

Summary of the GEI 2015 Women and Leadership Program in Vietnam

Compiled by Prof. Shirley Randell AO, with Nicola Mountain, Carole Snyder, Kelly Guzman, Mary Stebbins, Annina Pfennig and Lê Thị Hạnh.

The Global Engagement Institute (GEI) is a social enterprise that provides international students and professionals with high impact education and engagement programs in developing countries such as Africa and Asia. In May 2015, participants in a short-term GEI trip to Vietnam had the opportunity to upgrade their knowledge, skills and intercultural competence while making a contribution toward increasing the capacity of local counterparts and institutions in health, education, gender, entrepreneurship and leadership. The major objective of this international group of ten women and men, including professors and scholars from America, Germany, Australia and New Zealand, was to learn about women in Vietnam. The head of the delegation was Prof. Shirley Randell AO, PhD, Hon.DLitt and the vice-head was Dr Michael Grosspietsch, GEI Managing Director and Tour Organiser. This summary record was written by participants with a major contribution by Lê Thị Hạnh and edited by Dr Randell.

3 May 2015 – Nicola Mountain

Michael Grosspietsch started the day by introducing the team and gave an overview of



the week's program. Then we set off on a very interesting **tour of the city**. Hui, GEI Associate and Tour Planner, one of the Vietnamese Boat people who had left Vietnam as a child and returned as an adult, led this walking tour and showed us behind the scenes of Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), starting with the street market in District 4, one of the poorer districts, where we sampled local fruit and sugar cane juice and saw many varied stalls selling everything the

community needs, from clothes to fresh meat and fish.

We travelled to District 3 by our tour bus, where we met Hui's wife's uncle, **Nhan**, who showed us a memorial marking the place where a Buddhist Monk immolated himself in 1963 in protest against Buddhist oppression. Nhan took us around his area, including a very colourful temple and then down a narrow street to his home where his wife and family had prepared us the most delicious lunch. After lunch Nahn showed us his beautiful new multistoried house and then we had a choice of activities; some of us went for a relaxing hair wash and massage while others enjoyed more exploring or Vietnamese coffee in a local cafe!





We went back to the hotel for a rest before heading to **Hoa Sen University** for thought-provoking presentations and discussions about gender issues. Dr Bui Tran Phuong, President of Hoa Sen University received the delegation and after the introductions presented her research on "Vietnamese Women from Tradition to Modernity". According to Dr Phuong, Vietnamese culture is deeply rooted in Southeast Asian culture with a matriarchal/matrilineal society and a wet rice agriculture

for which a female labour force was needed. Ancestors worshiped goddesses and there was more equality between generations and between men and women. The proverbs, idioms, folksongs and lullabies handed down from long ago have proven this. Then came the period of 1000 years of Chinese domination, when Vietnamese culture was influenced by Confucian philosophy, the society became hierarchical and men were valued above women. However, in later times, there were still examples of knowledgeable women who had experienced great poetic literature such as: Nguyen Thi Lo (15th century), Trinh Thi Ngoc Truc (16th-17th century), Le Ngoc Han (18th century), Ba Huyen Thanh Quan/ Thanh Quan Prefect Lady (18th-19th century), and Ho Xuan Huong (18th-19th century). Especially during the second wave of feminism in Vietnam (1918-1945) there were numerous talented women writers, journalists and revolutionary activists such as: Suong Nguyet Anh, Dam Phuong, and Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, who fought for gender equality. Today, compared with a century ago, women in the 21st century are not truly equal to men. Therefore, continued communication and education is needed to raise awareness, share experiences and create empathy and understanding between men and women.



On behalf of the GEI delegation, Dr. Shirley Randell also outlined the current situation of women in Rwanda. After the genocide against the Tutsi that occurred in 1994, women



rose to heal the wounds. Because so many men were brutally killed, were in prison or had fled abroad, Rwanda's population was 70 percent women immediately after the genocide and they undertook the work in Rwanda's society that they had never done before. Now women are 52 percent of the population and the proportion of female parliamentarians in Rwanda is the world's highest at 64 percent with women performing many other distinguished roles.



This varied and interesting day concluded with a lovely meal in a vibrant, colourful **Vietnamese restaurant** where we had further opportunities for discussion with Hoa Sen University staff.

