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## **WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN VIETNAM FROM INSTITUTIONAL, GENDER AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

**Abstract:** Based on gender-related data in the political sphere for the past few years, the paper focuses on analyses and arguments, aiming at clarifying the actual status of Vietnamese women's political participation as well as barriers against their participation and representation. Research works have demonstrated that the proportion of women holding the top management positions remains low, although their proportion in the political system has increased generally. As shown by research findings, there are several factors impacting on women's political participation including institutional settings, gender biases under cultural influences, family responsibilities and gender related characteristics.

**Key words:** women's political participation, female leadership, policy, politics, gender equality in politics

### **Introduction**

Gender equality in politics is among the most important index of gender equality, which shows not only the progress of women in the society in comparison with men, but also ensures effectively that the progress will be made without interruption. Women's political participation results in changes in determining public policy priorities, helping the government to get a more equal and comprehensive view. Apart from the goal of self-improvement, gender equality in the political sphere is considered as significant factor that promotes gender equality in other spheres as well.

Among regions, the Americas witnessed the greatest aggregate changes over the past 20 years. In the late 2000s, the concept of "parity" began to take root. In Europe, there was a notable jump in the share of women elected to national parliaments. Women's representation made substantial progress in the Sub-Saharan African countries. Until recently, not all Arab States had granted women political rights. In Pacific there were uneven gains and lingering resistance with a long lag behind other regions in terms of women's share in parliament. In Asia, women representation is remaining constant as the world progresses. In the last five years, in multiple regions – Europe, the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arab States – efforts have shifted the target to 50 per cent, referred to as "parity" [IPU 2014: 13].

Though there is notable progress, women are still under-represented in the political system. Several explanations have been offered to account for the continuing dearth of women in political leadership. Among the structural barriers found by researchers are differential media coverage [Kropf & Boiney 2001]; the political party culture [Palmer & Simon 2001]; gender role socialization [Fox & Lawless 2003]; role conflict and the public/private dichotomy [Hochschild 1997]; levels of socioeconomic development and the proportion of women in professional and managerial occupations; the impact of political institutions, such as electoral systems based on proportional-representation; and cultural factors, like the predominance of traditional attitudes toward gender roles [Norris and Inglehart 2001].

However, the structural explanations cannot explain major disparities between relatively similar societies in the proportion of women in national parliaments. One alternative explanation is provided by institutional accounts, which suggest that the political rules of the game are the primary explanation for systematic differences in women's representation among relatively similar societies, and that changing those rules is the most effective way to promote women's political leadership [Norris and Inglehart 2001: 132]. Institutions gain legitimacy when social practices become accepted and collectively expected as obvious behaviour [Lucas 2003]. Legitimacy is achieved when the success of women leaders is recognized by one group, which in turn influences another group, and so on. Globalization and institutional isomorphism can also lead to a similar form of institutionalization across societies, as societies become more alike and model one another, and in this case more tolerant and accepting women in influential positions. Therefore, as the institutional development of a country increases, women's political leadership participation also increases [Bullough et al. 2012: 3].

Structural and institutional explanations need to be supplemented by accounts emphasizing the importance of political culture. Cultural indicators such as beliefs, norms, and expectations governing individuals within a society that affect the culture of that society and in turn will possibly affect the advancement of women. Even in countries where women have made gains in employment or education, they face cultural barriers to participation in politics [Lawless & Pearson 2008].

Modernization creates systematic, predictable changes in gender roles, observable in two phases. First, industrialization brings women into the paid workforce, dramatically reduces fertility rates, and gains in educational opportunities and literacy. Women are enfranchised and begin to participate in representative government, but they still have far less power than men. The second, post-industrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality, as women move into higher-status economic roles and gain greater political influence within elected and appointed bodies. In fact, over half the world has not yet begun this process, and even the most advanced industrial societies are still undergoing it [Norris and Inglehart 2001: 129].

