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# Vietnamese Political Elites and their Point of View on Equal Gender Political Roles

*Élites políticas vietnamitas y su punto de vista sobre los roles políticos de igualdad de género*

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### ABSTRACT

According to the article "Global Gender Gap Report 2020" of the World Economic Forum, on gender equality ranking roles by country, women's political participation in Vietnam has dropped ten places, from 77th in 2018 to 87th in 2019. Research results show that the majority of respondents believe both genders should play equal political roles in the country, although certain differences were observed in the attitudes of different groups of respondents on gender, age, and education level. These sub-groups also demonstrate certain notable trends when discussing measures to promote women's political participation in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Equal gender political, gender political roles, political elites, Vietnam, women's political participation.

### RESUMEN

Según el artículo "Global Gender Gap Report 2020" del Foro Económico Mundial, sobre los roles de clasificación de la igualdad de género por país, la participación política de las mujeres en Vietnam ha caído diez lugares, del 77 en 2018 al 87 en 2019. Los resultados de la investigación muestran que la mayoría de los encuestados cree que ambos géneros deberían desempeñar papeles políticos iguales en el país, aunque se observaron ciertas diferencias en las actitudes de los diferentes grupos de encuestados sobre género, edad y nivel educativo. Estos subgrupos también demuestran ciertas tendencias notables cuando se discuten las medidas para promover la participación política de la mujer en Vietnam.

**Palabras clave:** Élités políticas, mujeres políticas, política de género, política de igualdad de género, Vietnam.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last decades, Vietnam has undergone dramatic changes in gender roles. The country has also made considerable progress towards improving women's status. Vietnam's achievements in gender equality in politics, as often mentioned, include a female country Vice President since 1987, a fairly high percentage of women members of parliament, and a large number of government policies advocating gender equality, etc. However, such attainments have not yet represented the equality of women and men in political leadership, or an equal voice in the country's political life and decision-making processes. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 released by the World Economic Forum in 2019 stated that although Vietnam has bridged 70% of its gender gap, the country ranks 87th among 153 listed countries, down 10 positions from the previous year, with one-quarter of the parliament and only one woman in the cabinet of 25 ministers (World Economic Forum: 2019). Many Vietnamese people still believe that men should lead in politics, with a rather heavy stereotype that women have less political leadership capacity than men. Therefore, the implementation of measures to promote gender equality in this area still faces many difficulties.

## **METHODS**

Based on the findings of a study on gender power and political leadership in Vietnam conducted in 2018-2019 by the authors, this article attempts to answer two questions: (1) Do political elites believe that women and men should equally shape and lead political life in Vietnam?, and (2) What are their views on the existing measures to enhance women's political participation? Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect and analyse relevant data. The survey sample includes 648 respondents (266 females and 382 males) who are leaders and potential leaders of the political system. Ten female and eleven male government officials were interviewed to obtain in-depth insights into cases of persons directly involved in the process of selecting political cadres. The interviewees are positioned officials working at the central, provincial, district, and local levels of administration.

## **RESULTS**

### **Attitude toward equal gender political roles**

To understand the attitude of political elites towards gender equality in politics is very important in clarifying causes of gender imbalance in political leadership. Inglehart and Norris (2003) suggested that women working in sectors that reflect traditional sex roles of women as caregivers "may encounter fewer barriers than those challenging conventional sexual stereotypes in military, political, and religious institutions". Some others shared similar views in recent publications (Julie Dolan et al. 2020; Pamela Marie Paxton et al. 2020; H Papanek 2019). While such a suggestion could be true in general, our survey results demonstrate that Vietnamese women may have fewer ideologically barriers to enter political leadership. When answering the question "Should women and men equally shape and lead political life in Vietnam?", the majority of respondents (more than three quarters) believe that women and men should play equal roles in shaping and leading politics in Vietnam. Other respondents, meanwhile, argue against such equal roles.