4 May 2015 – Carole Snyder

We had the opportunity to visit the **Vietnam Women's Union (VWU)** of HCMC where senior representatives from the Union and the Intellectuals

Association met with us to discuss the promotion of women's roles in society as well as sharing their mission and frustrations. Ms Tran Thi Phuong Hoa, Deputy Chairperson of the VWU, discussed their mission to protect all women and children's rights throughout the country. She shared that VWU reports directly to the Communist Party and contributes recommendations to the policy and regulations regarding education and gender equality. Characteristics VWU would like to promote among Vietnamese women are confidence, pride, loyalty to the Communist Party and *nguoai*, which is that all people are human and there is no difference between women and men. VWU supports women by providing skills and knowledge through vocational schools and education, hoping that knowledge will benefit the next generation. VWU has a nationwide operating system at all levels from central to grassroots. In HCMC the VWU is active in all 24 districts and 322 communes.



Associate Professor, Dr Truong Thi Hien, Chairperson of the **Women Intellectuals Association (WIA)** of HCMC reported that this is a relatively new association supporting 175,000 members throughout the country. Throughout Vietnam's history, women have had a large impact on its development. WIA was established in order to gather the intellectual force of women, to link the women intellectuals in and outside the country, to promote

potential intellectual human resources among women intellectuals so that they can conduct research, provide recommendations, participate in advocacy, and set up policies for the Party and the Government in the fields related to women in general and women intellectuals in particular. WIA shares lessons with women in order to seek a better life and future, and mobilises women intellectuals to propose measures to increase their proportion in the fields and sectors that require a high degree of knowledge, and in the decision-making levels of the Party and the Government. One disparity Dr Hien shared is the mandatory retirement age for women, which is 55 years versus men at 60.

The two groups also exchanged ideas on social issues, such as education, scholarships and vocational training for women and girls; health care; the retirement age of the women intellectuals; and the conditions for enrolling as a member of the VWU Businesswomen's Club of HCMC. We enjoyed this friendly and informative visit.



The afternoon took us to **Mr Van's house/office**. Mr Van is a social worker who has been working with the underserved population for many years. We met four distinctly different groups at his home and split our group to visit the four areas he serves: HIV and drug addiction, 'deaf mutes', street kids, and women who have been granted micro loans. One group toured the neighbourhood with the boys with hearing challenges and were taken to a beautiful Buddhist temple and through a lovely park. They called in to markets and shops along the way and sampled the fresh sugar cane juice.



Another group toured the "ghost town" led by a prominent female leader and a community member of Mr Van's program. The neighbourhood was a maze of small 'houses' that averaged in size from 1 meter by 3 meters and were made of bricks, wood, tarpaulins and anything the people could find. The alleyways were narrow and action packed. The main source of income for these people is making offerings to sell at the markets. Scooters raced through the alleys alongside families preparing meals, playful puppies, and drug addicts and dealers. Although this area was considered a slum, there seemed to be a sense of pride as the neighbourhood looked and smelled clean and people seemed happy and not desperate. This group ended their walk with a stop at the outdoor market to purchase bananas!

5 May 2015 - Kelly Guzman

Mr Minh, a lecturer of Financial Management at the **University of Transport in Ho Chi Minh City** toured us through his facility. Mr Minh is studying for a master's degree in logistics and material and supply chain. The campus has an open design and layout with classrooms surrounding a quad where the students can connect in the open air. Most students and people in the city use motorcycles and scooters so there were over 100 motor bikes in the quad area parked



side by side which was quite impressive and we were curious to know how they get out from the middle! There are approximately 70 classrooms with 40-70 kids/classroom and all are equipped with screens, overhead projectors and an AV system for the teachers to use for lectures. There are more male students than female at this university, which appears to be culturally driven since most jobs are in construction-related fields such as engineering and technology and these are considered 'men's jobs'. Some challenges at the University according to Mr Minh include:



- High student teacher ratio
- Teaching materials are not available
- Most of the materials are printed in Russian, need to be transplanted, and are outdated
- More case studies for teaching purposes are needed
- Students need interview skills to obtain jobs post-graduation.

