

WOMEN DELEGATES IN THE VIET NAM NATIONAL ASSEMBLY: FROM PARTICIPATION TO REPRESENTATION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Viet Nam has made efforts to increase representation for women, particularly in the National Assembly (VNA). Prior to the 2007 and 2011 elections, the Fatherland Front and the Central Election Council sought 30 percent female representation.¹ While only 28 percent of the assembly elected in 2007 and 24 percent in 2011 were women, female representation nonetheless remains a concern for the party and government. The National Strategy on Gender Equality establishes gender equality targets in the fields of employment, education, health and public participation. For the VNA, the strategy targeted a minimum of 30 percent female representation from 2011-2015 and a minimum of 35 percent from 2016-2020. The targets are in line with the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action's assessment that 30 percent is the "so-called 'critical mass,' believed to be necessary for women to make a visible impact on the style and content of political decision-making."²

Despite the targets to increase the number of women in the legislature, little is known about how the women whom have won seats in the VNA perform their roles. Few studies have examined the positions women are selected to in the VNA or the way they perform their roles once selected. This is an important oversight because the research on the impact of female representation does not universally support the notion that greater numbers of women necessarily lead to legislation more aligned with the policy preferences of women (Waring 2010).

While gender quotas for executive positions such as village leaders have been found to have an impact on educational attainment for girls (Beaman, et al. 2012), the results are mixed for the impact of women in the legislative sphere. Some have found that greater proportions of women can have an impact on legislative output on issues of particular importance to women such as day care policy (Bratton and Ray 2002). However, most scholars of Western legislatures have found that party affiliation has a greater impact than gender on whether or not representatives vote for legislation boosting the rights of women (Tamerius 1995, Waring 2010). Despite the lack of strong evidence for the impact of gender on voting, other research finds that women do have an impact on setting the agenda (Tamerius 1995) and structuring debate (Piscopo 2011).

Given the conflicting nature of these studies and the fact that Viet Nam's political institutions are different from the contexts where previous studies have taken place, research into female representation in Viet Nam is necessary. Many of the studies are on Western (Tamerius 1995, Bratton and Ray 2002), Latin American (Piscopo 2011), or African legislatures (O'Brien 2012).³ However, these countries have dramatically different electoral systems, political institutions, and cultures, which may render the findings from those contexts inapplicable to Viet Nam. For these reasons, this project will address the following questions in the context of Viet Nam.

¹ See "Tăng đại biểu chuyên trách, giảm đại biểu là thành viên chính phủ." [The National Assembly will increase the Full-time delegates and Decrease the Government Delegates." February 24, 2007. www.nguoidaibieunhandan.com.vn.; "Hội nghị Hiệp thương thứ nhất bầu cử đại biểu Quốc hội." February 23, 2011. Tin Moi Online.

² See UN Women. "Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership." Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. October 24, 2005. <<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/eq-men/>>

³ This is just a small sampling of a much larger literature on this subject. However, to date no studies have examined female representation in Viet Nam or China, two countries with largely similar political systems.

- 1. Are women represented equally in the VNA?
- 2. How well are women represented in the different leadership positions in the VNA?
- 3. How do women perform their roles in the VNA? Do they represent issues pertinent to women? Are they more likely to criticize the regime than men?

Election of Female Candidates

In terms of elections and selection into leadership positions, the party failed to achieve its target for the 2011 election of a minimum of 30 percent elected. One obvious solution to the problem would be to nominate more women. In both the elections for the 12th and 13th VNA, roughly 30 percent of the nominated candidates were women. Increasing this number would lead to a greater likelihood of more women being elected. However, the results of the election show another problem – female candidates fared worse than male candidates in the elections. More than 60 percent of male candidates winning election compared to about 40 percent for female candidates.⁴

While this could suggest that the electorate is punishing women at the polls, further analysis reveals that it is not gender that hurts female candidates, but instead *the types of women nominated for election*. Voters are almost 20 percent likely to vote for military officials compared to the baseline candidate from the party or state. Military candidates are almost always male. However, voters are almost 17 percent less likely to vote for candidates nominated from private businesses and state-owned enterprises than from the baseline category. These candidates are disproportionately female. Out of the total 1,704 candidates for election to the 12th and 13th VNAs, about 24 percent of candidates were from the state-run or private business sectors, but 36 percent of the total number female candidates were from the business sector. Furthermore, centrally-nominated candidates, of which a higher proportion are male, fare better.