There are several reasons why equal roles of women and men in Vietnam's political life should be promoted. Among respondents arguing for equal political roles of men and women, only 57.4% think that this equality should come as a result of women's essential democratic rights, while just 38.4% believe that gender equality in politics might help improve the leadership style of Vietnam. Equality in politics to enhance gender equality in other fields of society seems to be the most important reason, as agreed by 72.3% of relevant respondents. This suggests a widespread conception among the political elites of their role as exemplary and

influential figures, which would create more pressure on female leaders. More than 21% of responses notably agree on all three reasons for gender equality in Vietnam's political life.

On the contrary, respondents also put forward key arguments against equality in men's and women's political roles. Among nearly one quarter of the respondents who oppose equal political roles for men and women, 61.5% argue that equality in political roles alone is by no means effective in bringing about gender equality in general. Almost 30% of relevant respondents argue that women have less ability, compared to men, in politically thinking and acting. In addition, 23% strongly believe in potential negative outcomes that women's leadership style may cause to political activities.

The analysis reveals that women are slightly more likely than men to support the idea that women and men equally shape and lead political life in Vietnam (78.5% vs. 73.7%, respectively). Older respondents are notably less inclined to agree on such an idea, showing a generational difference among the respondents (Figure 1). The effect of the respondent's education level is, however, more complicated. Those who have a Master degree seem to support such equality the least, with only 62.1% of them expressing their support, while those who have completed a graduate level or higher supported this idea with a much higher consensus (76.7% and 100%, in that order).

### **(Figure 1: 'Should women and men equally shape and lead political life in Vietnam?', by age group)**

Also, the current official status (being leader or not) may significantly affect the respondent's view of whether men and women should have equal political roles. Those currently holding leadership posts are more inclined than those in non-leadership posts to think that men and women should equally shape and lead political life. The difference in their confirmation of such idea appears to be sizeable, 76.9% vs. 70.6% within each status group.

In addition, the analysis of the results illustrates a strong relationship between the respondent's awareness of the gender situation and their attitude. Those who have a better understanding of the gender situation are more inclined to support equality of roles in political leadership. The Pearson correlation value of these two variables is  $-0.186$ , which is significant at  $p < 0.01$  of a two-tailed test. To some extent, this conclusion is consistent with those of Sanbonmatsu (2003), Barbara Burrell (2018), Krook M.L. (2020), who claimed that those who underestimate the proportion of women in office are more likely to support increasing women's representation than those who know the correct or overestimate the proportion.

### **Attitude toward measures to enhance women's political participation**

According to the studies of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women carried out in 1987, 1990, and 1994, 30% representation of women is a critical mass for making a difference in political institutions (Liswood: 1995). Studies of female parliamentarians in other democracies supported this argument (Kelly & Burgess: 1989, pp.47- 82, Grey: 2002, pp.19-29, Marwa Shalaby and Laila Elimam: 2020, Katelyn E Stauffer et al. 2020). Taking into account the notion of a critical mass, this gender quota has been adopted by more than a hundred countries for increasing female political participation (Krook: 2006, pp.303-327, Bagues, Manueland Pamela Campa: 2020, Bertrand, Marianne: 2018).

The Vietnamese Government has been applying this formula for a long time, and it is officially considered the most effective way to increase Vietnamese women's political representation. However, in nearly three quarters of a century since 1945, the country has never reached the critical mass of 30% women in parliamentary, ministerial, or other executive positions. This situation leads to the question of how Vietnamese political leaders think about this institutional intervention).

The survey results show that Vietnamese political elites seem not so impressed about this measure to improve women's political influence. The majority of respondents (more than 61%) argued against the idea that a compulsory ratio of women to men should be made mandatory in Vietnam's leadership posts. Meanwhile, only about one-third of respondents agreed that a target for the female proportion of leadership

posts should be in place (Figure 2). These results are interesting, considering the fact that more than 75% of responses supported equal political roles of men and women, as previously mentioned. As a possible explanation, gender equality in political roles is a good end in itself, but such a good end should not be brought about merely by setting a target for women's proportion in the system.

