

# Institutional and Cultural Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Vietnam

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**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 still remains low, although their proportion in the political system has increased generally. In fact, the number of women taking part in politics is too few to have a significant voice. Furthermore, most of them neither hold key positions nor undertake strategic tasks. They, therefore, do not play an important role in decision-making, despite their political participation. As shown by research findings, there are 5 categories of factors impacting on women's political participation, including: the factors related to and public policy and service; the factors related to personnel work; the factors related to the barriers resulting from cultural norms; the factors related to the barriers resulting from family; and, the factors related to the barriers resulting from personal characteristics.

**Keywords:** Woman, women's political participation, female leadership, policy, politics, gender equality in politics.

## 1. Introduction

Gender equality in politics is the most important and the highest index of gender equality, which not only shows the progress of women in 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 a significant factor that promotes gender equality in other spheres as well.

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 and cultural barriers against their participation and representation.

## 2. Gender equality in Vietnam as compared to that in the world

Vietnam is evaluated by the United Nations to have achieved significant improvements in gender equality, which is shown by indexes of gender gap and gender inequality. The gender gap index is built in four fundamental categories (sub-indexes), including: Economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. It ranges from 0.00 (inequality) to 1.00 (equality). The closer to 1.00 it reaches, the narrower the gender gap will be. For the

period from 2007 to 2015, Vietnam was listed in the medium group among the nations in this analysis. In 2015, the country was ranked 83<sup>rd</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 due to a big ranking-drop in education. 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).

Table 1: Gender Gap Index in Vietnam for the Period 2007 - 2015

Year	Value	Ranking	Sub-index in Economic participation and opportunity		Sub-index in Educational attainment		Sub-index in Healthcare		Sub-index in Political empowerment	
2015	0.687	83	0.731	41	0.941	114	0.950	139	0.124	88
2014	0.691	76	0.726	41	0.971	97	0.944	137	0.124	87
2013	0.688	73	0.702	52	0.974	96	0.944	132	0.124	80
2012	0.686	66	0.709	44	0.968	96	0.944	130	0.124	78
2011	0.673	79	0.710	40	0.925	104	0.945	130	0.110	76
2010	0.677	72	0.721	33	0.924	106	0.946	127	0.118	72
2009	0.680	71	0.712	34	0.897	108	0.970	97	0.118	72
2008	0.677	68	0.728	24	0.894	106	0.970	92	0.118	67
2007	0.689	42	0.744	11	0.892	103	0.970	91	0.148	42

Source: The World Economic Forum, the Global Gender Gap Reports in 2013 and 2015.

The gender gap index in political empowerment is measured by the gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making. It is calculated through the ratio of women to men in ministerial-level positions and the ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions. In addition, this sub-index is also complemented by the ratio of women to men in terms of years in the top executives positions (such as prime minister or president) for the past 50 years.

The gender gap index in political empowerment is the lowest among the four

sub-indexes in Vietnam, although Vietnam is not ranked high in comparison with the world general index in this category (most nations have a low index in this category as well), proving that the gender inequality in political empowerment between men and women still remains rather strong. Consequently, women have made a significant contribution in the economic area and they have got certain equality to men in the healthcare and educational areas, but their equality in political empowerment still remains very limited.