In Vietnam, modernization is a process of transforming from a "traditional" society to a "modern" one, in order to achieve economic development and growth, to renew politics and to enhance the social structure towards a political, social and economic system similar to those of western developed countries, has increased individual freedom, opened up social opinion, educational and work expansion to women [Tran Thi Minh Thi 2014: 72].

Gender role socialization under cultural norms creates barriers to women's successful integration into politics. With regard to gender roles in the family, conservatives often emphasize the value of a traditional division of household labour in which men work outside the home and women work inside the home, e.g., raising children [Davis and Greenstein 2009]. Hochschild studied the relationship between the public and the private domains and offered evidence that, there is much penetration of work issues into home life and vice versa. Men are seen as active, rational and objective and as acting in the public domain, while women are seen as passive, emotional and subjective and as acting in the private sphere [Hochschild 1997].

Women in politics are seen in several perspectives in Vietnam. First, they focus on gender roles and gender biases in family, community and society and identify social and cultural obstacles of women participation in the politics (Vu Manh Loi, 2011; Vo Ho Bao Hanh, 2012; Le Thi Kim Lan, 2012; Doan Xuan Diep, 2012; Dang Thi Anh Tuyet, 2015). Second, studies aimed to analyze legal framework on gender issues such as policy and system analyses to identify policy gaps and

actions (UNDP, 2012; UNDP; 2014; Tran Thi Minh Thi, 2017) with several interventions on gender and development and construct alternative intervention models supporting women at the grassroots levels.

Using national statistics and secondary data on women participation in Vietnam recently, this paper focuses on analysing gender-related data in the political sphere for the past few years, aiming at learning more about the actual status of Vietnamese women’s political participation as well as the existing institutional, gender and cultural barriers against their participation and representation.

**Background of gender equality in Vietnam**

Vietnam is evaluated by the United Nations to have achieved significant improvements in gender equality, which is shown by gender gap index (GGI). For the 10-year period from 2007 to 2017, Vietnam was listed in the medium group among the nations in this analysis. In 2017 the country was ranked 97<sup>th</sup> - higher than many nations in the region such as China, Japan, and Malaysia. For the past three years, however, Vietnam has been continually evaluated lower in the global gender-gap rankings. Of all the four categories in Vietnam, the ranking in economics is always the highest, which demonstrates that Vietnamese women play an important role in the labour force and economic development (Table 1). Women also got certain equality to men in the healthcare and educational areas, but their equality in political empowerment remains the lowest. The government set up the quota of 30% women participation in the political system up to 2020, yet this goal could not achieve fully so far [Poliburo, Resolution 11, 2007].

**Table 1. Gender Gap Index<sup>1</sup> in Vietnam for the period 2007–2017**

Year	Value	Ranking	Economic participation and opportunity	Ranking	Educational attainment	Ranking	Healthcare	Ranking	Political empowerment	Ranking
2017	0.698	9	0,738	3	0,972	7	0,957	38	0,124	7
2016	0.70	5	0,736	3	0,978	3	0,950	38	1,138	4
2015	0.687	3	0.731	1	0.941	14	0.950	39	0.124	8
2014	0.691	6	0.726	1	0.971	7	0.944	37	0.124	7
2013	0.688	3	0.702	2	0.974	6	0.944	32	0.124	0
2012	0.686	6	0.709	4	0.968	6	0.944	30	0.124	8
2011	0.673	9	0.710	0	0.925	04	0.945	30	0.110	6
2010	0.677	2	0.721	3	0.924	06	0.946	27	0.118	2
2009	0.680	1	0.712	4	0.897	08	0.970	7	0.118	2

<sup>1</sup> Gender Gap Index = 0: inequality = 1: equality

2008	0.677	8	0.728	4	0.894	06	0.970	2	0.118	7
2007	0.689	2	0.744	1	0.892	03	0.970	1	0.148	2

