

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN HAI PHONG: BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: Women's participation in political and social activities has long been a central concern across nations worldwide. In Vietnam, women are considered an essential driving force behind the country's comprehensive development. However, in practice, the role of women within political and social organizations has not been fully recognized, as they continue to face prejudice, public scrutiny, and gender-based discrimination. In this paper, the author employs research methods such as questionnaire surveys, document analysis, and in-depth interviews to examine the real extent of women's participation in political and social activities in Hai Phong City. The study identifies underlying causes and challenges, thereby proposing practical solutions aimed at enhancing the role of women in political and social organizations in Hai Phong in particular, and in Vietnam in general.

Keywords: Women, role, political and socio-political organizations, gender equality, political participation.

NÂNG CAO VAI TRÒ CỦA PHỤ NỮ THAM GIA TRONG CÁC TỔ CHỨC CHÍNH TRỊ - XÃ HỘI TẠI HẢI PHÒNG

Tóm tắt: Phụ nữ tham gia các hoạt động chính trị - xã hội luôn là mối quan tâm hàng đầu của các quốc gia trên thế giới trong nhiều thập kỷ qua. Ở Việt Nam phụ nữ là nguồn nhân tố quan trọng đối với sự phát triển toàn diện của đất nước. Tuy nhiên, trên thực tế vai trò của phụ nữ trong các tổ chức chính trị - xã hội vẫn chưa thực sự được coi trọng, vẫn còn sự định kiến, khắt khe, phân biệt đối xử... Trong nội dung bài viết của mình, tác giả đã sử dụng các phương pháp nghiên cứu như điều tra bảng hỏi, nghiên cứu tài liệu và phỏng vấn sâu nhằm tập trung phân tích thực tế sự tham gia hoạt động chính trị xã hội tại Thành phố Hải Phòng, chỉ ra nguyên nhân và những thách thức qua đó đưa

ra những giải pháp thực tiễn nhằm nâng cao vai trò của phụ nữ tham gia trong các tổ chức chính trị xã hội tại Hải Phòng nói riêng và Việt Nam nói chung.

Từ khoá: Phụ nữ, vai trò, các tổ chức chính trị xã hội, bình đẳng giới, tham gia chính trị.

1. Introduction

We are living in a remarkable era of scientific and technological achievements. These rapid transformations have profoundly impacted every aspect of social life. Among them, issues concerning gender equality and the empowerment of women have become crucial elements for the sustainable development of humanity. The active participation of women in socio-political activities serves as an important indicator of both the strength of the women's movement and the broader process toward gender equalization.

As Vietnam enters a new era of national resurgence, promoting women's roles across all fields, especially politics, has become an urgent and indispensable mission to ensure comprehensive and sustainable development. Women's participation is not merely a matter of gender equality; it is a pivotal factor that enhances governance efficiency and accelerates social progress [1].

Hai Phong, one of Vietnam's key socio-economic center, has made notable efforts in encouraging women's engagement in socio-political affairs. In reality, the city boasts a relatively high percentage of women involved in local

governance, with many holding core leadership roles at the commune, ward, district, and former sub-provincial levels. Nevertheless, the broader picture still reveals significant gaps. Female representation remains modest compared to their male counterparts, particularly in top-tier leadership positions, where women account for less than 15%. This discrepancy underscores the prevailing gender imbalance in political participation, with women still underrepresented in Party and government leadership roles. More alarmingly, social issues such as cross-border trafficking of women and domestic violence against women continue to exacerbate gender inequality [4].

This article aims to delve into the proportion of women participating in Hai Phong's Party Executive Committees (2020-2025), comparing it to the national targets on female representation in government bodies. It will also highlight the challenges facing women in political participation and, importantly, propose practical recommendations to enhance women's political roles particularly in Hai Phong, and more broadly in Vietnam.

2. Research Overview and Theoretical Framework

Women's participation in political and socio-political organizations is not a

new issue, yet it remains a matter of concern due to its complexity and depth. This topic has consistently attracted researchers seeking to uncover its core aspects and to help women achieve stability and development in their lives.

The study “*Factors Influencing Women’s Roles in State Management Activities*” emphasizes that women actively engage in all aspects of socio-economic life and make significant contributions to the nation’s peace and prosperity [6].

The article “*Vietnamese Law and Ensuring Women’s Right to Participation After Joining CEDAW*” analyzes the legal principles outlined in Articles 7 and 8 of the CEDAW Convention, which guarantee women’s participation in political and socio-political organizations [5].