Therefore, in order to ensure that the VNA hits the NSGE target of a minimum of 35 percent of the VNA comprised of female candidates, the party needs to further increase the number of female candidates and increase the number of female candidates with backgrounds voters prefer. The best way to do this is increasing the number of female candidates nominated by central level institutions.

Leadership positions are also important. In the VNA the chairs and deputy chairs of the committees, along with the Standing Committee, hold a disproportionate level of power. The analysis shows that women predominately occupy lesser roles in the VNA while men are more likely to be leaders. However, as with the elections results, the decreased proportion does not appear to be a function of discrimination. *Rather, the fact that fewer women are leaders is a function of disproportionately fewer women being nominated by central institutions such as the VNA Standing Committee and the Office of the VNA prior to election (as shown in Table 1). Therefore, to increase the number of female leaders, the VNA either needs to change the way it selects leaders or nominate more female candidates centrally.*

Table 1: Central Nominees By Gender

	Provincially Nominated		Centrally Nominated	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
Male	830	61.21%	305	87.64%
Female	526	38.79%	43	12.36%
Total	1356		348	
<i>Note: This includes all delegates from the 12th and 13th VNA. Source: All data including the speeches and the biographical information comes from information available on Office of the VNA website (http://na.gov.vn/)</i>				

⁴ It is important to note that Viet Nam's nomination system starts with a higher number of candidates than eventually make it to the ballot. Previous research shows that the initial list has a much higher percentage of women, but a disproportionate number of women fail to make it through the nomination process (Vandenbeld and Ly 2012).

The analysis shows that women delegates show that they hold less influential positions in the VNA than men. As shown in Table 2, women are more often part-time non-committee members than full time members of influential committees. Looking at membership in committees, women are not equally represented on the powerful Economic, Law, and Justice committees.⁵ Furthermore, even on those committees where they are represented, such as the Social Affairs Committee; the Culture, Education, and Youth Committee; and the Council for Ethnic Minorities, they are less likely to occupy leadership roles.⁶ This adds more evidence that in addition to focusing on increasing the raw total number of women in the VNA, more needs to be done to ensure women are taking leadership roles. *Again, given the nomination procedures in the VNA, this means that the VNA Standing Committee and the Office of the VNA needs to nominate more women at the central level.*

Table 2: VNA Delegates by Leadership Type

	Men		Female		Total
Part-Time Non-Committee Member	163	68.49%	75	31.51%	238
Part-Time Committee Member	327	70.47%	137	29.53%	464
Fulltime Local Delegate	104	80.62%	25	19.38%	129
Fulltime Committee Member	40	83.33%	8	16.67%	48
Deputy Committee Chair	69	89.61%	8	10.39%	77
Standing Committee	27	79.41%	7	20.59%	34
Total Delegates	730	73.74%	260	26.26%	990

Note: This includes all delegates from the 12th and 13th VNA. Three delegates are missing due to lack of data.

Source: All data including the speeches and the biographical information comes from information available on Office of the VNA website (<http://na.gov.vn/>)

Female Delegate Performance

While we do not have access to data on roll call votes or participation in committee hearings, an analysis of the substance of the speeches reveals that women do appear to raise different issues to men. Using speeches to make inferences about the patterns of representation has been used to explore gendered contributions in countries such as Argentina (Franceschet and Piscopo 2008) Australia (Broughton and Palmieri 1999), and New Zealand (Grey 2002) among others. This analysis suggests that increasing the number of women in the assembly should increase the level of representation of women's issues, at least within the public forum of the VNA query sessions, hearings, and debates on laws. Women were more likely to discuss issues of direct concern to women during their speeches. More than 30 percent of speeches made by women made a reference to women, a woman's issue, or children's issues compared to about 20 percent for men.

