

Case Study Three: Role of Women

Holding Up Half The Sky

Vietnamese Women's Predominant and Culturally Approved Role in the Economy

The black and white images are grainy and jolty as if the videographer had to suddenly take cover in a bomb shelter. Yet they reflect an indomitable spirit of a country. There are archives and archives of film footage showcasing Vietnam's wars against the French, the Americans, and the Chinese. Of course, they served a propaganda purpose for the nationalist cause, but they show something else. This is most apparent in the film footage that shows how General Vo Nguyen Giap forced the surrender of French troops at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

According to most military histories, the French chose Dien Bien Phu as its command centre because it was in a valley bottom and surrounded by steep mountains that could protect the encampments within. The mountains were considered inaccessible. The French thought that they would be in a safe place to continue the war against the Viet Minh and thus ensure that Vietnam would remain a colony of France. Of course, that didn't happen. And what the archival footage shows is how General Giap succeeded.

Featured prominently in the grainy, jolty, black and white films were the legions and legions of women who hand carried and pushed on overloaded bicycles heavy artillery deep into and up the "inaccessible" mountains surrounding the valley floor of Dien Bien Phu. They helped to set up the artillery guns and camped out in caves. Beginning on March 13, General Giap's troops started to rain shells into the camps and onto the airstrips of the French forces. Trapped, with nowhere to go and supplies running out, the French surrendered less than two months later on May 7. Ultimately, this led to the Geneva Accords in July 1954 which ended French colonialism almost 100 years after it began.

Without the legions and legions of female couriers, this probably would not have happened. They did the same thing along the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the American War. Women played enormously important roles in Vietnam's fight for independence and freedom. They more than held up their half of the sky. They helped win the war.

The question since 1990 has been this: Can they also help win the peace?

Women in the Workforce

In September 2009, Harvard Business Review Magazine published an article titled '**The Female Economy.**'¹ The report led with the sentence '*Women now drive the world economy.*' Like many such business reports, the writers quoted surprising numbers and data such as how globally women control \$20 trillion in annual consumer spending and that this could climb to \$28 trillion

¹ The Female Economy by Michael Silverstein and Kate Sayre in Harvard Business Review Magazine in September 2009

within five years (2014). Another eye-catcher was that women represent a growth market bigger than China and India combined.

As the world begins the decade of the 2020s, the number of studies, research reports, and surveys about the role of women in the economy and society seems to have increased. Women are, once again, seen as an immense market opportunity that has still never been truly tapped. Just in the past three years, McKinsey & Company have published at least three reports on women in Asia and their role in the economy. These reports and others consistently make the same argument which is that a lot of money and economic productivity is being left on the table because of gender inequality. In one of its reports, **The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific** (April 2018), the researchers claim an additional \$40 billion could be added to the GDP of Vietnam by 2025 if women's equality was advanced over the current business-as-usual trajectory. That's a \$40 billion improvement for a \$250 billion economy. For the entire Asia Pacific region, \$4.5 trillion could be added. That's a big jump.²

It brings to mind a very basic question: With so much money at stake, why hasn't this already happened?

Well, maybe it has, or at least it's beginning to, in Vietnam.

In August 2019, the McKinsey & Company produced a video about the future of Asian women in the workforce. The report noted that women in Asia contribute about 36 percent of Asia's GDP which is about the same as the global average. However, there is a range. In China, the share is about 41 percent while in India it is less than 20 percent. Vietnam's share has been estimated at the Asian average of around 36 percent.³

Among the many numbers that often surprises new observers to Vietnam is the size of the workforce. According to most data sources, it is close to 60 million people out of a total population of nearly 100 million. With very little unemployment, this means just the working-age population of Vietnam is larger than the entire population of South Korea and more than two times larger than the total population of Taiwan, the two countries that are this book's case study comparatives.

Scratch a bit deeper and even more compelling data is revealed. This is the percentage of women who are part of this active workforce.