These previous studies primarily focus on legal aspects and women’s rights in political and socio-political engagement. In contrast, this research concentrates on examining the current situation to highlight the difficulties and challenges women face in such activities. Based on these findings, the author proposes several solutions to strengthen women’s roles in political and socio-political participation.

From a theoretical perspective, the author applies the following frameworks:

First, Liberal Feminist Theory: This theory explains the causes and solutions

to the limitations placed on women. Women have historically been disadvantaged and confined to household duties. Today, with the advancement of the market economy, women have greater opportunities to engage in political and socio-political activities.

Second, Socialist Feminist Theory: This theory examines the root causes of inequality that restrict women’s participation in political and socio-political activities. It also proposes solutions to promote equality, such as redistributing time-consuming and invisible household tasks so women can shoulder fewer burdens and participate more actively in socio-political life.

Third, the Symbolic Interactionist Approach: This approach emphasizes the role of social structures in creating inequality and underscores the importance of human interactions—particularly women’s—in political and socio-political activities.

The integration of these three theoretical frameworks not only provides a solid foundation for the study but also guides a comprehensive analytical approach to enhancing women’s participation in socio-political organizations in Hai Phong. The article examines the current rate of women’s involvement in political and socio-political activities, identifies the challenges they face, and offers practical solutions to strengthen women’s roles in

these organizations-both in Hai Phong specifically and in Vietnam as a whole.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts several research methods as follows:

3.1. Theoretical Research Method

In this study, the author focused on examining documents such as the Party Work Report of the City Party Committee for the 2020-2025 term and the report of the City Women's Union on statistics regarding women's participation in political activities, as well as the challenges they face. Through this, the study seeks to propose orientations and solutions to enable women to fully realize their potential.

3.2. Survey Questionnaire Method

To obtain reliable quantitative data, the author designed a questionnaire covering key topics such as the level of political participation, perceptions of leadership roles, barriers and challenges faced, and women's own recommendations. Sampling method: Stratified random sampling was applied across administrative units (districts), ensuring representation from both urban and rural areas. Sample size: A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, including 250 to women working in socio-political organizations and 50 to male officials for gender-based comparison. Data analysis: Data were

coded and processed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean), comparative analyses (across age, occupation, and gender groups), and Chi-square tests were employed to examine relationships among variables.

3.3. In-depth Interview Method

In parallel with the quantitative survey, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted to gain qualitative insights: 10 women holding grassroots leadership positions, 5 male officials in similar positions for comparison, 5 representatives from social organizations and administrative agencies.

4. Research results

4.1. The current status of women's political participation in Hai Phong

Women's political involvement in Hai Phong is not a recent phenomenon - it has been a consistent thread throughout history, expressed through participation in mass organizations, revolutionary movements, and highly political social activities.

Vietnamese women in general, and those in Hai Phong in particular, have always played a vital, irreplaceable role in patriotic movements and the struggle against foreign invaders. The Vietnam Women's Union, with its 94-year history of development, has remained a central pillar in the women's movement, continuously innovating its mission and

approach to unleash the full potential and creativity of women from all walks of life. This organization has made critical contributions across various societal domains, supporting economic development and national defense from the resistance war against the French (1946-1954) to the one against the American (1954-1975). As a major port city, Hai Phong undoubtedly has a dynamic local branch of the Women's Union, actively mobilizing women to engage in these activities [3].

Amid the turmoil of war, women were not merely a reliable support force on the home front but directly involved in production, resistance, and homeland defense. The beauty of women in wartime has been likened to legends, embodying strength and resilience while still preserving their femininity and innocence amid the bombs and bullets.. Although these contributions were not always tied to formal political roles, they laid a firm foundation for broader female engagement in societal affairs, affirming

their significance in shaping the nation's destiny.

Despite Hai Phong women's considerable contributions and visible presence in socio-political life, deeper analysis reveals persistent gaps and challenges. While the city has a relatively high rate of female participation in politics, women remain underrepresented in top leadership positions compared to men, particularly at the higher levels of governance.

For instance, in the 16th Congress of Hai Phong's Party Committee (2020 - 2025), only 8 out of 53 members were women, accounting for 15.09%. This marks a notable improvement from the 8.9% recorded in the previous term. However, among the 15-member Standing Committee of the City Party Committee, there was only one woman. This suggests that while more women are entering the Party ranks, their representation diminishes significantly at decision-making levels of real authority [4].