### **(Figure 2: Attitude toward a compulsory ratio of women to men in leadership posts)**

Women are more likely to favour this method than men, with the difference in likelihood of such an attitude at more than 10% (39.2% vs. 28.8%, in that order). The younger generations are also more inclined towards this attitude. Except for the outliers (2 cases aged 24 and younger at time of survey), the highest percentage of agreement was among the age group 25 to 29 (40%), and the lowest was among the age group 50 to 54 (20%).

In the Vietnamese context, it seems not so irrational that people do not strongly support the application of gender quota. Among 61.1% of all the respondents who think it is not necessary to have gender quotas, 78 people provided detailed explanations; these can be divided into four main concerns: (1) the qualification of female and male leaders; (2) the imbalance between supply and demand sides of female/male resources; (3) the possibility of increasing gender inequality; and (4) the capacity of the system to apply such gender quotas.

Regarding the first topic, what most respondents are concerned about is the relative qualifications of female and male leaders, representing 69.2% of those objections (54 out of 78 explanations). Among these, many people argue:

"It [leadership] should be based mostly on people's working ability".

(Male, aged 43, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of provincial department, North);

"The more important criterion is whether that person's capacity fits the demand of that leadership position".

(Female, aged 42, married, 2 children, Head of provincial department, Central);

"Discrimination derives from people's minds... I think whoever can do the work well should be the leader".

(Female, aged 44, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, North)

However, by so affirming, respondents are likely to fall into a gender-neutral perspective. In other words, while focusing too much on "qualification" (which are mostly male-biased) they tend to forget the fact that there are very few women in the political leadership of Vietnam, and that gender-sensitive measures to improve women's political position may change perceptions about the qualifications needed. The following are some additional examples:

"We need to choose talented persons. In other words, the candidates should have good skills in implementation of plans, and should be righteous persons. We will not choose low-quality persons just because of the assigned gender proportion".

(Female, aged 31, married, 1 child, Deputy-Head of commune department, South)

"It is important that women must be qualified for the leadership in the political system".

(Female, aged 39, married, 2 children, Head of commune department, North)

In addition to such gender-neutral perspectives, some people worry about the possible negative effects of women's political leadership. The reason they provide is that they believe women have less capacity and are less enthusiastic than men in performing leadership and management roles, as shown in the following illustrations:

"If we only care about gender structure and let women hold important positions while they have limited competence for those tasks, then the leadership strength of the whole country would be affected".

(Female, aged 47, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, North)

"We should follow the natural principle. For this reason, it is not necessary to fix a proportion for females in order to ensure the quality of the leadership".

(Female, aged 42, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, Central)

“The compulsory gender proportion giving women leadership positions would affect the quality of the entire mechanism”.

(Male, aged 47, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, South)

“The Oriental women in general and Vietnamese women in particular, carry a heavy responsibility for their families and children. They are self-deprecating and not active enough in political activities. Thus such an imperative order is not suitable”.

(Male, aged 51, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of provincial department, North)

In their concerns about ‘qualifications’, the survey respondents also mention the avoidance of formalistic solutions in efforts to attain gender equality. In fact, this is a warning sign in the political life of the country, from central to local level, and needs to be seriously concerned. Following are some examples:

“The leaders are selected for their competence and righteousness rather than for the reason of just putting them into seats in the meeting”.

(Female, aged 31, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of commune department, South)

“Leadership positions are for talented and objective people, serving the purpose of the country’s political stabilization and economic development. Hence equality means the selection of people without concern for their sex. It’s absolutely not for window dressing”.

(Female, aged 42, married, 2 children, Head of provincial department, Central)

Secondly, concern over the imposition of quotas relates to the imbalance between supply and demand sides of leadership resources (of both sexes). If some people worry about the lack of qualified staff in certain places, others would think the application of gender quotas could lead to the misuse of good leaders, as shown below:

“It depends on the leadership resources of different places, at different times. The principle of choosing “the right person for the right job” must be followed”.

(Male, aged 41, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, North)

“That way is too theoretical. To appoint a good female leader is not as easy as to appoint a male. This gap is too big”.

(Female, aged 41, single, Deputy-Head of provincial department, Central)

“It must be based on specific circumstances of each institution and each locality”.

(Female, aged 42, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, South)

“If we just care about gender proportion, then put a certain person into a certain position, for instance. We may make a mistake because that person could work better in another job...”

