

POLICY BRIEF

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF VIET NAM



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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This policy brief draws from the draft research report "Women in the National Assembly: the way forward" conducted by international and national experts with support from the Empowerment of Women Project.

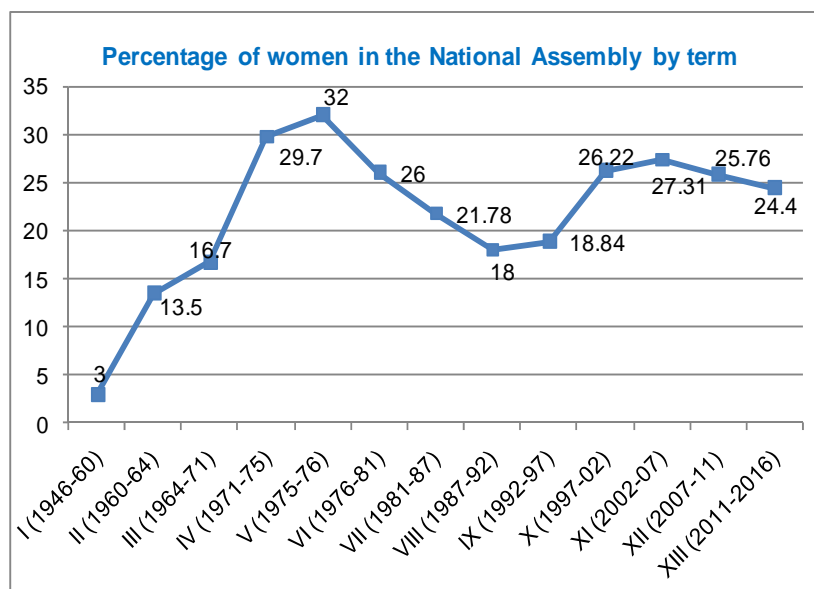
WOMEN IN VIET NAM

Viet Nam has always placed a strong emphasis on gender equality. This has resulted in important achievements such as low maternal mortality and high access to education. Indeed, Vietnamese women have one of the highest labour force participation rates in the world. On most gender indicators Viet Nam compares positively in international rankings, especially compared to other countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

DECLINE IN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The number of women represented in the National Assembly has been declining over the past ten years. In 1997, Viet Nam ranked among the top ten countries in the world with regard to the number of women in parliament. By 2012, Viet Nam has fallen to 44th in the world – at 24.4%. However, there remains a strong base for women's leadership in Viet Nam, including the fact that Viet Nam is a signatory to the main international treaties on gender equality, has a strong domestic legal framework, as well as a nation-wide mass organization dedicated to gender equality

(the Viet Nam Women's Union). At the same time, there has been a slight increase in the number of female representatives elected at the provincial and local levels of government.



Source: Office of the National Assembly, 2011. Reproduced from EOWP Women's Representation in Leadership in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has seen fluctuations in the number of female parliamentarians in the past, usually around periods of economic and social transformations. Globally, where women's leadership in politics is strong there is a corresponding increase in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). If the current decline in the number of women in parliament and leadership in Viet Nam continues, the country could be in danger of stagnating in its socio-economic development.

STRONG LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Viet Nam has strong legal and policy frameworks for gender equality and women's representation. The one exception to this is the gender differential in the mandatory age of retirement, which is 55 for women and 60 for men. Viet Nam is a signatory to major international treaties regarding women's political representation, including the Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Viet Nam constitution ensures equal rights for men and women in all fields. The Gender Equality Law requires “appropriate” representation of women, and the National Strategy on Gender Equality for the period 2011-2020 has set a target for the next election in 2016 of a minimum of 35% women MPs. Communist Party Politburo Resolution 11 has set a target of a minimum of 35% to 40% women in the National Assembly and People’s Councils by 2020. In addition, a number of Decrees and Decisions provide further clarity on responsibilities and penalties. The challenge is therefore not in establishing laws and policies but in ensuring that these are implemented.



Members of the Women's Parliamentary Group

EMPHASIS ON “STRUCTURE”

According to Viet Nam’s political system, there is a strong reliance on “structure” (co cau) in the electoral process. Decisions are made at the highest levels regarding which societal groups need to be represented in the National Assembly, and this “structure” is sent to provincial authorities, which are asked to find electoral candidates who match the criteria. The criteria include areas where there are already fewer women, such as senior officials from local government, state enterprises, trade unions, the police and military and other social sectors. One reason for the lack of women in senior positions is the mandatory age of retirement, which takes women out of the pool for promotions earlier than men. Therefore, even though there is a target of 30-35% women as electoral candidates, most local authorities have difficulty finding enough women who match the criteria. As a result, the few “open” spots are filled with individuals who fall into several “quota” groups at the same time – for instance a young ethnic minority woman.