We had coffee and our first 'light' lunch with the delegation at the **Sim Café** and met with Ms Thuy a Professor at the University with some of her students. Ms Thuy provided an overview of her programs, which focus on 'How To Influence Young Girls'. Discussion topics during lunch included the traditional and cultural roles of men and women at home and in the workplace. Culturally women are raised to essentially "do it all" and the men have been raised not to participate or to have a passive role with housework, child rearing, etc. Additionally, men have been discouraged to marry an educated woman because she may be more trouble than a non-educated woman. As a result, young women are struggling to go to school and have a career but get married based on past traditions and are expected to

be married between 18-25 years old. The girls are considered 'old' if they aren't married by the time they are 30! The most interesting part of this discussion to us was the topic of sexual education, puberty, and "What's happening with my body", which are not taught in school or discussed among friends. As a result, children learn about sex the hard



way. We had active discussions about pre-marital sex, rape, sexual harassment and strategies to address all of these topics. One of the girls, a 23 year old, commented that this was the first time ever that she had a conversation such as this! Very interesting.

In the afternoon we visited the **Nursing School of Nguyen Taat Thanh University** with Vice Dean, Ms Trinh Thi Loan and Luu Nguyen Duc Ha. Ms Loan has been a nurse for over 30 years and is referred to as the 'Florence Nightingale of Vietnam'. She has a personal interest in improving the education levels of the nurses of Vietnam as well as implementing a home health care program. She has a very fascinating background and life story. She was sent to the US with five other nurses to learn about nursing practice



in 1975 because the skills and training in Vietnam did not exist at that time. She received several months of training in American hospitals and then returned to teach other nurses what she learned and to care for Vietnamese soldiers who were injured as a result of the war. She has studied and travelled all over the world to learn about nursing and at 83 years old, she is truly inspirational. This woman has 'seen it all'!

Ms Hanh, is her heir apparent and although she is tiny in stature and appearance, is quite powerful and dynamic! In the 7th grade she told her family that she was planning to study abroad so she began to prepare for her studies by taking Honours English and going to the US for her last two years of high school so she could attend university in another country. She went to nursing school in Wyoming, has a BSN and practised there for about a year. Much to everyone's surprise, she came back to Vietnam with a plan to stay for 6 months and then go to another country to gain additional experience. After 6 months she realized that her education and skills were needed in Vietnam, so she joined the faculty with Ms Loan and is currently studying international program development, and translating curriculum into Vietnamese so they can teach current practices to their students. At 23 years of age she is truly inspirational and we are confident that she will

do amazing things for her country! These nurses are great role models for nurses everywhere. Some challenges they shared with us included:

- Physicians dictate nursing practice
- Nurses are not allowed to practise as a traditional Western nurse and the 5 step nursing model.
- Nursing diagnosis are not allowed as this would be considered physician's work
- There isn't a standardized test to determine competency for all nurses
- Nurses do everything from patient hygiene to medication administration
- Public health and home health models are needed
- Basic research models and methodologies are needed
- Ratios are measured as physician to nurse and not nurse to patient
- Nurses in the ICU can care for up to five patients
- Some shifts are 16 hours
- Pay is poor in the governmental hospitals



The day ended with a delicious meal at **Tandoor, Indian Cuisine** where we were able to continue our conversations and enjoy each other's company!

6 May 2015 - Mary Stebbins

We had an early morning departure from the Grand Hotel Saigon (HCMC) for the short flight to Hue City. Our tour bus was waiting and soon after arrival, we set off to explore



the **UNESCO World Heritage Site of Hue**, considered by many to be the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual heart of Vietnam. This small city is home to 300,000 people, most of whom are Vietnamese originating from the north (Kinh) and 14 percent are ethnic minorities. According to our informative guide, Xiu, this area was originally a gift from King Champa in exchange for Princess Huyền Trân, later Queen Paramesvariin of [Champa](#).

Our first stop was to visit the **Imperial City** (also called the Citadel), the former capital of Vietnam. Xiu provided an interesting commentary as we walked around the grounds of this walled fortress ringed by a moat. The Citadel is situated along the northern bank of the Perfume River (Song Huong). Construction took place from 1804 to 1832 and the



site served as the center of the Nguyen dynasty from 1805 to 1945. It was built using a combination of Chinese principles of *feng shui* for harmony and balance, and military architectural concepts adopted from the French.