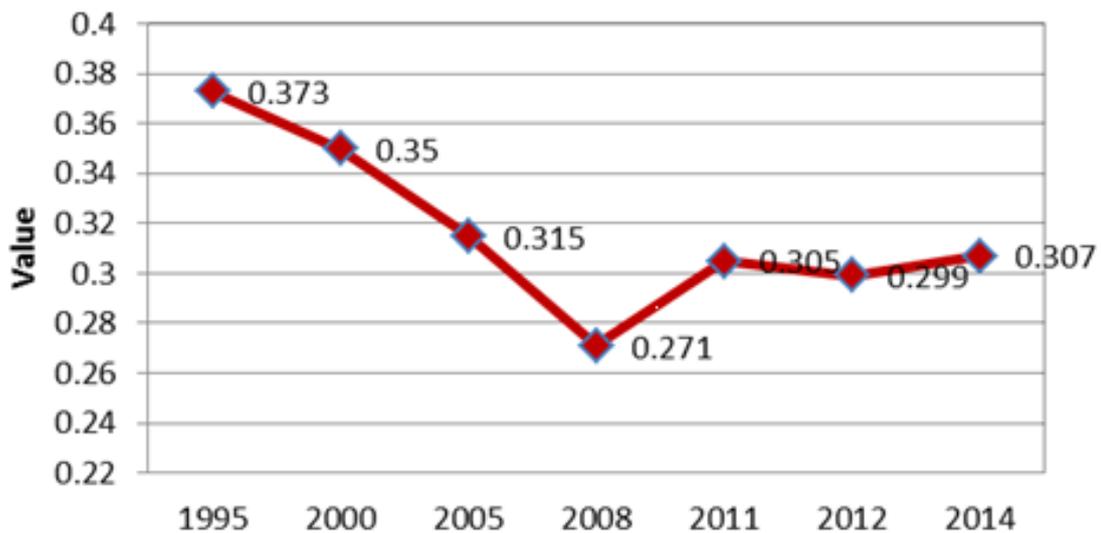


Figure 1: Vietnam's Gender Inequality Index for the 1995 – 2014 Period

Source: [16].

Besides, the Gender Inequality Index (GII) is also used to measure the inequality between men and women within a nation or a territory. The value of this measurement ranges from 0 to 1. The nation, of which the gender inequality index is the closest to 0, is ranked first;

i.e. the inequality is the lowest or in other words, and the equality is the highest. For the period from 1995 to 2014, Vietnam's GII tended to decrease, showing its improvement in gender equality on the whole. Compared with other ASEAN nations, Vietnam is always ranked one of

the nations that have the best gender equality. As regards the gender inequality index alone, Vietnam is now ranked third (after Singapore and Malaysia). In the 2012 Human Development Report released by the United Nations Development Programme [17], Vietnam was ranked 48<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the gender-inequality index and it was assessed to have made remarkable improvements in carrying out gender equality. In 2014, Vietnam with the GII of 0.307 was ranked 60<sup>th</sup> among all nations in the GII analysis.

### **3. A brief outline of 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 are 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%. 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%. 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 still 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 is 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 24.4% (in the current tenure). 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. As regards the National Assembly deputies nominated by cities/provinces for the 2011 - 2016 tenure, the proportion of female deputies from 22 cities/provinces is over 30%; particularly, the corresponding proportion in 2 provinces (Ninh Binh and Ha Giang) has amounted to 50%; by contrast, 3 provinces do not have any female deputies at all.

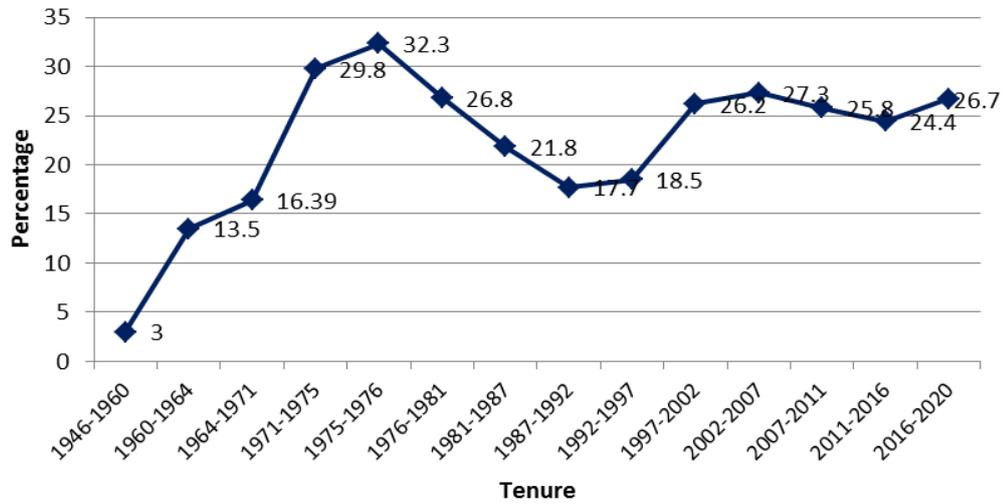


Figure 2: Proportion of Female Deputies in the National Assembly over Tenures

Thirdly, in the state administrative bodies at the central level, women who are ministers or holding an equivalent position just account for 4.55% (2 out of 22 are female) and women who are vice ministers or the equivalent make up 7.7% (11 out of