(Female, aged 49, married, 2 children, Head of commune department, North)

In addition, some respondents are concerned about the risk of leaving out the most talented persons when applying gender quotas, as expressed in these two opinions:

“Currently, the educational fundamentals are pretty good, so if a gender proportion is fixed we may skip over the real qualified persons”.

(Male, aged 40, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, South)

“If assignment is like that, we could fail to nominate the proficient talents”.

(Female, aged 30, married, 1 child, Deputy-Head of district department, Central)

Thirdly, several respondents expressed their anxiety about the possibility of increasing gender inequality, or even regard gender quotas as a violation of democratic and human rights, to some degree (Gewin: 2020, pp.295-296).

“The first priority is women’s capabilities. Applying gender quotas can create a feeling that the criteria for choosing a female leader are lower than those for choosing a male”.

(Male, aged 53, married, 2 children, Head of provincial department, North)

“Having an assigned gender proportion also means that priority is given to women and that is unequal. The criteria for certain posts should be education, working capability, and age”.

(Female, aged 45, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, North)

"...At the same time, it [gender quota] is discrimination".

(Male, aged 40, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, South)

"The allocated gender proportion leads to the violation of democratic and people's right to vote".

(Female, aged 43, married, 2 children, Head of commune department, South)

"In order to ensure political democratic, we should select the competent persons, and avoid constricting the talents".

(Female, aged 27, married, no child, Deputy-Head of district department, South)

And finally, a small number of people indicate that they do not believe in the capacity of the system to apply gender quotas. Their concerns may be expressed in a general way, for instance "the assignment is sometimes very hard to be put into practice" (Female, aged 40, married, 2 children, Head of provincial department, South), or "...that is not to mention the other negative things when applying proportion in personnel management and human resource development" (Female, aged 49, married, 2 children, Head of commune department, North). Some respondents also point out the negative effects in detail, for example:

"Assigning proportion also means 'benison' - giving someone privilege; then that may lead to the exclusion of better qualified persons from the political system and institutions".

(Male, aged 40, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of commune department, North)

Other measures to improve women's presence in Vietnam's political life are indicated from the survey results. Among those, the least important measures are to lower the requirements for women in promoting decisions, and to put in place better surveillance of the implementation of legislated targets for gender proportions in leadership. These measures received support from only about 11% and 30% of respondents, respectively. This further consolidates the point previously made that gender equality should not be forced via a compulsory gender proportion target. Besides, assessing women's political activities in a broader context and ensuring better media coverage of information are also expected to help improve women's political presence; this was agreed on by more than respectively 54% and 41% of responses. In another aspect, improvement in advocacy should also be given equivalent importance. More than 56% of respondents think that political leaders should receive greater advocacy to improve gender equality, while nearly 47% argued for better advocacy to the mass population on gender equality. Advocacy to leaders notably receives higher attention than that to the general population.

Most importantly, enhancing political training for women is seen as a critical measure to facilitate a stronger women's presence in Vietnam's politics. More than 76% of respondents agreed on this measure, while only less than 24% were opposed to it. This may implicate that even though respondents tend to agree on a greater political role for women, they still seem to be in doubt about the leadership skills and knowledge of both current and potential female politicians.

Figure 3 presents the difference by gender of respondents in expressing their attitude toward those measures. The percentage of female respondents agreeing on "better training on leadership skills for women" is much higher than that of males (87.2% vs. 69.1%, in that order). Simultaneously, there are slightly more women than men who expect to "lower the bar" for women's political participation (13.5%, compared to 8.9% of their male counterparts). The phenomenon of a slightly higher percentage of females than males thinking that women should be favoured is somewhat similar to what some scholars found, that women more often than men state that men should not be privileged (Siemienska: 1990, Baskaran, T and Z Hessami: 2019, Born, A, E Ranehill, and A Sandberg: 2018). This result, on one hand, reflects women's strong desire for better leadership skills. On the other hand, it shows their expectation of having a temporary solution for the shortage of female leaders

The difference between the opinions of the two genders in the survey results also implies that female political elites are more likely than males to support detailed solutions rather than general ones for the purpose of increasing the presence of women in political leadership. All solutions favoured by female respondents are more specific than those favoured by males. To illustrate, the more specific indicators are "political leaders"

as the targeted group of advocacy, “surveillance on the implementation of legislative instruments” and “training leadership skills for women” as specific tools of women empowerment, and “information reflects results of women’s political activities” as a focus of the advocacy. Meanwhile, two solutions agreed upon by more male than female respondents are somewhat more general than the others, and they are limited to “population” and “community” as the target of advocacy.