The **Citadel** has three walls or tiers, the outermost of defensive stone ramparts with a flag tower, and seven gates for the second tier containing royal buildings, gardens, and temples. Of particular note in the second tier (where we saw a short movie), was the **Hall of Supreme Harmony** (*Thai Hoa Palace*) that houses the emperor's throne and many red-lacquered wood columns adorned with the golden dragon emblem of the Nguyen dynasty. Access to the

Citadel's innermost areas, known as the 'Purple Forbidden City,' was restricted to the Emperor (the only man allowed) and Nguyen royal family. During our tour, we were dismayed to see extensive damage from various past wars. The Tet offensive in 1968 (the 'American war') was especially devastating. However, it is good to note that restoration work is on-going and progress is being made to return the most important structures to their former beauty. Touring the Imperial City provided a fascinating glimpse into the history of Vietnam and many wonderful photo opportunities.



Following our interesting visit at the Citadel, we enjoyed a welcome break for lunch at the **Ancient Hue Restaurant**. According to the brochure, the lovely, traditional architecture of this restaurant is intended to reflect the history of Hue and the Nguyen Dynasty. Set among beautiful gardens with a waterfall, statues, and colourful lanterns, it offered a relaxing respite from the heat along with a delicious sampling of Hue cuisine.



After lunch, we drove to the **Pilgrimage Village**, our hotel for the night. This was another impressive venue with beautifully manicured grounds, extensive amenities, and a very well appointed spa offering a long list of inviting services. We wished for more time to enjoy all that this lovely resort had to offer in the quiet countryside on the outskirts of Hue City. After a quick break to settle into our rooms and change, we were off again to yet another special experience.

Our bus was waiting at 4pm to take us to the home of Madame Ta Thi Ngoc Thao, a wealthy businesswoman who designed this as her place to retire. We soon discovered that the **Cat Tuong Quan Zen House** is far more than a retirement home. As we walked through the gate toward the house, we were surprised to be greeted by Xiu along with another young woman and two young men, all dressed in “Tai Chi” attire. They escorted us to the courtyard with a reflecting pool surrounded by elegant open-air wooden buildings with columns and tile roofs. We were offered cool wet towels, and a refreshing tea drink before Madame Thao came out to greet us. With Xiu serving as translator, she welcomed us and offered a tour of her home and Zen center. Many Buddhist influences were apparent inside and out. We marvelled at the décor and the beautiful furniture that looked like museum pieces. After the tour, we were invited to be seated amphitheater-style on the



steps to watch the Zen Master’s demonstration of Qi Gong, an ancient Chinese martial art form similar to Tai Chi. Qi Gong (pronounced ‘chee kung’) can be described as a spiritual healing practice that integrates slow physical postures, breathing techniques, and focused intention with the goal of achieving mind, body and spirit connection.

After the inspiring performance, we were offered an escorted walk to the top of **Thien An Hill** for an opportunity to try some basic Qi Gong movements and breathing exercises taught by the Zen Master. We lined up in rows in front of the Master, facing a large statue of the Virgin Mary, which provided an interesting backdrop for this meditative experience in an exotic outdoor environment. On our walk back to the Zen House, we discovered a wide stone stairway leading to a garden area. As we climbed the stairs, a large, highly adorned Catholic Church came into full view and we heard beautiful chant singing coming from the black-robed monks inside. A very tall ornate pagoda stood next to the church—another exotic juxtaposition!

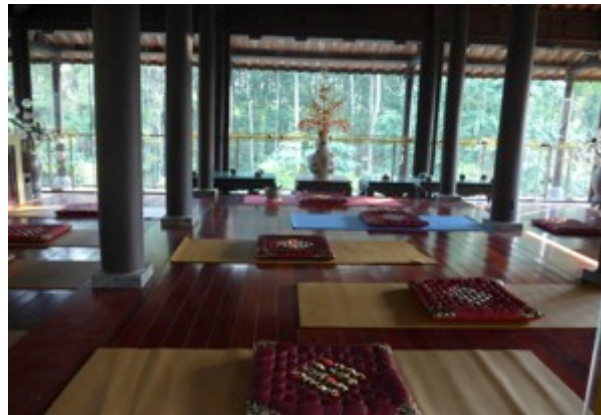


Back at the Zen House, we were offered tea along with a snack of fresh fruit and sweet rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves. A beautiful black lacquered table and chairs were set up so that we could also watch a slide show of photos taken of our group during the visit. Those of us who tried Qi Gong with the Master had a chance to see what we looked like in various poses.