142). The proportion of women who are director generals or the equivalent of the departments (under Ministries) is 7.8% and the corresponding proportion for their deputies is 13.4% [7] (see 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

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 the highest proportion, compared to that in the

past 4 tenures since 1989. 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%). 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; only one out of the 63 provinces and cities has a chairwoman of the provincial people's committee (Yen Bai province).

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 still remain low at all levels.

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

##### *Barriers resulting from the policy framework*

Some regulations 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 [12, 15]. Most state-run institutions and postgraduate schools do not have a preschool, where staff and students can send their children to. This makes many new mothers choose to take care of children as the first 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 high results in the workplace and get appropriate educational attainments corresponding to the position they strive to hold.

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, the women who do hard or toxic jobs can benefit a lot from the policy. 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 two tenures before the retirement age; and, those who are re-nominated to continue working in the Party committee must be young enough to work for at least 4 years; 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 have to 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.

#### *Barriers from the personnel work*

According to the requirements of almost all doctoral and master's training programmes abroad, applicants must be under the age of 35 for the master's degree or 40 for the doctoral degree. At the same time, they must have at least 2 years of work experience. Those requirements may not be seen as a difficulty for men, but they are very disadvantageous for women. Because most of women under that age have to spend a lot of time on marriage and childbirth, they find it difficult to apply for the training programmes. In addition to the training-related difficulties, female officials are also encountering similar disadvantages resulting from the personnel planning. The time when they are scheduled to strive for promotion is the very time when they need to get married and have children [5].

Besides, some research works on the actual status of provincial female officials show that the personnel planning for female leadership/management has been mainly done passively and ineffectively. The female officials who have good virtue and competence are not provided with favourable conditions to run for the leadership positions [5, 19, 3]. According to statistic data in 2009 from the Vietnam Women's Union, female officials were provided with fewer opportunities to enrol on capacity training courses, compared with the male ones; for example, the proportion of female participants in the training courses at the central level on political theories and management is very low, ranging from 10 to 20%.

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. This is one of the factors preventing women from enhancing their leadership capacity [19, 13, 14].

*Cultural barriers: Traditional gender norms and gender stereotypes*

According to research works on the modern social viewpoints, the tradition of male chauvinism is still practised in Vietnam at present, especially in rural areas and among low-income groups (Institute of Family and Gender Studies, 2015). The pressures caused by Confucian thought have resulted in a number of moral duties in human relationships. This can be seen clearly in the hierarchical relationships, such as the relationships between father and child, between older brother and younger one, and between husband and wife. According to such hierarchical relationships, the superiors give instructions to the subordinates, while the subordinates have to obey the instructions and show the gratitude as well as filial piety towards the superiors [8].

The proportion of the women taking part in leadership and management activities has

been increasing slightly for the past few years. In the eye of most people, the image of those female leaders/managers has not been yet recognised correspondingly to their competence and contributions. A research conducted by Le Thi My Hien (2011) shows 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. Although the women who expect to have female leaders account for a relatively considerable proportion of all women, the social position and the career of men are still viewed as more important than those of women. There is a difference between men and women in terms of the attitude towards leaders. The proportion of women who prefer to have a female leader is much lower than the corresponding proportion of men who prefer to have a male leader.

The traditional gender patterns of education for boys and girls are almost unchangeable and deeply rooted in people's mind. . Those patterns unfailingly provide men with favourable conditions for occupational development towards the position of leadership, whereas they tend to attach women closely to the duties for "family happiness", housework, childcare and the sensitivity to the needs of other family members. Thus, women's opportunity to take part in politics is already restricted, even before they start to do it. The stereotype of women's ability and the consistent preconception about the leadership/management image have been hindering women from striving for promotion and self-improvement.