**(Figure 3: Attitudes toward measures helping to increase women’s political participation in Vietnam, by gender)**

From the qualitative data, evidence reflecting the above different trends among male and female interviewees discussed above is also found. Besides those who offer general solutions, some men try to shift the responsibility to the “mechanism” and do not believe in women’s leadership ability, or even lay the blame for the failure to attain equality on women. For example a Head of a Personnel Department at provincial level said:

“It is the mechanism... It is due to the limited amount of staff we can manage. We have 20 people, for instance, and when we need a new deputy head, obviously we have to take from the staff inside the department first. So if there is no qualified woman in the department we must select a man. To be honest... finding a qualified woman for a leadership position is very difficult in most governmental institutions”.

(Male, aged 43, married, no child, Head of provincial department, Central)

“That is not to say about the jealousy of women toward themselves. We care a lot about their advancement, but they do not support each other”.

(Male, aged 36, married, 2 children, Head of provincial department, South)

While these male respondents stuck to the point that they do not have to bear the responsibility for gender imbalance in political leadership, some women said quite the reverse:

“The disrespect [towards women] shown by the population generally is a big barrier, but I’m thinking more about men as obstructionists”.

(Female, aged 43, married, 2 children, Deputy-Head of district department, North).

Madame Nguyễn Thị Hoài Thu, a member of the Central Party and Chairwoman of the Committee of Social Affairs also expresses her viewpoint as follows:

Following the Party’s care for women, with every single effort spent on women, the State will benefit twice (I just mean the modest benefit). I have two requests and one suggestion to the Party: First, please do not privilege women by lowering the criteria for having women in higher position and secondly, please do not give women a pity look, but a real appreciation for their strength against their weakness (women have also a lot of weak points and envy is their weakest point). My suggestion is that the Party and State should not ask women for abilities they don’t have while do not use them for abilities they possess. By the way, may I suggest that the Party should actively give assignment to women, women will try to fulfil them and will do well. Please don’t evaluate women before giving them jobs to do. (Nguyen Thi Hoai Thu: 2005)

## **DISCUSSION**

The research results show that the differences in attitudes toward women’s role in politics are not statistically significant between male and female respondents, although women have more egalitarian views than men. Many men and women hold conservative views that favour men more than women. In some cases, female respondents express even more conservative views on these issues than their male counterparts. Research results also indicate that the assessments of working abilities of each gender expose little difference

in the attitudes of males and females. Like many Vietnamese political elites, both female and male respondents still assume that women lack the necessary skills and capability to be political leaders. This helps to explain why female respondents often show stronger desire than male respondents to have better leadership skills and to lower the requirements for women in political promotion. For them, such measures are temporary but necessary to increase women's participation in political leadership.

With regard to a specific measure named "gender quota" to increase women's political participation, women are more likely to support than men. Younger respondents are also more inclined to imposing a quota than the older generation. However, on the whole, the majority of respondents do not favour this institutional measure. Instead, they prefer measures that help to improve female candidates' working competence for leadership positions.

## **CONCLUSION**

In sum, although the majority of respondents believe women and men should play equal roles in political life in Vietnam, many of them still hold a relatively conservative view of the roles of political actors and the capacity of women in political leadership. The conservative perception towards men's and women's leadership abilities may lead to the common attitude of being hesitant about or less supportive of female leadership. Female respondents, although more seriously concerned about the gender imbalance in the country's political life, still have a conservative attitude towards women in leadership roles. This attitude is one of the main barriers to achieving gender equality in Vietnam.

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