If only World Bank data sourced from the International Labor Organization database is considered (September 2020), there are a few ways to look at this issue when comparing Vietnam to the rest of the world. For example,

- the ratio of female to male labour force participation is 66.48 percent worldwide and 88 percent in Vietnam (i.e the share of women working compared to men is 66.48:100 worldwide and 88:100 in Vietnam)

² McKinsey Global Institute – **The Power Of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in the Asia Pacific** by multiple authors

³ McKinsey & Company – **The Future of Women in Asia's Workforce – An interview with Anu Madgavkar, a partner with McKinsey Global Institute, August 2019**

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- the labour force participation rate of men 15 years and older is 75.85% worldwide (2010) and 77.2 percent in Vietnam (i.e. Vietnamese men's rate of participation in the labor force is roughly the same as the global average)
- the same measurement for women regarding the labour force participation rate of women 15 years and older is 46.91 percent worldwide (2020) and 73 percent in Vietnam (i.e. Vietnamese women's rate of participation is far higher than the rest of the world)

Data collected by the market research firm Cimigo in Ho Chi Minh City reveals similar trends. Through its household surveys and private analysis, Cimigo measures the share of women (ages 20 to 64) who participate in the labour force at 88 percent. For men, the same share is 96 percent. Though there is an eight percentage point difference between men and women, it's clear that Vietnam has taken a "team approach" to its labour force. This also lowers the dependency ratio⁴. This is not the case in many countries which have much higher ratios since a smaller percentage of the total population are part of the workforce and they must take care of those who are under 15 and over 64 years of age.⁵

Regardless of how the data is screened and viewed, the bottom line is that a lot of women in Vietnam go to work. They do so at a higher rate than the rest of the world. Consider these participation rates for the percentage of women in the workforce in the year 2020 for Vietnam's neighbouring countries.

Vietnam: 79%

- Indonesia: 55%
- Malaysia: 55%
- Thailand: 67%
- Myanmar: 51%
- Philippines: 48%
- China: 68%
- Japan: 72%
- **South Korea: 60%**
- **Taiwan: 54%** (Source: Taipei Times newspaper)

Source: World Bank; International Labor Organization database

Of course, a key issue is what kind of jobs women typically hold in Vietnam. A second and perhaps more important issue over the long-term is how much women get paid compared to men for the same or a similar job. Agriculture still takes the major share for employment, but many of the factory jobs, especially in the agriculture off-season, are taken up by women. Service sector jobs in restaurants, stores, and other retail outlets are predominantly held by women. Lower to middle level office work is primarily the reserve of women. In this sense, the labour

⁴ The dependency ratio is defined as the ratio between the number of citizens from age 0 to 14 plus citizens over the age of 65 as compared to those citizens who are 15 to 64. This latter group is the labor force to support the other two groups. Or it is the total number of working citizens who must support non-working citizens.

⁵ Cimigo presentation Vietnam 2021 Consumer Trends (Slide 34) Demographic Dividend – low dependency ratio sourcing data from GSO, Global Demographics, and Cimigo

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demographics in Vietnam in terms of gender and job roles are not too unusual for an Asian country. There are most likely issues with pay equity and job role and advancement opportunity as well, but is that the more compelling issue at this time? Not for the authors. We feel there is a more fundamental question that is more important to understand at this time, because it will help shed light on what Vietnam might be like in 2050.

The more fundamental and compelling question is this: Why do so many more women in Vietnam work compared to their regional peers?

Maybe it started with the Trung sisters.

Vietnam's Cultural Edge

A bit more than 2,000 years ago, two sisters with the surname of Trung set the standard for what women could, and perhaps should, do for their country. As is learned by first graders in Vietnam and can be learned by readers of this book in the 'Immortalized on Maps' section of chapter two, the two Trung sisters (Hai Ba Trung) led Vietnam's first successful fight for independence and freedom from China. This was at the dawn of the first millennium. They ruled only briefly, but they made a stand for the *Kinh* people against the Han Chinese. How much has Vietnamese women's role in society changed or stayed the same since Hai Ba Trung is a complicated issue.

First question: Is Vietnam a matriarchal or patriarchal society?