Following the refreshments and slide show, Madame Thao came out to greet us again. She set aside this time to provide us with an opportunity to learn more about her life as well as her perspective on women’s issues. Ever smiling, she started out by telling us that she “came from nothing” and was raised without family since the

age of six in a Buddhist ashram. Her lifelong career as a businesswoman was in real estate. She was married, had children and is now enjoying her role as grandmother. She expressed her opinion that, socially, there should be no difference between genders. In the Vietnamese language, there is no separate pronoun for 'he' or 'she'. The pronoun is the same for both genders and loosely translates as 'human being'. Furthermore, young people (especially girls and young women) should not allow social barriers to prevent their achievement in whatever they want to do. They should persevere and find ways to achieve their goals even if it defies tradition. She gave an example from her personal life when she was a young married woman early in her career. It is traditional for women to be responsible for all the household tasks in addition to managing the demands of their work outside the home. Madame Thao dealt with these inevitable conflicts by hiring people (presumably women) to do the cooking and cleaning in the home while she spent time with her husband and children after work.

When Madame Thao offered to entertain questions, she was asked about how less affluent women can handle work-life balance dilemmas when they cannot afford to hire help. Her response was not very specific nor enlightening. Likewise, very little was said in response to questions about how she started her career and the challenges she faced in the workplace, especially given that she had come from nothing. Nonetheless, it was clear that



Madame Thao has been very successful in her work and home life and she is an inspiration to young people lucky enough to interact with her.



us to enjoy a dinner typical of this region.

At the conclusion of her presentation, Madame Thao invited us to come to the yoga studio for some guided meditation practice. Seated on mats and pillows, she led us in a series of relaxation movements similar to "self massage" for about a half hour. At the end of the "meditation" session, she spoke about the importance of paying attention to our bodies. She encouraged us to carve out time on a regular basis to take care of ourselves because that is just as important as caring for others (if not more so). Then she invited

Dinner was served al fresco in the same area as the Qi Gong demonstration. The black inlaid table had been moved to this location and set with pottery and utensils in the traditional Vietnamese way. We were treated to several courses of colourful and



delicious vegan dishes served family style. Throughout the meal, the young people we had met earlier brought out platters of food and bowls of soup and helped us to serve everything properly. They made sure that our water glasses were replenished and the conversation was lively. After dessert, Madame Thao returned to bid us good night. Michael took this opportunity to present her with a thank you gift from our GEI delegation. Knowing that she has an affinity for bees, he had chosen several

personal items containing bee products.

The entire evening was a memorable and uniquely enjoyable experience. Although it was disappointing not to hear more in depth about Madame Thao's views, we were very appreciative of her generous hospitality and her willingness to share a relaxing "Zen experience" in a most lovely and peaceful environment. We returned to the hotel around 9pm where some of us retired to the room and others went to the piano bar or spa before some much welcome sleep.

7 May 2015 – Annina Pfennig

After a very relaxing night at the Pilgrimage Village, we spent the morning on the bus and enjoyed just a small part of central Vietnam. Starting in Huế, we followed the cloud pass with beautiful views of the mountain scenery before we reached **Hội An** (meaning *peaceful meeting place*) in the early afternoon.

Lunch was served at **Seedlings**, one of these perfect places that GEI has a knack for finding. Seedlings is a mentorship program for local disadvantaged youths who receive specialized training in the restaurant as well as English classes, which gives them the opportunity to later work in, for example, bigger hotels. Seedlings became our base for the afternoon and impressed us not only with their great food but especially with their friendly and genial staff.





With time to explore in the afternoon, small groups of us set off for the city, which has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO and looks back on a long and diverse history. In a local market, our guide Su showed our group different kinds of rice and spices before we briefly visited a small museum of history and culture situated in an old pagoda.

Just a few doors down, we went to an ancient Chinese temple. On stepping inside the old courtyard, lined with trees, the bustle from the streets died down and it became very peaceful. Inside the temple was a big stack of rice bags, donations for disadvantaged families to be given out at celebrations at the beginning of the next lunar months.