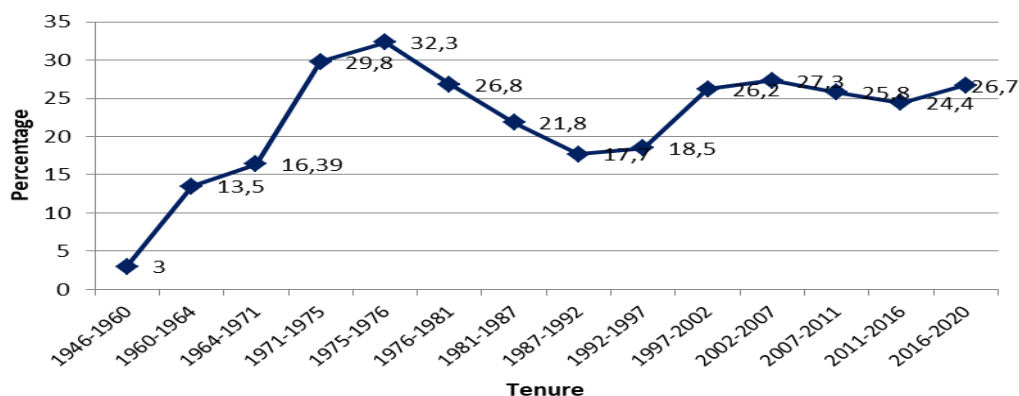
Source: The World Economic Forum, the Global Gender Gap Reports in 2013 and 2017

### Women’s political participation in Vietnam

Firstly, we will have a look at the women’s participation in the most powerful bodies of the Communist Party of Vietnam. For the past nearly 9 decades years since its foundation on 3 February 1930, the Party has held 12 national congresses and 11 people have been elected to the post of the General Secretary, but all of them were men. The 2016 – 2020 tenure is marked with the highest proportion of female members in the Politburo (3 out of 19 members, making up 15.78%). Regarding the membership of the Party’s Central Committee for the tenure, 17 out of the 200 members are female, accounting for 8.5%<sup>1</sup>. The number of female members in the 12<sup>th</sup> tenure is higher than that in the 11<sup>th</sup> tenure in terms of both quantity and proportion. However, the number of female members holding important positions in the Party Secretariat has not varied considerably over the past tenures, making almost the same proportion (more or less 10%). Amongst all the 63 members who have been elected as the secretaries of the city/provincial Party committees for the same tenure, only 3 are female, making up 4.76%<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the current tenure has been recorded with a breakthrough in the proportion of women holding the key positions in the Party system, but in fact it remains much lower than the corresponding proportion of men.

Secondly, we will have a look at the women’s participation in the National Assembly - the highest organ of State power in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Although female deputies are now accounting for a relatively high proportion in the National Assembly, compared with other nations in the same region, and there are three female members elected to the Politburo, the proportion of female deputies in the National Assembly decreased from 27.3% (in the 2002 - 2007 tenure) to 26.7% (in the current tenure) (Figure 1). By May 2015, Vietnam was ranked 49<sup>th</sup> out of 190-member nations in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in terms of the ratio of women in the Parliament/National Assembly, falling down in the rankings; it was ranked 36<sup>th</sup> in 2009 and 2010, 33<sup>rd</sup> - 2008, 31<sup>st</sup> - 2007, 25<sup>th</sup> - 2006 and 23<sup>rd</sup> – 2005 [IPU, 2014].

Figure 1. Proportion of female deputies in the National Assembly over tenures



Source: Vietnam National Assembly website <http://quochoi.vn>, 20.12.2017

<sup>1</sup> Calculated from <http://dangcongsan.vn/>

<sup>2</sup> Calculated from <http://dangcongsan.vn/>

Thirdly, in the state administrative bodies at the central level, women who are ministers or holding an equivalent position just account for 4.55% (1 out of 22 are female) for the tenure 2016-2021 and women who are vice ministers or the equivalent make up 7.7% (11 out of 142) for the tenure 2011-2016. The proportion of women who are director generals or the equivalent of the departments is 7.8% and the corresponding proportion for their deputies is 13.4% (Table 2).