There are plenty of books and articles written about this subject. One perspective is that ancient Vietnam (during the time of the Trung sisters) was matriarchal and it became patriarchal over time as China cemented its rule. Vietnamese children take their father's surname, but the mother keeps her own family surname after marriage. Confucian patriarchal values from China were adopted by Vietnamese early on and continue to exist today, but this has been and is changing. For example as early as the 1930s, the Vietnamese Women's Union pushed for issues like paid maternity leave and a right to be consulted on women's health issues. In the original constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1949, there was a clause that stated "women are equal to men in all respects."

An interesting anecdote shared by an interviewee is that children from 'mixed Vietnamese families' (meaning the husband and wife are from different regions of Vietnam and thus have different accents) always adopt the mother's accent regardless of where they grow up. For example, if a Saigon man marries a Hanoi woman and the kids are born and raised in the south, the children will grow up speaking Vietnamese with a northern accent despite their father's southern accent and the fact that they live in the south and grow up with playmates who speak with a southern accent. The inverse is equally true. Another North/South myth? Maybe, but it's an interesting issue to consider.

When foreigners such as your co-authors ask Vietnamese whether their country is a matriarchy or a patriarchy, it's fun to listen and watch the different responses. Young people tend to automatically say it's a patriarchy, but then an argument immediately breaks out if there are more than a few people in on the conversation especially if there are young women in the group. Older women often stridently claim it's a matriarchy or, with eyes rolling, they casually say it's a

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patriarchy. Middle aged and older men sigh, shrug their shoulders, look away, and try to ignore the question. No matter the answer, there is always at least one “*but, ...*” in the conversation.

At a minimum and as World Bank data proves out, it appears that Vietnamese women are more active in the workforce than in more traditional patriarchal societies as well as in the other Northeast Asian countries. During their Tiger Economy runs, Taiwanese and South Korean women did not have the same level of labour force participation. Both countries have female participation rates in the 50 percentiles today.

This reveals two interesting ideas and potential trends. First, Taiwanese and South Korean men apparently carried the bulk of the workload in terms of growing their country’s economies in the 1980s, ‘90s, and early 2000s. This is when their countries climbed out of the Middle Income Trap to reach high income status. Anecdotal discussions with Korean and Taiwanese revealed stories of how their fathers had two or three jobs while their mothers usually stayed home to take care of the children. Second, Vietnam is now growing its economy like Taiwan and South Korea did 30 years ago. A very key difference is that it’s not the men alone who are carrying the bulk of the workload, but it’s more of a team effort of men and women. In other words, Vietnam has twice the workload force of what Taiwan and South Korea had for their Tiger Economy runs.

There is also much more that can be done in today’s economy than what existed for Taiwanese and South Koreans 30 years ago. The McKinsey study revealed that the high-tech sector has been hugely impactful for women. In Indonesia, for example, the percentage share of women-owned businesses is 15 percent for offline businesses, but it is 35 percent for online businesses. The study also reported that of the 150 self-made women billionaires in China a total of 114 of them earned their wealth through the high-tech sector.⁶

Though there may not be too many high-tech billionaires or millionaires in Vietnam, there are plenty of women with compelling stories that reflect the spirit of a Tiger Economy.

Secret Weapons

Twenty years ago, life must have been a bit frustrating for Vo Thi Thuy Ha. She had what can only be described as ‘the perfect resume’ for a young, 20-something year old Hanoi woman. She had earned a banking and finance degree from the National Economics University in Hanoi. She had completed auditor training and then worked for the international auditing firm Arthur Andersen for three years. She then won a scholarship and earned a Master’s degree in development economics from The Hague University in the Netherlands. She had done everything right. Yet when she put all that on a resume and started applying for jobs, there were no offers.

“I felt so ashamed. I have Arthur Andersen. I have a Master’s degree, but I cannot find a job or get a job offer. I always end up in second place. I’m always the second one [in line] to be chosen,” Ha said noting that she looked for three months straight.

⁶ Interview with Anu Madgavkar, a partner with McKinsey Global Institute, August 2019 for its report *The Future of Women in Asia’s Workforce*

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Whether it was an epiphany or a bit of desperation, the memory of a terrible lunch sparked an idea in her mind. The terrible lunch was at a factory. It was cafeteria style food commonly served up in large volumes for factory workers all across Vietnam in the late 1990s. When a factory that employs hundreds and often thousands of workers who have around 30 minutes to eat their lunch, the culinary concepts of quality, freshness, taste, and all the other senses that are linked to good food take a back seat. When you're feeding the masses, it's all about volume, speed, and of course cost.