The last stop was at the Japanese covered bridge, the last monument that represents Japanese settlement in this city. In the middle of the settlement we went to the Buddhist temple where Su told us the story of how the tortoise came to be carrying the crane on its back. We were all impressed with this traditional story's ability to encourage cooperation and friendship and it is included on the last page of this report.



Last but not least Hoi An is also a shopper's paradise and we put our bargaining skills to good use before we hopped on another plane to return to Ho Chi Minh City in the evening, taking with us lanterns, pottery, scarves, greeting cards, jewellery and other treasures.

The hardy ones among us enjoyed the rooftop bar again or went out for champagne in a nearby music bar, while others retired early for the night to be ready for the international conference.

8 May 2015 – Lê Thị Hạnh and Shirley Randell

The GEI delegation ended its activities in HCMC with the ***First International Conference***



on Women in Leadership in Vietnam for all involved in the study tour to exchange experiences, one of the highlights of the visit. The Banking University of HCMC hosted the conference while the GAS Research Center - Hoa Sen University and GEI jointly organized the program of the conference. The workshop brought together about 90 participants - university lecturers, specialists and researchers from various institutions in HCMC. This was an English-only international conference. The workshop was divided into three major consecutive sessions. Session 1: Opportunities and Challenges for women's associations of Vietnam; Session 2: Gender Mainstreaming in national development policies and plans; and Session 3: Current academic research.

After a welcome and introduction from Tp. Ho Chi Minh, the ***Rector of the Banking University***, Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, distinguished feminist leaders, presented the theme *Opportunities and Challenges for Women's Associations in Vietnam*. According to Madame Ninh the ***Vietnam Women's Union (VWU)*** has several strengths such as: it was established quite a long time ago, in 1930, and right from its inception, VWU has been a part of the government operating system with an extensive network from the central level to the grassroots. For example, women in their village know how to use available food such as eggs and chicken to help malnourished children to recover their health. These women will exchange their experiences with other women in surrounding villages. This is a rare thing in the world because in some countries once the women's groups are active and strong in the system of government, they have no network at all levels, and vice versa; if they have a good network at all levels they do not belong in the government system.



However, since the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the VWU has faced a number of challenges such as: developing its administration because it relies heavily on



government support, especially for financial support. Also the VWU staff do not have fund-raising skills at this time in order to fund their activities. This is a common challenge for most social organizations in the world. Next, when the society entered the “Renovation” period, the VWU staff needed to be young and dynamic with various skills such as leadership, business and technical sciences savvy, plus an understanding of international relationships and globalization. In

addition, the operational machineries of VWU and the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs are overlapping. There is still not a Ministry dedicated to women's issues.

Other women’s organisations include the **National Committee for the Advancement of Women** established in 1993 to implement the National Plan of Action developed for the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing and **The Centre for Women in Politics and Public Administration** (WIPPA). WIPPA was launched in 2013 at the Ho Chi Minh Academy of Politics and Public Administration in Ha Noi, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Viet Nam. These foster the leading capacity for women in the public sector in the context of global economic integration. They run programs and initiatives that promote gender equality in the public sector and in particular work to increase the numbers of women in senior positions.

Madame Ninh considers that women’s associations generally are not very active with modern-day concerns and are fairly conservative around gender issues. She spoke with pride about the **Women’s Caucus in Parliament**, which she had established, as well as the **Women’s Executive and Entrepreneurs** group in Hanoi, HCMC. This is more dynamic than the VWU, tackling more modern issues. Some of the challenges Madame Ninh addressed included raising funds, how to engage professional women in the activities, sustainability, independence, legal status and registration. At this stage there is not enough money in businesses for local funding. When asked ‘Is it easy to set up an NGO or other women’s organisation in Vietnam?’ she answered, ‘Yes and no. It is not easy but very worthwhile’.



In the presentation of "Opportunities and Challenges for the Women's Organization in the World", three foreign speakers who are GEI's international ambassadors, provided the participants with additional new knowledge. Ms Carole Snyder introduced herself as Past President of the State Council of the **International Emergency Nurses Association** (ENA) of California, USA. She has been a registered nurse for over 20 years working in the Emergency Nursing Department and she also is the Commissioner for Emergency Medical Services for Los Angeles County and a Disaster Manager in the health care system in Los Angeles, California, USA.

