation of its permanent exhibitions. The museum has shifted from the museum of history and culture over to a gender museum, providing information on history, culture, gender and contemporary social issues of Vietnamese women to visitors. The new exhibits are displayed in a more scientific way, very beautiful with modern and unique equipments covering three topics: *Women in family; Women in history; and Women fashion*. In addition, VWM also has a number of special rooms where exhibitions are held reflecting aspects and issues relating to gender and contemporary life of Vietnamese women under different themes.

As a national museum, to effectively develop it into a center of research and domestic and international cultural exchanges, contributing to achieving the goal of gender equality, Vietnamese Women's Museum has constantly renewed its contents and activities, becoming a dynamic cultural centre in the capital city of Hanoi, very attractive to both domestic and international visitors.

II. Key activities of Vietnamese Women's Museum

1. Reasons for renewal of museum activities, using gender approach, playing the role of social critic, and reflecting contemporary life and targeting marginalized women groups

- Like other museums in Vietnam, from its establishment in 1987 to 2000, the Vietnamese Women's Museum concentrated its exhibitions on issues of past history and revolution of women. It honoured and praised the positive role played by women in general and presented some typical individuals for their contributions and sacrifices. It paid little attention to the private life of each woman, particularly disadvantaged women groups. In this approach and selection of contents, temporary exhibitions in the past were often not interesting and not attractive to the public, recorded very few visitors as they failed to meet visitors' needs.

In face of this situation, Vietnamese Women's Museum conducted an assessment and survey to get public feedbacks to find out the reasons why such exhibitions were not attractive to the public, what visitors want to see when they visit the museum and how the museum can play its role in society, particularly to promote gender equality. As a result, VWM perceived its new mission of a gender museum and its critical functions regarding contemporary social issues and cultural heritage in a multi-cultural society.

In 2004, VWM experimented with its first special exhibition "*Family Life and Social Activities of Women in Cua Van Fishing Village*". The exhibition saw basic changes including its approach, respecting and developing voices of the owners of cultural heritages. Through the true stories of the insiders, the exhibition reflects issues of contemporary life.

In addition to reflecting typical and outstanding examples, VWM features the lives of a large number of ordinary women with stories about their daily lives. Of these target groups, vulnerable women are given special attention.

From 2004 until now, Vietnamese Women's Museum has organized 8 exhibitions using this approach and has received initial public interests. These exhibitions tell about challenges, difficulties, sacrifices and losses suffered by women, particularly problems facing them in the contemporary life. These women include vulnerable groups, women living in disadvantaged areas, women victims of drug abuse and HIV/AIDS and women entrepreneurs who are facing difficulties in the period of international integration. Many exhibitions are profoundly social critical and received warm response from domestic and international visitors such as the exhibitions of "*Street Vendors*" and "*Single Mothers' Voices*"...

2. Some exhibitions held by VWM and public feedbacks

- The Exhibition “*Family Life and Social Activities of Women in Cua Van Fishing Village*” was held in early 2004. At that time, Ha Long Bay was known by Vietnamese and foreigners as Vietnam’s famous attraction and was recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage Site. Yet, very few people know of the existence of a small fishing village on Ha Long Bay where villagers have a life, shelters and customs very different to the majority living in the mainland. Vietnamese Women’s Museum selected the topic of women’s lives in Cua Van fishing village for its exhibition. For the first time, an exhibition reflects the voices of the owners of their culture who live on a small fishing village. The exhibition helps visitors understand more about the daily life of fishing village women and children, how pregnant women give birth in difficult conditions on the vast sea; and how children grow up in narrow fishing boat deck and have to row the boat themselves to go to school. It also shows difficulties and disadvantages as well as aspirations of women and children living in this village when Ha Long Bay is recognized as a World Heritage Site. It raises many issues to policy makers to step by step improve the quality of life for these people and narrow the gap among different groups of people and resolve the issue of preserving cultural heritage in the cause of development and integration.

In 2006, Vietnamese Women’s Museum held an installation exhibition entitled “*Who Is Going to Care*”. Through providing opportunities for people living with HIV to be involved in the exhibition contents through their writings of their thoughts and their aspirations for their family and community. The exhibition had a great impact on visitors on the threat of HIV/AIDS to women, helping victims of HIV/AIDS to be more confident when integrating into community and helping the community to share and assist these disadvantaged people.

In 2007, the Exhibition “*Women Overcoming Bad Fates*” was held. It tells stories of women in special circumstances who have to overcome their difficulties and severe fates for the happiness of themselves, their children and their family. The exhibition confirms the skill and spirit and remarkable perseverance of Vietnamese women, honours them and rekindles the pride for their fine virtues.

In 2008, VWM was successful in its exhibition “*Street Vendors*”. The exhibition received good response from domestic and international visitors.

Most of street vendors are rural women who are unable to find jobs in their home town and thus migrate into major cities to earn their living as street vendors. They have to work very hard from dawn to dusk but earn very little money. The exhibition gives them a chance to tell true stories of their livelihoods and their silent sacrifices for their family. These women have to live in narrow boarding houses, sparing in food and spending to save money to remit to their family, husband and children who suffer many difficulties living without them at home in the countryside. The exhibition has a strong impact on the perception of the community, particularly people in Hanoi Capital City, helping them be more sympathetic to women vendors. Following the success of this exhibition, Vietnamese Women's Museum launched an educational program for students by organizing a photo exhibition "*Street Vendors Through the Eyes of Students*". This program creates favourable conditions for students to directly meet with street vendors and have a real experience when following them to take their snap shots. In addition, the program provided training to street vendors to improve their awareness on environmental protection, food safety and hygiene. In this case, VWM has established a network with more than 1,500 street vendors.