At the time, Ha was on one of her factory visits at the behest of Arthur Andersen. She was doing an audit, a normal business function that factories and businesses go through on an annual basis. On most visits, the Arthur Andersen crew were invited to lunch at the workers cafeteria.

High volume, fast, and cheap food is not expected to be good. Ha's lunch at the factory was not a case of unmet expectations. Instead, it was the source of that age-old spark of creativity that is common to all entrepreneurs – *I can do better than this*.

In this fashion, the seeds of the TriStar Catering Company were planted. The initial goals were modest. Choose a factory, make a pitch for the catering contract, win it, and then focus on providing a quality product at a good price that allows for a decent profit margin.

"My goal was to earn \$10,000 of income for the first year. That was a lot of money back then. Instead after just three months, I was earning \$10,000 per month," recalls Ha with a laugh.

Of course, focusing on quality and price is nothing new in business. All entrepreneurs do that, or at least try to do so, and yet many still fail. Successful entrepreneurs need to find more than just quality and price. Scratch deeper on Ha's business strategy and there are some interesting nuggets that get unearthed and they go well beyond the standard metrics of price and quality.

The first step was to make the direct sale's calls on her own. The second step was to select Japanese companies as her first potential clients for those direct sales calls. This was based on a belief that Japanese managers would place a higher value on nutritious and high-quality food compared to factory managers from other countries and cultures. The Japanese, Ha believed, would be more receptive to the link between food quality and worker productivity. Ha wanted to focus on food quality and freshness (not just cost), but she needed a market of clients who also had this same ethos. The Japanese were first followed shortly after by the Koreans. At the time and still to this day, there were many large Japanese and Korean factories in the north with hundreds and sometimes thousands of employees within a single factory.

The pitch worked. She got her first Japanese and Korean clients. Through word of mouth marketing and continued direct sales calls by Ha and Ha alone, the client list grew. TriStar's combination of food quality, service, and price resonated with the large foreign-invested companies as well as other industrial sized clients such as hospitals, schools, retirement homes, and others. As the 2020s began, TriStar was working with more than 200 carefully vetted food suppliers and serving food in more than 60 locations where her team was dishing out over 250,000 meals every day. Ha carried the same business model and ethos to a wedding business, several restaurants, food distribution companies, and eventually into real estate projects. These companies all fall under the Tristar Group which is owned by Ha alone.

Alone in ownership, perhaps, but she has a secret weapon for her operations. This is to employ well-balanced women and put them in charge. The Tristar Group employs around 5,000 people in its many operations in northern Vietnam. In the Hanoi home office, there are around 100 staff, but Ha says she works most closely with around just 10 people and nearly all of them are women. She trains and hires every person on her core staff. Female managers and leaders are part of her arsenal of secret weapons.

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“Before, we could be successful up to a certain level. People would say ‘Okay, that’s enough for you because you’re a woman.’ After a certain point, you have to hide your success. They are jealous and society doesn’t want to have women so successful,” says Ha noting that her female friends who are 10 to 15 years older than her and are like mentors have advised her to slow down.

“It hasn’t stopped me. I knew I could go higher and further.”

* * *

Ha is not at all alone in terms of holding a leadership position.

In March 2021, the accounting firm Grant Thornton published its annual Women In Business report.⁷ There were two significant findings in the 2021 report relevant to this case study. First, the percentage of women holding leadership positions was at 31 percent. This was the first time the percentage had surpassed 30 percent globally. Nine out of 10 businesses worldwide now have at least one woman on their leadership teams compared to just two-thirds of the total that were tallied in 2017. There are also more managing directors and chief executive officers with women holding 26 percent of these roles. Second, Vietnam ranked third worldwide together with Brazil and India in terms of women in leadership roles with 39 percent of women holding senior positions. This was behind the Philippines (48 percent) and South Africa (43 percent). This was based on surveys with more than 10,000 business leaders in 29 countries. This included surveying 101 business leaders in Vietnam.