Table 1. Proportion of female Deputies and Leaders in Hai Phong across terms

Entity	Term	Female Proportion	Notes
Hai Phong Party Executive Committee	2020-2025	15.09% (8/53 members)	Higher than 8.9% in previous term
Hai Phong Standing Party Committee	2020-2025	1 woman / 15 members	
Hai Phong People's Councils (all levels)	2016-2021	+2.24% over previous term	

Entity	Term	Female Proportion	Notes
Key leadership roles (overall in Hai Phong)	Present	<15%	
District-level People's Council (Hai Duong)	2021-2026	41.95%	+7.57% due to administrative mergers
Commune-level People's Council (Hai Duong)	2021-2026	37.22%	+5.15% due to administrative mergers
National People's Councils (all levels)	2021-2026	29%	Approaching the 30% target
National People's Councils (previous term)	2016-2021	Slightly higher than prior but still below the 30% benchmark	

Source: Hai Phong City People's Committee (2024), Report on Socio-Economic Development and Female Cadre Affairs

A positive shift can be observed in the proportion of women in the Hai Phong Municipal Party Executive Committee, increasing from 8.9% in the previous term to 15.09% in the 2020-2025 term. This marks a significant step forward, reflecting genuine efforts to enhance female representation in Party leadership bodies.

However, when examining key leadership positions across Hai Phong more broadly, the figure remains below 15%. This discrepancy indicates that, despite an upward trend in the proportion of women in legislative bodies (such as the People's Council) and Party committees, female advancement into positions of real decision-making power, particularly within the

executive apparatus and the Party continues to face substantial obstacles. It highlights the fact that the quality of representation (influence and authority) is just as critical as the quantity (numerical presence). *"I believe that women should assume more key positions in the current political system. Such representation affirms both women's right to participation and their professional and managerial competence."* (Female Manager, in-depth interview).

Assessment against national targets

To assess Hai Phong's progress, it is essential to compare current statistics with national targets on gender equality in leadership and governance. These goals are outlined in the following table.

Table 2. National targets for female representation in leadership and management

Resolution/Directive	Target Details
Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW (May 19, 2018)	
Female Party Committee members at all levels	20 - 25% by 2030
Female deputies in the National Assembly and People's Councils	>35% by 2030
Directive No. 35-CT/TW (May 30, 2019)	
Minimum of 15% female Party Committee members	≥15%
At least one woman in each Party Standing Committee	
National Average	
Female representation in provincial Party Executive Committees	16%

Source: Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (2022); National Report on Gender Equality for the 2021-2030 Period

When comparing Hai Phong's data against these national benchmarks, the city's 15.09% female representation in the Party Executive Committee for the 2020-2025 term has already met the minimum target set by Directive No. 35-CT/TW. However, it still falls short of the 20-25% target outlined in Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW for 2030. Notably, the presence of only one woman in Hai Phong's 15-member Party Standing Committee does satisfy the requirement to include at least one female member in such bodies, but the overall representation remains modest.

A particularly noteworthy trend is what some have called "legislative

success, executive stagnation." Data reveal that female representation tends to be higher in legislative bodies. For example, in Hai Duong, which is soon to be merged with Hai Phong, the percentage of women elected to the district-level People's Council for the 2021-2026 term reached 41.95%, and at the commune level, 37.22%. These figures significantly surpass the female representation in Party committees and top leadership positions in Hai Phong. This pattern suggests that barriers to women's advancement become more pronounced as they rise to higher levels within the political hierarchy particularly into executive and Party

structures, where real decision-making authority is concentrated.

Moreover, there is a stark gap between the percentage of female candidates and those successfully elected. At the district level, women accounted for 41.04% of candidates but only 24.3% of those elected. At the commune level, the gap was similarly large: female candidates made up 39.98% of the total, but only 27.93% were elected. This substantial drop-off from candidacy to actual election points to underlying issues that go beyond nomination processes. These may include voter bias, campaign effectiveness, insufficient support systems for female candidates, or internal party dynamics that hinder the transition from candidacy to electoral success. This underscores the critical insight that solving gender disparity is not just about increasing the number of female candidates. It also requires improving their electability through public awareness campaigns aimed at challenging voter stereotypes, and through targeted support mechanisms for women running for office.

4.2. Challenges for women in political participation in the new era

As Vietnam enters a transformative era of national resurgence, the country must fully harness the role of women across various sectors, especially in politics. However, the proportion of women in the political system remains disproportionate to the nation's socio-

economic progress, highlighting long-standing systemic challenges.

The restructuring of local government from a three-tier to a two-tier system along with the dissolution of intermediate levels, mergers of administrative units, and potential provincial amalgamations though strategic in improving administrative efficiency, has posed significant new hurdles for women in politics.

Hai Phong is among the localities with a relatively high rate of female political participation, with numerous women holding key positions at the commune, ward, and former district levels. Still, female representation remains modest when compared to men particularly in top leadership roles, where it stays below 15%.