On the World Violence Prevention Day (25/11/2009), the Exhibition "*Changing for Alteration*" was inaugurated attracting a large public. For the first time, real stories of the victims of domestic violence are told at the exhibition. Visitors witness the physical and spiritual pain of each victim. The exhibition breaks the silence of the victims and calls on people to voice against domestic violence.

- The Exhibition "*Peaceful Place*" held in 2010 provides a warning against trafficking of women and children in Vietnam. It features tormenting stories of victims at a "peaceful house", sheltering them after being trafficked. Their stories are about the pain they experienced, the honour, human dignity and body being trampled upon as well as their aspirations for integrating into community. The exhibition has left strong impression and torment on visitors, calling on them to raise sense of responsibilities and build an equitable society for development.

- On March 7, 2011, the exhibition "*Single Mothers' Voices*" was opened to public at VWM. Applying the approach of cultural anthropology and photovoice, 20 single mothers from Tan Minh commune, Soc Son district, Hanoi were trained and given cameras to take photos of themselves, their daily life and other people of the same circumstance. The exhibition portrays 18 mothers who have to "shoulder heavy burden", as both mothers and fathers and have to overcome difficult

circumstances, gender stereotypes and inferiority complex to bring up their children and find happiness for themselves. It delivers to the public a message that changes are needed and action should be taken on the issue of single mothers to join hand to share their difficulties.

The thematic exhibitions held by Vietnamese Women's Museum targeting marginalized women groups have received warm response and encouragement from domestic and international visitors. They help raise public awareness and prove effective when featuring contemporary social issues. They also show that the goal to reach marginalized women groups and feature challenging social problems by the Vietnamese Women's Museum is correct and this will be the path to follow in the future.

Here are some feedback of our visitors:

Thank you for the beautiful and very touching museum. It is very inspirational to show the strength in these women. I am glad their lives are better and it makes me very thankful and appreciative for the life I have and the family and good fortune that I am blessed with. Thank you. Good luck in the future.

D. Mitchell, Canada.

This is the best exhibition I have seen. It gives the story of real life through the words of the single woman. I am glad that these women are overcoming their hardships, although I understand that life is still very difficult. I hope through exhibits like this a greater understanding and compassion is given to these women. Thank you.

Ain M'Grcaly, Ireland

I don't know the words great enough to express how important and moving this project and exhibition is. That some concrete and solid work is being undertaken to allow these amazing, strong, incredible women to succeed in their lives is fanstastic. Their courage and power is also incredible - the strength to follow a path in life which is so against the norm, when the society could censure them so heavily for doing so. It is so valuable too, that visitors to this museum can learn about their story and be educated about how life is for many, many women. It is a different world from my culture and continent. The clarity and realness of the accounts and photos really brings the situation present. The fact that the women were given the cameras, rather than being subjects of a photographer, exemplifies the quality that makes this project stand out - it is about empowerment, rather than charity or patronage. I only wish that more of our richer nations would make a difference like this so that our

sisters all over the world can live independently whether they are single through choice or circumstance. For women to have the say in their destiny is so important. Thank you to all you women for sharing your stories with us and thanks to the curators of this exhibition for placing it in this accessible context.
Rosy, London U.K

3. Difficulties and challenges

With its function of social critic of a gender museum, VWM is facing a number of difficulties and challenges during its curatorship and organization of exhibitions and educational programs relating marginalized women groups. They include:

- Research methodologies/approaches

The marginalized group is often very sensitive. They lack information and have inferiority complex about themselves, therefore it is difficult to reach them and conduct research. It often takes a certain period of time for curators to establish good relations with them and win their trust.

- Resources to undertake activities

For each exhibition, VWM always has to conduct activities to support curatorship and establish good relationships with the source community. However, due to limited resources (including financial and human resources, competence and capacity to realize significant commitments to community), educational programs have been effective but are not yet sustainable. Their activities can only be maintained in a short period of time.

During the development of curatorship and organization of exhibitions, VWM curators are inexperienced in applying different research methodologies, particularly in the arrangement of interviews and in interviewing skills and data analysis.

- Cooperation to resolve sensitive issues

In the past, most of the museum exhibitions in Vietnam only featured positive aspects of life. But during the process of renovation, applying cultural anthropological approach, VWM is now focusing on sensitive issues and marginalized groups by establishing cooperation and partnership with social organizations and other international museums to jointly tackle sensitive issues

in order to raise community awareness to fight discrimination and stigmatization against marginalized groups.

4. Future activities

- VWM is seeking partnership to conduct some exhibition projects including “*Women Marrying Foreigners*”, “*Scrap Iron Dealers*”, and “*Migrants*” with an aim to promote gender equality for these marginalized women groups through exhibitions and educational programs.

- VWM wishes to take part in FIHRM Conference to learn experiences from other museums in tackling sensitive issues in a positive way through exhibitions and educational programs for gender equality and social development. Such event will help improve the capacity of our curators and staff on human rights and gender issues.

4. Conclusion

It can be confirmed that Vietnamese Women’s Museum is one of the museums in Vietnam pioneering in renewal and renovation of operations and research target groups so as to fulfill well the function of social critic of a gender museum. This is evidenced through its effort to upgrade and revise contents of its permanent exhibition, to shift from a museum of culture and history over to a museum of gender and to organize thematic exhibitions on marginalized women groups in recent past.

In the development trend toward gender equality, VWM will continue its research, curatorship and exhibitions on other marginalized women groups. In addition, it will continue to diversify its educational activities and public relations, increase communication so that more people visit VWM and its exhibitions and create favourable conditions for visitors to join its activities in order to bring the museum closer to the public and build it into a gender museum of international standards.

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