### *Barriers from family*

In 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 have to spend a lot of time doing unpaid work and “unrejectable” 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. The family-related burden is inversely proportional to women’s development and leadership/management participation. This is a big challenge to most women at present. Regarding the family decision-making, women often have less power to make decisions, 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.

Looking at the barriers resulting from family and society, we can realise that 2 factors, including “the family-related burden” and “the male chauvinism that still remains severe at present”, are the major barriers preventing women from getting promotion and career development [5]. Due to the lack of supporting services that help to reduce the family-work burden undertaken by women and because men are not fully prepared to share housework, furthermore, women have to continue

taking a major role in accomplishing housework.

### *Barriers from personal characteristics*

Another factor affecting the extent of women’s political participation is their personal characteristics. Some differences in the leadership style between male and female leaders have been shown; for example, male leaders are better at operational work, communication and more resolute, whereas women are better at doing detailed work and listening to others [20].

Personal characteristics improve and at the same time hinder women’s participation in leadership work. In terms of the characteristics viewed as positive for leadership, women often endeavour to better themselves; they try to overcome difficulties and accomplish tasks flexibly and smoothly; they carry out work industriously, patiently and calmly; they stick to the working plan and show soft behaviour; they have persuasive skills and high sense of responsibility; and, they attach much importance to setting up effective relationships with colleagues in the workplace, which can be seen as one of their strengths. At the same time, women often make reliable decisions that rarely result in negative consequences, owing to their cautiousness [10]. In terms of the characteristics viewed as the hindrances, they are often indecisive and insufficiently self-confident, which can be seen as the shortcomings for leadership/management work [9]. Being too careful, women are often cautious about making a decision. As a result, they cannot get so many decisions that are breakouts as men can [10].

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 have to undertake unpaid work at home, such as childcare or housework [2]. A research work shows that “to have a lot of relations” is viewed as a good quality for male leaders [21]. 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 [10, 11]. 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” [17]. 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 [18].

## 5. 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 still remains low. The number of women taking part in politics is too few, so their voice is not significant enough. Furthermore, most of them neither hold key positions nor undertake strategic tasks. They, therefore, do not play an important role in decision-making, despite their political participation.

As shown by research findings, there are 5 categories of factors impacting on women’s political participation, including: the factors related to public policy and service; the factors related to personnel work; the factors related to the barriers resulting from cultural norms; the factors related to the barriers resulting from family; and, the factors related to the barriers resulting from personal characteristics.

To increase the representation of women in the political system, it is necessary to devise and apply appropriate measures to get more female members. As women account for half of the whole population, it is really fair that women should have a corresponding proportion in the political system in order to make decisions relating directly to their life. The best way to improve the proportion of female deputies in the National Assembly is to increase the quantity and quality of female candidates. This requires us to appoint more women to the posts of potential candidates, while providing more capacity building training and encouraging them to strive for career promotion.

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 customs, resulting in more opportunities for initiatives and recognising new values, owing to which women will be socially accepted to hold positions of leadership/management. In an underdeveloped economic environment, on the contrary, women's participation may be more limited, since individuals cannot make development freely and they have to undertake unfair and dubious activities.

Development of social institutional framework will contribute a part towards improving the women's political participation. Major social issues, such as gender equality, sustainable environment, education, family healthcare, social security, and medical resources, which are closely related to the national economic and cultural prosperity, in turn will create opportunities for women to take part in political and non-family activities. If the social security system encounter problems such as those in regard of healthcare and environmental safety, the family-care burden will be heavier on women and the general socio-economic development will also be negatively impacted.

It is also important to improve the cultural institutional framework in the trend of making it more open and free 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. There are some cultural motives, which help to promote women's participation in leadership, such as: social support for activities, which may break common rules. Such motives can include advocating women's participation

in social activities, for example. On the other hand, there are some cultural hindrances, which may cause negative impacts on their participation, such as: the trend of collective responsibility for activity of individuals, the patriarchal regime, and the traditional gender stereotypes.

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