For Ms Snyder, the nursing profession is an important one as nurses are needed throughout a person's life from birth until death. According to common tradition in society it is women who perform this duty and nurses are considered as assistants to doctors while the majority of doctors are men. Therefore, nurses have little voice in the workplace as well as in society. However, today ENA has helped emergency nurses prevail over reducing gender inequalities. ENA was established in 1970 and now has 41,000 members worldwide. They hold training sessions and online training to improve their members' qualifications. ENA has a completely self-sufficient budget and does not use the state budget. All emergency nurses in the world can join the association.



Mrs Nicola Mountain introduced **Zonta International**, an organization founded in 1919 and now nearly 100 years old. Zonta International is a leading global organization of professionals empowering women worldwide through services (e.g. scholarships, health care, gender responsive schools programs) and advocacy (e.g. campaigning to prevent

violence against women). On 8 March each year, International Women's Day, Zonta clubs often present yellow roses, a favourite Zonta symbol, to local women for their contributions to their communities.

The third foreign speaker was Prof. Shirley Randell, an Honorary International Member of Zonta and Past World Vice-President of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) also founded in 1919 and now known as **Graduate Women International** (GWI). GWI is a women's organization at the international level; its vision is



to have 100 percent of girls and women in the world achieve quality, lifelong education and training to the highest levels, which is a critical step in securing sustainable

development, female empowerment and substantive gender equality. Currently GWI has nearly 25,000 members worldwide. The GWI mission is advising the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations and having official relations with UNESCO, ILO, and UNICEF. In their development program from 2015 onwards, GWI calls on governments and their education sectors to be committed to ensure free access to universal education and secondary education with quality for everyone. Such governments should also provide incentives and financial assistance to have the students from the poorest families continue their school attendance to Year 12.



Next in Session 2 on "*Mainstreaming gender into strategies, policies and national development plans,*" Dr Shirley Randell briefly introduced gender mainstreaming in *Australia, Bangladesh and Rwanda*. In Australia today the foreign aid budget has returned to focus on gender equality. Ms Natasha Scott Despoja was appointed Australia's first Ambassador in charge of women and girls. Gender issues that Australian women often face include: human trafficking, sexual and gender-based violence, wage disparity between men and women, and barriers to women's advancement.

In Bangladesh, the Ministry of Women and Children issues in collaboration with UNDP has implemented a gender mainstreaming strategy in the civil service. In Rwanda, another country where Dr Shirley had worked for nine years, Article 9 of its Constitution states that 30 percent of all decision-making structures shall be reserved for women. The goals of their national policy on gender, to be achieved by 2020 for all women, men, girls and boys of

Rwanda, are for equality of voice, and participation and access to all areas of economic growth and poverty reduction.

The Vietnamese guest speaker, Dr Huynh Thi Ngoc Tuyet lectured on "*Mainstreaming Gender in National Development Strategy, Policies and Plans in Vietnam*". One of the tasks in gender mainstreaming is the ratification and commitment of the Vietnamese government to international conventions, such as the world context, the "Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women"(CEDAW) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, signed by the Vietnamese government in 1980 and entered into force in Vietnam in 1982. In the Constitution of Vietnam, amended and supplemented in



2001, Article 16 clearly indicates that: (1) Everyone is equal before the law, and (2) No one shall be discriminated against in political, civil, economic, cultural and social life.

Based on the international and national legal frameworks, the "Gender Equality Law" in Vietnam was passed in 2006 and came into effect in 2007. This law provides the gender equality principle in all fields of social and family life and measures to ensure gender equality and accountability of agencies, organizations, families and individuals in the implementation of gender equality. Regarding the national strategies, policies and plans, there are many resolutions and decisions such as Decision 2351/QĐ-TTg, dated December 24, 2010, which approved the national strategy on gender equality for the period of 2011 - 2020, with the overall objective as: "By 2020, there will basically be a guarantee of substantive equality between men and women in terms of opportunity, participation and entitlement of political, economic, and socio-cultural rights contributing to the rapid and sustainable development of the country".