**Table 2. Number of male and female leaders in the state administrative system for the 2011-2016 tenure**

	Female	Male	Total
Ministers or equivalent positions	2 (9.1%)	20 (90.9)	22
Vice ministers or equivalent positions	11 (7.7%)	131 (92.3%)	142
Department director generals or equivalent positions	89 (7.8%)	1048 (92.2%)	1137
Department deputy director generals or equivalent positions	485 (13.4%)	3122 (86.5%)	3607

*Source:* Report of Vietnam Women Union, August 2014

Regarding the people’s council – an organ of the state power in the locality – which is established at the provincial, the district, and the commune levels, there is a slight increase in the proportion of female members in the people’s councils at all levels during the 2011–2016 tenure. It is noticeable that the proportion of women elected to the people’s councils at all levels is always higher than that of women elected to the National Assembly in the same tenure.

At the city/provincial level as well, in the People's Committee, which is elected by the people's council as the state administrative organ in the locality, the proportion of women who were holding the position of chairperson during the 2011–2016 tenure is 1.58% (reducing by 1.54% in comparison with the previous tenure) and the corresponding proportion for the position of vice chairwoman is 10.42% (reducing by 5.66%) [Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2016]. Since the proportion of women holding key positions in the local executive bodies remains too little, it is suggested that there is some systematic discrimination preventing women from holding leadership positions. During the 2016–2021 tenure the proportion of women holding the position of chairperson of the provincial people’s committee has not been improved yet.

The above-mentioned data describe the low representation of women in the political system, especially in the positions of leadership. Although the equality between men and women in politics is ensured in the legal framework, the higher the position, the lower both the quantity and the proportion of women holding it.

In the following part, we will analyse some cultural and institutional barriers, aiming at giving an explanation as to why the participation and proportion of women in the political bodies remain low at all levels.

## **Barriers to women's political participation**

### *Barriers resulting from the policy framework*

Some policies in the gender equality-related fields have not been appropriate, resulting in limitations on the conditions and opportunities for women's equal participation, such as the policies on the retirement age, the maternity leave, and public services providing support to working women.

The policies on the maternity leave and the public daytime childcare service are important factors influencing women's career progression. A six-month maternity leave is currently granted to expectant or new mothers, but those who work in the informal economic sector have not benefited from this policy. Since new mothers come back to work after the 6-month maternity leave, the demand for daytime childcare service becomes greater. Recent research works show a big shortage of daytime care for children under the age of 3 in both state-owned and private sectors [Tran Thi Minh Thi 2014: 68]. This makes many new mothers choose to take care of children as the priority over the opportunity for further training or career promotion, which has posed a big challenge to be faced by women, because they have to accomplish at the same time both tasks in the workplace and childcare at home. The challenge is particularly greater for the women, who want to get promoted, as they need to achieve similar high results in the workplace and get similar appropriate educational attainments corresponding to the position they strive to hold, compared to men. Because most of women under that age must spend a lot of time on marriage and childbirth, they find it difficult to apply for the training programmes [Vo Ho Bao Hanh 2012: 37].

On the one hand, the policy on the retirement age (women are to retire at the age of 55, while men – 60) makes it favourable for women to have time to rest and take care of health, especially for the women working in hard jobs. On the other hand, however, it causes pressure on the women who are striving to hold leadership/management positions. The policy on the retirement age is placing men and women on different categories for comparison, owing to which men get an advantage over women. It is, for example, regulated that those who are nominated to the Party committee for the first time must be young enough to work for at least a full tenure before the retirement age; and there is no differentiation between men and women. This regulation on the age ceiling for nomination is really a challenge to women. As regards family work, women mostly have to undertake all activities relating to birth-giving, childcare, housework, and children's schooling. This more or less affects negatively their working time and promotion opportunities, since they neither have time to satisfy training requirements nor prove the leadership capacity. Even when they have got over all those difficulties, they still have to prove their leadership capacity in order to be recognised and nominated to the Party committee 5 years earlier than men. If not, they will be excluded from the list of nominees due to the age requirement. Most of women must sacrifice personal happiness for work or refuse to take part in the race for promotion; otherwise, they have to make every effort together with vigorous support from their family.