At the beginning of the electoral process, the Viet Nam Women’s Union proposes between 45-50% women as candidates. However, in 2011, once the “structure” was applied, the number of female candidates was only 31%. This is partly because over one third of the electoral candidates are nominated by the central level, and consist of incumbent MPs and senior officials, where women are significantly under-represented. There are also very few self-nominated candidates who are successful in elections.

PLACEMENT OF WOMEN ON THE BALLOT

The relative placement of women on the ballot is extremely important. If women are positioned alongside men who are equally or more qualified, usually the man will be elected. This is also a result of patriarchal attitudes in society and within families. As a result, only 24.4% of the successful candidates in the last election were women.

Example of a fictitious ballot where women are uncertain to be elected:

5 candidates for 3 seats

- Senior political official (male)
- kindergarten teacher (female)
- Head of the local Farmers Union (male)
- Chief of police (male)
- Young ethnic minority student (female)

Example of a fictitious ballot where women are more likely to be elected:

4 candidates for 3 seats

- Director of a hospital (female)
- Head of a local Trade Union (female)
- Young businessman (male)
- Vice-head of a government department (male)

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE AND WHAT CAN THEY DO?

There are several agencies and organizations with responsibility for implementation of national policies regarding women's representation. The **Communist Party** is foremost in influence. The Party identifies potential candidates from senior government and Party positions to run as centrally seconded candidates. It is therefore important to increase the number of women in senior government and Party positions. Another influential body is the **Standing Committee of the National Assembly (SCNA)**, which has responsibility for selecting committee

chairs and vice-chairs and choosing which incumbent MPs will be put forward for re-election as centrally seconded candidates. The SCNA should use its influence to propose guidelines and changes to the "structure" which would result in the election of more women.



*Voting during first session of the National Assembly
— few women represented.*

The **Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU)** is a powerful mass organization representing all strata of women throughout the country. The VWU plays a significant role in training and mentoring candidates, public awareness, proposing policy changes and in monitoring implementation of gender laws and strategies. The VWU should use its vast network and build on its previous successes to prepare candidates at the national and local levels and to influence the electoral process in order to make it more equal for women. It should also organize public awareness campaigns about the benefits of having more women in elected positions.

Within the parliament, the **Social Affairs Committee** and the **Women's Parliamentary Group** have the potential to play a greater role in reviewing legislation for its impact on women's representation and mainstreaming gender through legislative procedures. The Women's Parliamentary Group, together with retired female MPs, should act as a coordinating body for women's advocacy and leadership.

The **Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA)** has formal responsibility for gender equality. It collects and disseminates data and monitors other Government ministries for compliance with the national gender strategies. The **National Committee for the Advancement of Women** should be given more autonomy and staff resources to fulfil its mandate of coordinating between ministries to achieve established targets for women. The **Ministry of Home Affairs** is responsible for the public service and should ensure that there are fewer barriers to women's career advancement in order to increase the pool of qualified female candidates (including addressing age discrimination throughout a woman's career).

The **Viet Nam Fatherland Front** is an umbrella group of mass organizations and special interest groups, including the Women's Union. It has the legal mandate over elections, especially at the local level. The Fatherland Front, following guidance from the Communist Party and the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, designs the criteria and "structure" of the election and communicates these guidelines to the provincial Fatherland Front organizations. The provincial

and local Fatherland Front is the main actor with responsibility for overseeing and implementing the elections, including the vetting of candidates, organizing the meetings where candidates present themselves and coordinating the activities of the election councils. As such, the Fatherland Front is the single most important actor in guaranteeing the implementation of Resolution 11 and ensuring that women are equally represented. The **Election Commission** and local Election Councils are responsible for actually organizing and running the election. These councils should have mandatory training on gender awareness and the Women's Union should have an ex officio spot on each Council.

WAY FORWARD

There are four broad areas where improvement could lead to significant increases in women's representation in Viet Nam. **First**, raising public awareness of the benefits of electing women to counteract social stereotypes held by both men and women. **Second**, enhancing accountability and oversight mechanisms to ensure implementation of the national gender policies. **Third**, promoting more women to senior positions from which electoral candidates are drawn and **fourth**, ending official age discrimination for women and providing both men and women more choice in deciding their age of retirement within a specified range.

Together, implementation of these recommendations would have an immediate effect on reversing the current downward trend and ensuring that Viet Nam emerges once again as a global leader on women's leadership and representation.



Member of parliament speaking at plenary session at the National Assembly.