



**D**r. Nguyen Kim Cuc, a pediatrician by training, has been active for more than 10 years now in the Vietnam Women's Union, where she serves as head of the International Re-lations Department. The only women's organization in Vietnam, the Union has representatives in the country's 12,000 communes. Dr.Cuc's position in the group brought her to Manila last October for a lobbying training course organized specifically for the World Summit for Social Summit in Copenhagen this March.

Dr. Cuc studied at the Medical University in Hanoi, then took post-graduate studies in East Germany. She specializes in the rehabilitation of children and has been a practicing physician for 24 years.

**Q:** Dr. Cuc, what are the goals of the Vietnam Women's Union, and in particular, your goals as Chief of International Relations?

**Dr. Cuc:** Every five years the Vietnam Women's Union sets up a Congress meeting to review the activities of the past five years and to plan for the next five years. During the Congress of 1992, I was elected as a member of the presiding committee, a position I hold until 1997. My job is to build friendships with women's organizations around the world, to exchange information on and share experiences about women's concerns and to foster better understanding with other women's groups.

The Vietnam Women's Union seeks to protect women's and children's rights and promote equality to the 11 million who are part of the organization.

**Q:** Eleven million women? How do you convince so many women to be part of your organization?

**Dr. Cuc:** Unlike other countries, Vietnam has only one women's organization. Our voice is therefore strong. Our network starts from the central down to the commune level. At the central level, we have 200 members and several departments that address the different issues.

# In a different way

*a doctor ministers to other women*

An interview by Luz Maria Martinez



## Conversations

**Q: What are the Union's main programs?**

**Dr. Cuc:** At the last Congress, we set five priority tasks: 1) to expand women's knowledge and understanding, specifically women in the mountainous areas; 2) to eradicate illiteracy in remote areas; 3) to share and transfer technology with farmers, such as advice in how to improve rice production; the use of new seeds and technologies; 4) to focus on gender issues; and 5) to acquaint women with their rights and discuss issues relating to equality with them.

**Q: How do you reach the women to discuss their rights and equality issues?**

**Dr. Cuc:** We hold workshops and train our staff in the two training schools we have. The staff then go out to teach at the commune level.

**Q: Is your group part of the government structure?**

**Dr. Cuc:** No, no, not government. Ours is a mass organization with a strong network. We have branches in the 53 provinces and 500 districts. We have members in each of the 12,000 communes—even those in the mountainous areas.

All decision-making is done at the grassroots level. These decisions are implemented and monitored by the 200 staff committee. In addition, we have advisors providing assistance in family planning, fund-raising, and AIDS prevention and other health-related projects.

**Q: What are the main issues affecting women in your country at this time?**

**Dr. Cuc:** The major one is that of the impact of economic growth on women. While in some areas the growth has

helped improve the quality of life for women, in rural areas, this is not so apparent. These are women usually with low skills levels and unable to find jobs, yet have heavy responsibilities. [Such a situation] has led many women into prostitution. With the influx of foreigners investing in our country, there is more demand for women for sex. The Vietnam Women's Union has asked the government to invest in training and financial support for women engaged in entrepreneur projects. The focus should be in training the very low-skilled in areas such as

typing, computer technology, cooking, photography and in the rural areas, handicrafts making. These are skills that will give women some livelihood.

We also focus on educating the family, particularly the mothers who are the carriers of tradition and do not allow their daughters to receive the necessary education. This education is part of the ongoing meetings we have with the women in each village.

**Q: Do you have issues of domestic violence?**

**Dr. Cuc:** In Vietnam, especially among the younger generation, the men are encouraged to share in the family chores. The Women's Union encourages couples to share in the responsibility of family planning and to participate in all the activities of the family. With regard to domestic violence, the women of the local branches serve as mediators in family problems. In cases where violence is happening in a household, the women in the commune intervene to stop the man from beating his wife.

The Women's Union has been fighting for women's equality since 1930. Now we are seeing the fruits of our struggle. All forms of discrimination against women are not allowed. Viet-



Dr. Nguyen Kim Cuc

nam has laws to protect women and children, and the Women's Union interprets these laws to women so that they know their rights. We train women on how they can make maximum use of the laws designed to protect them.

**Q: What are the projects that you are personally involved in?**

**Dr. Cuc:** As Chief of the International Relations Department, I am asked for assistance by many international organizations; my department then distributes these requests to the appropriate departments.

I have a position as advisor to other projects such as family planning and other health projects. I also participate in other activities including fundraising, I am also a member of environmental protection group.

**Q: After your term, will you go back to your job as physician?**

**Dr. Cuc:** No, if elected for the Committee in 1997, I will stay. I want to stay with the Union.

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