The Balancing Act

In the research for this case study on women in the economy, a very consistent theme among male and female informants has been an appreciation for working with women. Entrepreneurs like Ha from Tristar know this better than most on a personal level, but she hears this from other business colleagues. The common refrain is that women work harder, manage logistics and business dynamics better, get along with others well, and can more or less do it all.

It’s all about finding a balance. And this is an issue that does not fall on men equally. The idea of finding a balance is more a women’s job than it is for men. Many interviewees stated that men primarily focus on making money for the family. While all the other duties of life can be and often are a shared responsibility (e.g. housework, cooking, school issues, caring for children, etc...), the notion of finding a balance is more often the job of the woman than the man within most Vietnamese households. They need to achieve a sometimes delicate balance at home and this makes for a good manager at work. Balance is an asset, a skill that transfers well to other areas. For this reason, middle management, finance, accounting, and a range of other professions are predominantly held by women because, speaking in purely gender terms, they are better than men. Their strength is their ability to balance and manage work, life, projects, aspirations, kids, grandparents, the future, finances, and anything else that comes along.

There is also an ongoing generational trend that will shape this dynamic in the 2020s and beyond. The 7X and 8X generations (those born in the 1970s and 1980s) have women who are

⁷ Women in Business 2021 – A Window of Opportunity an annual research report by Grant Thornton

now making the money for the family. In previous generations, the idea of women as household managers of the money was a given because they did not work as much outside the home nor earn as much as men. In addition, they were good at household finance. It made sense that they handled everything at home because they were better than their husbands. They could easily balance the work that they did do with the household/family duties that they took on. Now it's different and this transition is not without its growing pains. In today's society, many husbands earn the same or less than their wives, but the job roles at home are somehow not supposed to change and this is one of the generational problems many families are grappling with.

There's an additional distinction between those who have studied abroad and those who have not. Several sources said that the 7X and 8X men who have studied abroad are quite different than a more traditional Vietnamese man who never had the chance to or had never wanted to study abroad. Those that have experience abroad do housework and other chores without any real debate about traditional roles and therefore their family life is smoother. For those who do not study abroad and/or have never left Vietnam, there can be problems.

When the authors asked Ha the perennial question of whether Vietnam is a matriarchy or patriarchy, she, like everyone else, had a long-winded opinion that was full of a lot of 'but.....' caveats. In general, though, her answer focused on the future generations and didn't really address the Vietnam of today.

"I think in Vietnam in terms of perception, it's a patriarchy. But now, step by step, it's becoming a matriarchy especially for the younger generation," Ha says.

Holding Up Half the Sky

Mao Tse Tung came up with the 'women holding up half the sky' phrase. However, it became more widely known recently because of a book written by New York Times journalist Nicolas Kristof and his wife Sheryl WuDunn. The name of their book is '**Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity Worldwide.**' The Kristof-WuDunn book is about the oppression of women and girls in the developing world. It features several examples of women who have faced insurmountable odds yet succeeded. Their core argument is how a little bit of help for girls and women can go a long way in the development of a country. They argue that the key to economic development lies in the unleashing of women's potential. If and when they get this opportunity, they will hold up half the sky.

In far too many countries around the world, women are oppressed and not allowed to fulfil their potential. While there are certainly some cases of this in Vietnam, the same level of oppressiveness is not as apparent compared to so many countries in the world. There are very few cultural constraints that Vietnamese women must address before they can move forward, join the labour force, or start a company. They just do it. After a history of moving forward and accomplishing numerous objectives during the war years, Vietnamese society has given them the freedom to do things that women in other countries cannot do. In Vietnam, there are basically no constraints due to religion, strict social mores, or male-dominated social role models.

One key difference between Vietnam and the case study comparatives of Taiwan and South Korea is in politics. Vietnam's political system is opaque and all power is held within the Vietnamese Communist Party. The photos and names that appear in the state press of the Party

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leaders usually only feature one or two women. Vietnam has not gone through the strife and political protests that occurred on the streets of Seoul and Taipei in the late 1980s and '90s. Nor has there been a female leader who has risen to the top as in Taiwan (President Tsai Ing-wen who is currently in power along with several cabinet ministers over the past couple decades) or in South Korea (President Park Guen-hye and Prime Minister Han Myeong-sook who served in the past).