Responsible people, including leaders of State institutions and Party committees, play an especially important role in personnel work related to female officials. In some local areas, leaders of the Party committees, local governments, and authorities are not fully aware of gender equality; consequently, the gender mainstreaming has not been effective in women's training and promotion. Due to the gender stereotypes, a lot of women who have the same or even higher qualifications and qualities than their male colleagues encounter difficulties in getting promotion and favourable

conditions for improvement of the professional competence [Nguyen Thi Hong Van 2012; Phan Thuan 2015; Dang Thi Anh Tuyet 2015].

### ***Cultural barriers: Traditional gender norms and gender stereotypes***

Cultural pull is another dimension strongly influencing gender equality in Vietnam since it is sedimentary from thousands of years of history, which is hard to solve in a short time. Cultural factors, compared to science and technology, economic, etc., are changed much more slowly. The pulling forces of Confucian culture, patriarchal, and feudal ideology are still huge barriers to social and family in providing women with enough foundations for equality. In order to achieve the same position as men, women have to work much harder because they have to play traditional roles and ensuring reproductive function to overcome social stereotypes about women's participation in economy, and to gain a position in a male dominated political system. In general, both women and men expect a successful woman who both have a happy family (in the sense that ensuring housewives work and spend time caring for their family) and have modern characteristics such as knowledge, social understanding, high education achievement, employment, etc. That means women in general and female scientists in particulars have to bear a double standard without an appropriate social service system. Hence, many women have initiatively placed their family above their training and career development, and they accepted certain disadvantages compared to their male counterparts. This makes it difficult for women to balance in professional development while still ensuring family responsibilities and quality of life. Some researches discovered that one usually thinks of a man, when mentioning a leader; the proportion of those who have such thinking among local residents, the ward/commune's officials, and the ward/commune's leaders is 82.9%, 81.3% and 86.2% respectively [Le Thi My Hien 2011: 25, 40]. The proportion of women who prefer a female leader is much lower than the corresponding proportion of men who prefer a male leader.

### ***Barriers from family***

In the family, gender-based labour division is still maintained, although there has been some sharing between men and women in productive, trading and other activities. Housework is mainly undertaken by women. In some areas of the matriarchy, women not only have to undertake almost all housework and childcare, but they also play the role of the family breadwinner. They must spend a lot of time doing unpaid work and duties, such as: to take care of children; to look after elderly parents; to do housework; to organise worship feasts; and, to undertake the family-line responsibilities [IFGS 2013; 2015]. The family-related burden is inversely proportional to women's development and leadership/management participation. Regarding the family decision-making, women often have less power, compared to men. The husband has more power to make decisions about the family consumption, production/trading, and kinship. In the meanwhile, the wife just has some power to make decisions about contraceptive methods, children's schooling, and housework.

### ***Barriers from gender differentials in characteristics***

Another factor affecting the extent of women's political participation is their personal characteristics. In terms of the characteristics viewed as positive for leadership, women often endeavour to better themselves; overcome difficulties and accomplish tasks flexibly, patiently and calmly; stick to the working plan and show soft behaviour; have persuasive skills and high sense of responsibility; and, attach much importance to setting up effective relationships with colleagues in the workplace [Le Thi Kim Lan 2012: 42-44]. In terms of the characteristics viewed as the

hindrances, they are often indecisive and insufficiently self-confident, which is the shortcomings for leadership/management work [Le Thi My Hien, 2012: 43].