The abolition of the intermediate level (districts), and the merging of smaller communes and wards especially with the possible merger of Hai Duong into Hai Phong has led to a reduction in leadership positions without a corresponding decrease in total personnel. As women already hold a minority of leadership roles, this administrative downsizing puts them at higher risk of being displaced, reassigned, or relocated. Many female officials face heightened pressure due to societal expectations that they must fulfill domestic responsibilities raising children, caring for family members regardless of their professional

roles. Widespread traditional views continue to position household duties, caregiving, and emotional labor as women's primary responsibilities, often at the expense of their careers. This results in a significant imbalance, with men rarely expected to share such domestic duties equally. Consequently, there remains a harmful stereotype that successful women in the public sphere must inevitably fail in their private lives, due to the perceived impossibility of balancing "home and work."

To advance their careers, many female intellectuals must exert double the effort, excelling in both professional and domestic realms to prove their worth. The longstanding slogan for Vietnamese women, "Excellent at work, devoted at home," together with movements such as "Active learning, creative labor, happy families," and "Cultivating moral qualities: confidence, self-respect, loyalty, resourcefulness," reinforces the notion that domestic competence is an essential feminine virtue. *"Engagement in political activities is a major challenge for us. Unlike men, we cannot devote ourselves entirely to work. While we fulfill political duties as men do, we also bear the responsibility of managing our families. This dual burden is often exhausting, and at times we lack spousal support. Coming home late, for instance, can trigger reproach and even conflict."* (Female Office Staff, in-depth interview).

However, these expectations become significant barriers, particularly for women pursuing political careers, which demand mental labor, long hours, and public visibility. The so-called "dual role" forces women to shoulder the burden of both family and professional responsibilities, often without sufficient institutional support. Female politicians require time to study, train, etc. while rest time is frequently sacrificed for unpaid domestic labor.

These traditional ideals inadvertently bind women to household roles, without encouraging men to share domestic responsibilities. This dynamic limits women's ability to participate in long-term training programs, travel for work, or attend time-intensive political meetings now increasingly necessary due to expanded administrative jurisdictions and extended working hours following local government consolidation.

Women remain underrepresented in leadership, weighed down by family burdens, while socio-economic development continues to increase the pressure on women as wives, mothers, and early educators of the next generation. Time spent on domestic work severely limits their opportunities for self-development. The burden of household responsibilities often acts as an inverse factor, impeding women's access to leadership and managerial roles.

In addition, a persistent lack of confidence in women's capabilities continues to plague society. Many still believe that women are unsuited for high-stakes roles such as scientific research or executive leadership "reserved for men." If a woman shows assertiveness and decisiveness traits often praised in male leaders she is frequently criticized as lacking femininity. This double standard imposes tremendous pressure on female professionals.

Moreover, the pipeline of young female leaders remains shallow. Opportunities for women to showcase their talent and take on leadership responsibilities are still limited. Female officials are frequently assigned to cultural or social affairs, rather than strategic, high-impact roles. The implementation of gender policies often hinges on the attitudes of individual leaders rather than institutional mandates.

A further obstacle lies in the disparity in retirement ages between men and women, which affects planning, promotion, and training for leadership roles. Many Party committees and local governments still lack a comprehensive understanding of the importance of gender equity in human resource development. Gendered stereotypes, Confucian legacies, and societal norms that prioritize male dominance persist.

These issues are not merely societal prejudices, but also internalized self-doubt and lack of ambition among women themselves.

This internalized bias leads to a defeatist mindset, discouraging women from striving for leadership roles. The problem is further compounded by policies that continue to discriminate in age requirements for promotion and retirement-undermining female potential in governance and leadership.

To make matters worse, new administrative restructuring guidelines lack clear integration of gender considerations in planning, training, and assigning personnel. This omission leaves women at a disadvantage when competing for new positions, even when their experience and qualifications are equal to or greater than their male counterparts.

Post-merger appointment processes typically follow the principle of selecting "the most competent and reputable candidates," but without gender quotas, women are often overlooked. Preference is given to experienced or pre-designated "cadre reserves," leaving few openings for younger women to prove themselves or be promoted. This results in a generational gap and contributes to disillusionment and discouragement among aspiring young female leaders.

Sudden changes in work environments, responsibilities, and increased competition frequently create anxiety, stress, and a loss of direction. Without timely institutional support, women are more vulnerable to emotional exhaustion and a decline in motivation and engagement.