Taiwan and South Korea have very different political systems compared to Vietnam. For example, President Park is the daughter of Park Chung Hee, the former strongman and president who was in power for 18 years before he was assassinated while still in office in 1979. Park's mother had been murdered five years earlier. Park herself held power for just over four years before she was impeached in March 2017 and later sentenced to jail. In Taiwan, the numerous fist fights on the floor of the Taiwan parliament made and still makes for entertaining television in Vietnam. For the average Vietnamese citizen, watching two middle-aged Taiwanese politicians fight on the floor of the parliament must make them question the efficacy of democracy.

More importantly to the central thesis of this book, Vietnamese women are a crucially important part of the current growth trends occurring in Vietnam today in 2020. It is doubtful that over the next several years Vietnam will endure the political battles that occurred on the streets of Taiwan and South Korea and which could lead to a more equitable political role for women. In its own Vietnamese way, the Party and government will likely include more women in the political sphere over time.

Short of political participation, the majority of Vietnamese women have not experienced the levels of oppression that Kristof and WuDunn wrote about in their book. For the most part, their playing field has been level to that of men and their participation has been near capacity in terms of taking part in the business of building the country. The unleashing of the potential of Vietnamese women has been ongoing for a long time, maybe for as long as 2,000 years. For the 2020s and with *Doi Moi* beginning its fourth decade, women are, once again, more than holding up their half of the sky.

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Testing the Hypothesis

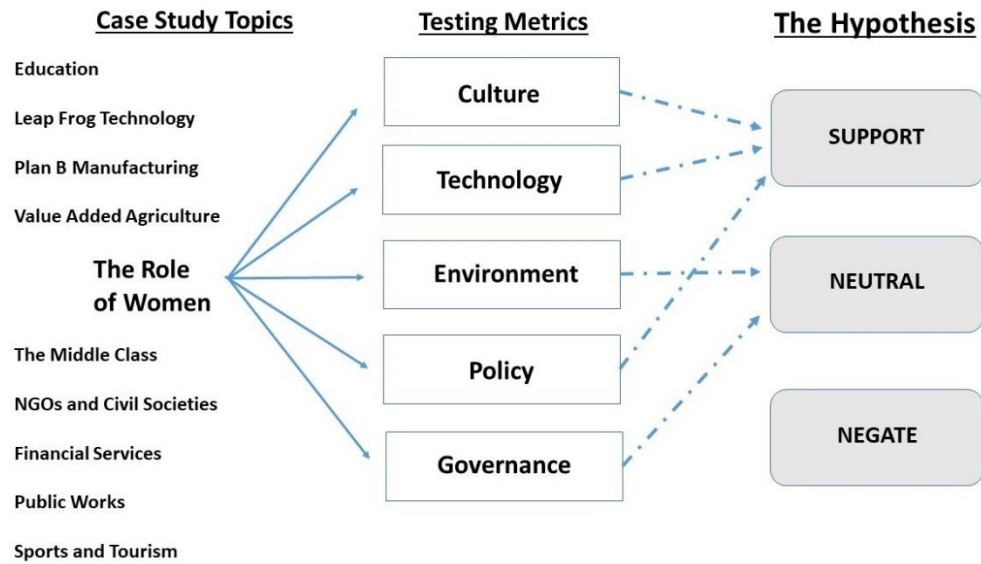
Using the five testing metrics, the authors' analysis is that the role of women in the economy and society is conducive to the hypothesis being correct. There are simply too many women who are too active in the world of business and the economy, and holding leadership positions, to negate the hypothesis. Culturally, there are many examples of women's positive impacts for the country. Technology holds some strong potential as has been shown in China, Indonesia, and other countries. Policy also leans towards a fair and equitable deal for women. In cases of divorce, for example, women have equal rights to the assets of the family. A married man cannot sell a major asset without his wife's consent even if her name is not on the ownership papers. The environment and governance issues do not seem to add to the hypothesis, but these issues also do not negate it. Just those two issues combined will not prevent Vietnam from

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replicating the success of Taiwan and South Korea. There is too much value being added by too many women to come to any contrary conclusion.



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