

As a child Vo Thi Hoang Yen was afflicted by post polio syndrome. She can walk only short distances, with crutches, and needs a wheelchair to move further. Yet her impaired mobility has not prevented her achieving more than many people without her disabilities, and in November 2009 she received the Kazuo Itoga Memorial Prize for her outstanding achievement in promoting the rights of people with disabilities.

Ms Vo was chosen to receive the Prize in recognition of the way she has dedicated her life to promoting the inclusion of women and men with disabilities in all spheres of society. She is now a lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City Open University and Director of the Disability Resource and Development Centre, but she faced many barriers to getting where she is today.

Although she passed the entrance exam for the University of Economics in Ho Chi Minh City she was refused admission because of her physical disability. After pleading her case she was finally admitted but was told that she would not be guaranteed a government job after graduation, normal practice for graduates.

In 1990, after taking her degree, Ms Vo was offered a job as a chief accountant at a joint venture company, only to be rejected when her physical disability came to light. Ms Vo could not get a regular job so she decided to train as an English tutor, gaining a B.A. in English Teaching from the University of Education in 1999.

In 2001 she was awarded a Ford Foundation scholarship to study at the University of Kansas, where she received an M.A. in Human Development in 2004. Back in Viet Nam, and with support from the Ford Foundation, she set up the Disability Resource Development Centre in Ho Chi Minh City in 2005. What was initially conceived as a two year pilot project still continues.

"In 2000 I tried to look for information for persons with disabilities, but I couldn't find any." Ms Vo said. "So it was my dream to set up an information centre for persons with disabilities".

The project aims to raise awareness among the public and persons with disabilities of their rights and abilities and to help persons with disabilities to develop their capacities.

There are approximately 470 million people with disabilities of working age in the world, 238 million are in Asia. Vietnam has more than 5 million, equivalent to 6 per cent of the population.

While many are successfully employed and fully integrated into society, a disproportionate number face unemployment, lower earnings and poverty. They are often relegated to informal, low-level, low-paid jobs with little social and legal security, or segregated from the mainstream labour market. Many are under-employed, which damages their self-confidence and can lead them to become discouraged and drop out.

This exclusion from decent employment opportunities deprives societies of an estimated US\$1.37 to 1.94 trillion in annual loss in GDP.¹ Therefore providing decent work for people with disabilities makes social as well as economic sense.

Among persons with disabilities, men are almost twice as likely to have jobs as women. What's more disability has an impact on the labour force participation rate of many women, as in most societies they remain the primary care givers.

While there has been little research on women with disabilities in Asia, there is enough evidence to show the discrimination they face - in accessing primary and higher education, health care, information, skills training, loans, employment and decent work. Women with disabilities live a separate life, and stigma and discrimination hinder their full, effective and equal participation in society. They are often confined in centres which offer second-class traditional skills. In rural areas traditional beliefs and lack of opportunities mean their segregation is even worse.

"Experience shows that when women and men with disabilities find jobs suited to their skills, abilities and interests, they can make significant contributions in the workplace," said Bill Salter, Director of the ILO Subregional Office for East Asia in Bangkok.

The ILO's [INCLUDE project](#) (short for "Promoting Decent Work for Persons with Disabilities through a Disability Inclusion Support Service") focuses on advocating and promoting decent work for persons with disabilities. INCLUDE helps countries to move from an approach that provides policies and services for persons with disabilities separately, to one that emphasises their full, mainstream participation. It also supports the participation of women with disabilities in entrepreneurship development. In Asia INCLUDE, which is supported by Irish Aid, recently started programmes in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam.

¹ Robert L. Metts, *Disability Issues, Trends and Recommendations for the World Bank*, World Bank, Washington D.C, U.S.A., 2000

INCLUDE is implemented in collaboration with the ILO's Women's Entrepreneurship Development and Gender Equality (WEDGE) programme.

More information on the ILO's work on disability can be found at:

http://www.ilo.org/global/Themes/Skills_Knowledge_and_Employability/DisabilityandWork/lang--en/index.htm