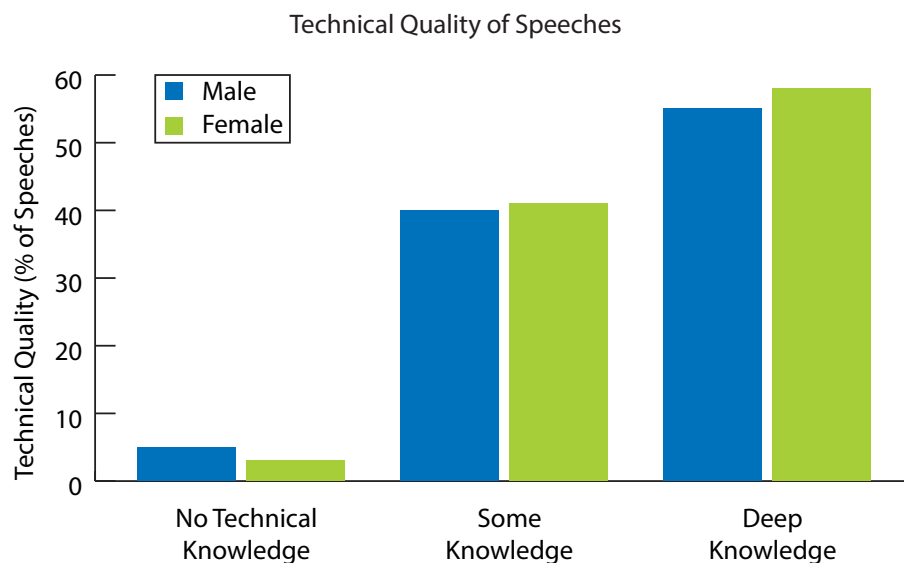
However, as the mere mention of women's issues may not indicate that the speech was truly about such topics, we conducted another analysis where coders coded a portion of the speeches. These speeches were used to inform a computer algorithm to assess the remaining speeches to see whether or not women were more likely to raise issues. Based on this method, we found that an estimated 11 percent of speeches made by women contained at least some reference to issues of concern to women as compared to only 8 percent for men. The evidence, combined with the analysis of the terms and the case studies, strongly suggests that women are more attentive to issues that impact women. In addition to showing the increased attention to issues of concern to women, the case studies also show that women are more likely to support pro-women policies and oversee the implementation of these policies during government hearings.

A final question regarding behavior focuses on the assertiveness and technical quality of women in the assembly. While many recent studies have downplayed the difference between men and women in legislatures in terms of tone, some past research has suggested that women are less critical. This project assesses the behavior of women in the assembly **on all issues** to measure whether or not women are more or less critical of ministers during query sessions or of laws during debates on legislation. The analysis does not reveal any

⁵ We consider the standing committee separately from the other committees because the majority of the standing committee is made up of the chairs of the substantive committees.

⁶ An interesting debate is whether or not setting up a special committee on gender, as has been done in some Latin American and Eastern European contexts is a good idea. Although it may serve to raise women's issues to the fore, some research suggests that the existence of women's committees allows legislative leaders the opportunity to quarantine all women on such committees, thus inadvertently decreasing their representation on other more powerful committees (Heath, Schwindt-Bayer and Taylor-Robinson 2005).

clear differences between men and women in terms of criticality or technical quality when speaking about any issue. In fact, the only slight difference is that women actually appear more willing to participate in debates than men. Although women only made up 26 percent of the total number of delegates for the 12th and 13th VNAs, they made 28 percent of the total number of speeches.



Note: The estimated values are based on coders reading 500 speeches and assessing by hand the technical quality of the speeches. The algorithm discussed in Appendix 4 was then used to code the remaining speeches.
Source: All data including the speeches and the biographical information comes from information available on Office of the VNA website (<http://na.gov.vn/>)

Taken together, the analysis of how women perform in the VNA shows that women are more likely to raise issues of concern to women and support pro-women policies. At the same time, this increased focus does not appear to come at any cost in terms of quality of their contributions and the willingness to challenge the government on other issues. If anything, the evidence seems to show that they are more willing to participate than men in any discussion. *Therefore, increasing the number of female delegates should lead to greater emphasis on women's issues at no cost to the level of debate on other issues.*

Findings and Recommendations

- Women are more likely to raise issues of concern to women than men.
- Women contribute to debates on all issues, not just women's issues, with the same level of quality.
- In order to increase attention to women's issues, the number of women in the VNA should be increased. This will come at no cost to the quality of the VNA.
- To increase the influence of women in the VNA, more women need to be selected to leadership positions in **all** committees, not just Social Affairs and the Council on Ethnic Minority Affairs.
- The best way to increase the number of women elected and selected to leadership positions is to increase the number of female candidates **and** increase the percentage of female candidates nominated by central level institutions.