This was the first time the Vietnam government issued national objectives on gender equality as the basis for the enactment of measures to promote gender equality. On the implementation of the aforementioned legal framework, besides the good opportunities opened to women, some feedback from the grassroots level was also received such as the building and repairing of local regulations in order to ensure gender equality in facing difficulties due to the lack of specific implementation guidance.



In Session 3 on “*Current Academic Research*”, Dr Thai Thi Ngoc Du summarized on-going research entitled: "Intellectual Women and the Retirement Age in Vietnam". According to Dr Du, the preliminary findings of the study show that under Decree 76/SL, dated May 20, 1950 on the status of civil servants of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which entered into force on May 1, 1950, employees will retire after 30 years of work or at age

55, and there is no difference between women and men.

However, the difference in the retirement age was implemented in 1961 by Decree 218/CP, dated 27 December 1961, which issued temporary regulations on a social insurance system for government workers and employees. Article 42 of this decree clearly specified that male workers and employees who are 60 years of age and women who are 55 years of age will retire. In addition to the above-mentioned conditions of

workers' age, men are eligible for pension benefits after 25 years of work and women are eligible after 20 years of work.

According to Government Decree 12/CP, dated January 26, 1995 on the social insurance charter, Article 25 stated that: 60 year-old men and 55 year-old women will have fully paid social insurance for 20 years. The Social Insurance Law of 2006 indicated a similar regulation. There was no official explanation about the difference between men's and women's ages. There is only some interpretation that it was a privilege for women to retire early, according to the general trend of the former socialist countries. There is no scientific foundation for this policy, since women's health at 56-60 years old is no worse than that of men and the qualities of intellectual women's competencies, skills and experiences are as valuable as men's.

Generally speaking, women's retirement at the age of 55 causes a waste of human resources, particularly for women intellectuals. This also causes a detriment to women such as lower pensions than men, fewer opportunities than men to be promoted, frustration due to underestimation by society, and lack of contribution to gender equality. It is necessary to have equality in retirement age between men and women, especially for women intellectuals.



The lecture on "Empowering women through microfinance" by Dr Ngo Vi Trong gave a different perspective on loans to the poor. Banks generally portray this notion of loans being household borrowing, whether by women or men. Microfinance activities should incorporate financial sustainability and social mission wherein banks

should select people capable of repayment in order to make a profit. This profit will be continuing, to further invest in the business. The loans will be operated more as long-term investments to assist people to escape poverty (how social mission is achieved) and to be able to repay bank debt (how financial sustainability is achieved).

The workshop on diverse topics ended after one day of work. Cooperation with GEI as mentioned above was also considered an excellent opportunity for various organizations in the country to introduce Vietnamese women's activities to international visitors as well as an opportunity for organizations in the country and abroad to meet and discuss gender issues. The participants inside and outside the

country had an opportunity to exchange experiences and expand their network in the future.



There was a wonderful atmosphere in the conference and delegates took the opportunity to discuss issues during the tea breaks and the luncheon that was beautifully catered for. Many students attended and benefitted greatly from the day's proceedings.

The photo below shows some of the participants and guest speakers gathered together at the end of the conference proceedings.





We finish this tour report with the story of the crane and the turtle, which represents friendship and co-operation.

In days gone past, a flood arrived upon the plains of Vietnam. The crane flew hither and thither but found no place to rest her wings. She stayed in the air for a long time and was about to drop with exhaustion when a young turtle arose out of the flood waters and offered her back to the tired bird to rest upon. In this manner, the turtle kept the crane alive long enough for floodwaters to recede.

Years passed.

The crane owed the turtle an eternal debt. The two stayed in close touch, one a creature of the skies and the other a creature of the lakes. They grew old together for both are long-living creatures. And it came to pass that a terrible drought passed through Vietnam. It was a drought so long and so thirsty that it drank up all the water in the turtle's lake. Many animals died. The crane could not bear to see her friend perish. With a supreme effort (for the old turtle was heavy and the old crane was weak) the crane hefted the turtle up into the air and carried her to another lake far away.

There, the two animals lived together in reciprocity...helping and caring for each other until each passed into the mists of time.

The statues of the crane upon the turtle are found in every place of worship, in places where the Vietnamese go to for purification, and this symbol is of the values of love and co-operation between diverse peoples and different individuals.

We will carry this story back with us together with our memories of the new friendships with the people of Vietnam and each other.