One of the ways to build a position in the political life is to set up networks of social relationships. Men often have more advantages for taking part in such networks, especially via informal events after work, when women must undertake unpaid work at home, such as childcare or housework [Doan Xuan Diep 2012: 28-31]. A research work shows that “to have a lot of relations” is viewed as a good quality for male leaders [IFGS 2015: N]. Men have “the open space” for activities; whereas women are restricted to the family space.

Women have less promotion opportunity than men, since their qualifications/skills are lower than those of men [Le Thi Kim Lan 2012; Vu Manh Loi 2011]. However, many research works have demonstrated that female secretaries of the Party, chairwomen and vice chairwomen of the commune people’s committees have higher educational attainments than their male colleagues, because “it was really necessary for the female leaders to get a higher educational attainment, in order to gain the respect and admiration from local members, who would then elect them to the post of the Party secretary” [UNDP 2012: 15, 22]. A research work on the National Assembly female deputies shows that there are not clear differences between male and female deputies in terms of qualifications and competence for giving feedback. Indeed, a minor difference is that women seem to be readier for debates than men; they are better at making recommendations about women-related issues; and, they advocate more women-supporting policies, while they are still capable of contributing recommendations about other fields [UNDP 2014: 32].

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Although women’s proportion in the political system has increased for recent years, the proportion of women holding the top management positions remains low. Women representation in the political system are much lower than men. Furthermore, most of them neither hold key positions nor undertake strategic tasks.

As shown by research findings, there are several factors impacting on women’s political participation, including institutional settings, gender biases under cultural influences, family responsibilities and gender related characteristics.

As women account for half of the whole population, women should have a corresponding proportion in the political system in order to make decisions relating directly to their life. It is essential to develop and complete economic institutional framework, which will help to increase the representation of women in the leadership/management. Innovative and creative activities in a healthy economic environment can lead to new values, owing to which women will be socially accepted to hold positions of leadership/management.

Development of a comprehensive social institutional framework will contribute a part towards improving the women’s political participation. If the social security system cannot supply appropriate supporting social services for working women such as child care, health care, the family-care burden will be heavier on women.

It is also important to improve the cultural institutional framework towards making it more open and freer for individuals in society. Cultural indexes, including the confidence, social customs, and social expectation of the gender-based role, are the very factors affecting the progression of women.



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## УЧАСТИЕ ЖЕНЩИН В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ЖИЗНИ ВЬЕТНАМА С ТОЧКИ ЗРЕНИЯ ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНЫХ, ГЕНДЕРНЫХ И КУЛЬТУРНЫХ ПЕРСПЕКТИВ

**Аннотация:** Основываясь на гендерной ситуации в политической сфере за последние несколько лет, в статье основное внимание уделяется анализу и аргументам с целью выяснения фактического статуса участия вьетнамских женщин в политической жизни страны, а также барьеров, препятствующих их участию и представительству. Исследования показали, что доля женщин, занимающих высшие руководящие должности, по-прежнему остается низкой, хотя их доля в политической системе в целом возросла. На самом деле, число женщин, участвующих в политике, слишком мало, чтобы иметь значительный голос. Кроме того, большинство из них не занимают ключевые позиции и не выполняют стратегически важных задач. Поэтому, несмотря на их политическое участие, они не играют важной роли в принятии решений. Как показывают результаты исследований, существует пять категорий факторов, влияющих на участие женщин в политической жизни. К ним относятся факторы, связанные с государственной политикой и службой; факторы, связанные с кадровой работой; факторы, связанные с барьерами, вытекающими из культурных норм; факторы, связанные с барьерами, возникающими в семье; и факторы, связанные с барьерами, обусловленными личностными характеристиками.

**Ключевые слова:** женщина, участие женщин в политической жизни, руководящие роли женщин, политика, политическая деятельность, гендерное равенство в политике.

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