4.3. Solutions to enhance women's roles in Hai Phong's socio-political organizations

Given the challenges posed by the transition from a three-tier to a two-tier administrative system, ensuring the full, equal, and effective participation of women in socio-political life must be recognized as an urgent task requiring the coordinated involvement of the entire political system.

First and foremost, transparent mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the processes of recruitment, appointment, and staff restructuring after administrative reforms must be established. These should ensure that the principle of gender equality is applied substantively, preventing the silent removal of women from leadership pipelines or their relegation to purely symbolic roles. The Vietnam Fatherland Front, the Women's Union, and other socio-political organizations should actively participate in oversight, promptly making recommendations when signs of

unfairness or inappropriate personnel decisions are detected.

Furthermore, Party and State policies must incorporate gender perspectives in a substantive way, implementing scientific gender analysis to ensure that gender differences are acknowledged, respected, and addressed at every stage of the policy cycle. Existing policies should be reviewed in light of the Law on Gender Equality and the Politburo's Resolution No. 11. to ensure consistency. Consideration should also be given to amending regulations on leadership appointment age and ensuring equal retirement ages for men and women, in accordance with the spirit of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Specific provisions should also be introduced on the age for training and leadership preparation, creating special mechanisms for female cadres to ensure their equal opportunities to contribute to national development. Flexibility in the age for training, professional development, and appointment should be treated as a form of positive action.

There is also a need for a clear, structured process for planning and developing a pool of potential female leaders. This process must start at the grassroots level, from the recruitment stage,

and include continuous professional training for women, rather than only reviewing candidates at the time of Party congresses or leadership transitions.

Policies must also adapt to the needs of a modern society, particularly in light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. For example, the working hours stipulated in the Law on Cadres and Civil Servants could be reconsidered to align with the general labor market (many businesses begin at 8:00 a.m., while schools typically start at 7:30 a.m.). Such adjustments could reduce unnecessary pressure on public employees, especially women affected by mergers who must commute longer distances to work.

On an individual level, women must take proactive steps to equip themselves with knowledge and skills, remain open to change, and continually improve their technological literacy and foreign language proficiency to meet the demands of high-quality jobs and adapt to labor mobility in the digital era. Women should leverage their strengths with a progressive mindset, humility, a willingness to learn, persistence, creativity, and diplomatic communication. Opportunities favor those who are bold enough to propose ideas, initiate projects, experiment, and accept calculated risks.

The modern capable woman is no longer the one who shoulders all household

responsibilities alone, but the one who engages her spouse and children in sharing domestic tasks and uses modern technology to improve home management. By doing so, women can free up time for rest, cultural enrichment, and lifelong learning, thereby enhancing their capacity for contribution. Strengthening women's internal resilience is equally important, as it is a valuable driver of sustainable development and a key factor in overcoming professional challenges.

Public communication efforts must be intensified to shift perceptions among leaders and the wider public both men and women about the role of women in political life. Gender equality should be seen not only as a means to an end, but also as a fundamental human right and societal value. It must be understood that the more actively women participate in politics, the faster national development goals can be achieved.

Most importantly, strategies must ensure that women can balance their "dual role" in both family and society. In Vietnam's cultural context, regardless of position or educational level, family remains a central priority for women. The significant time women dedicate to their families inevitably affects their creative and intellectual contributions in public life. To reduce this burden, the State should encourage the development of a professional and reliable domestic service

sector including household help, childcare, preschools, and accessible healthcare facilities. In parallel, the Law on Gender Equality must be enforced effectively, and public opinion should be mobilized to celebrate men and women alike who excel both in public service and at home. Such initiatives would help dismantle the outdated stereotype that domestic work belongs exclusively to women, while research, governance, and leadership are male domains.

While the administrative shift to a two-tier model is a strategic move, it inevitably brings major changes in organizational structures and human resources. In this context, women despite their proven capabilities continue to face unique structural barriers. Identifying these challenges and adopting tailored solutions is essential to ensure that women not only “participate” but also “exercise real authority” in the new political-administrative framework. This requires strong commitments from the political system, policy advisory bodies, and critically the proactive engagement of women themselves in overcoming obstacles and contributing meaningfully to national development in this new era.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights both the progress and persistent gaps in women’s political participation in Hai Phong. By

combining empirical evidence with theoretical insights, it contributes to a clearer understanding of structural barriers and proposes practical solutions to strengthen women’s roles in socio-political organizations. The findings underscore that achieving gender equality in politics requires not only policy reform but also shifts in social norms and greater individual empowerment. To advance, Vietnam must ensure stronger political commitment, institutional support, and active involvement of women themselves. These lessons hold value not only for the Vietnamese context but also as guidance for other countries striving toward inclusive and sustainable development.

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