

The Changes of Women's Position: The Vietnam Case

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ABSTRACT

To explore and clarify the changes of Vietnamese women's position, this paper focuses on three aspects: education, employment, and political participation. We find positive changes of Vietnamese women's position in all above aspects. In the past banned women from learning whereas at present provides basic education for everybody and asserts that lifelong education is the right and responsibility of each citizen. Since then more and more women got education. Although Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world and is affected by Confucianism, women's literacy rates and educational levels are relatively high. The gender difference in literacy has been steadily reduced. Today, women have strong representation in the economy. They are significant contributors in agriculture, trade, education and social service. In fact, the important change is that most of women now earn living independently of their husbands on a nation-wide scale. In Vietnam, women and men have equal rights to vote and stand for elections on all levels. These rights are guaranteed by the Constitution of 1946 and are implemented in practice. Women's right to participate in positions of leadership and decision-making are stipulated in resolutions and policies, and apply to all levels, sectors and geographic regions.

Keywords: women, equality, education, employment, political participation.

INTRODUCTION

On September 2nd, 1945 in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of Vietnam, and the formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). This is a great turning point in the Vietnamese history, because Vietnamese society changing from half-colonial and half-feudal country to a liberated country. "It formally concluded more than eighty years of French colonization and marked the end to nearly five years of Japanese occupation. The meaning of this moment-the demise of French Indochina and the emergence of the DRV-was also communicated in symbolic terms" (Pelley, 2002, p.1). Since then on the Vietnamese society has been undergoing the most fundamental socio-economic transformation in its history. Together with socio-economic changes, the situation of Vietnamese women has been improved, too. In 1946, the Women's Union (Hoi phu nu Viet Nam) was founded. As a link between the Communist Party and women in Vietnam, the Union has been, and remains concerned about the eradication of any "backward", "feudal" (i.e. Confucian), and "superstitious" thinking that may negatively influence the ideal of "equality of men and women" (Drummond & Rydström, 2004, p.3). By virtue of the influence of the Women's Union, the National Assembly passed the Law on marriage and the family, on 28th December 1959, which aimed to destroy all "remnants of feudalism" in sex-related social roles and family structure, and to build "happy, democratic and egalitarian families". Over the

years, in close cooperation with the Women's Union, Vietnamese gender research thus has been, and remains, politically committed to continuously improving the status and position of women in Vietnam. In this paper I would like to explore and clarify the changes of Vietnamese women position in three aspects: education, employment, and political participation.

METHODOLOGY

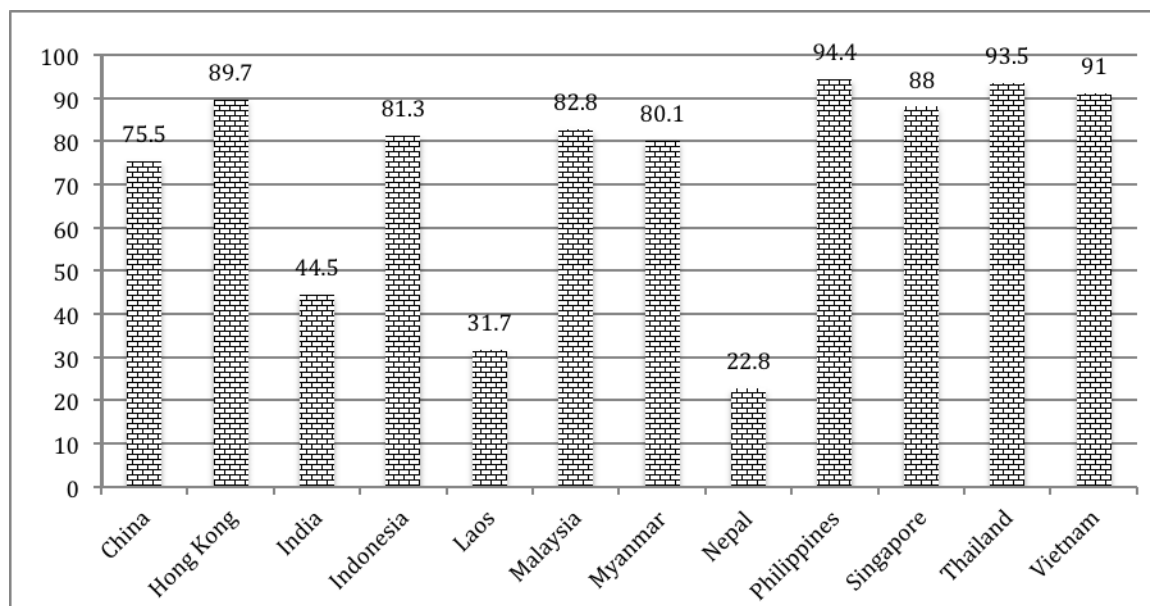
This article is not a field study, but an attempt at a synthesis of a number of sources, secondary as well as primary. In other words, it relies on the result of a lot of research; it is to a large extent a survey of existing literature. That means; I collect, interpret and evaluate the different studies' results, which were applied by different researchers and used here as my resources. Some documental sources related to article.

- The statistics from the statistical agencies, especially from General Statistic Office; General Office for population family planning. It provides an overview statistic about Vietnamese women. It is main sources to write this article.
- Books, journals in sociology; especially from the sociology of family, sociology of gender.
- Information on the contemporary families, gender, women from magazines and newspapers in Vietnam is also taken into account to give more concrete imagines on the women.
- Literary works, both written (novels, short stories and so on) and oral ones (tales, folk songs, proverbs, and sayings, etc.) are used as well. They are an indispensable part of the Vietnamese culture. The Vietnamese people tell stories, sing folks songs and take quotations from folk sayings in their everyday life. They use them both as a line of conduct, and as justifications of their real behavior. In this sense, folk literature not only shows the dreams of people as to what things in social life should be, but also reflects the real state of affairs. There are relatively long traditions of using folk literature to understand Vietnamese women.

RESULTS

The changes of Vietnamese women in education

There is now a smaller discrepancy between the education of men and women than in the nineteenth century, and this change is taking place rapidly in Asian countries as well (Goode, 1963, p.21). Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world and is affected by Confucianism; however, women's literacy rates and educational levels are relatively high compared to that in neighboring countries (World Bank, 1995; Tan and Mingat, 1992) (see Fig. 1). Due to its remarkable achievements, Vietnam has frequently been cited in the realm of education (Anh, et al., 1995; Fraser, 1993).



Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2000

Fig.1. Female adult literacy in Vietnam and its neighbors (%) ()

In 1943, approximately 95 percent of the population and 98 percent of women could neither read nor write. The policy of the Vietnamese Communist Party since the 1946 Constitution has been to provide equal access to education for boys and girls to enable them to participate fully in achieving national goals. Based on the 1989 census, the literacy rate was 38% for women aged 60 and over and 92% for girls between 10 and 14 years. Among men, it increased from 78% to 93% between these two age groups (Fraser, 1993; General Statistics Office, 1991). The gender gap in literacy went from 40% to 1% between these cohorts. The 1998 Law on education once again provides in its Article 9 that women and girls shall have equal access to educational opportunities. The Vietnamese Statistical Office reported in 1999 that women form 69 percent of the 5.3 million illiterate people in Vietnam. While the rate of female literacy has improved dramatically in the last ten years, there remains a literacy gap between women and men, especially in groups aged over fifty (Table 1). Gender gaps are also prominent among the poor and ethnic minorities and in rural areas (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004), due to school fees and the opportunity cost of child labor. According to the latest statistics in 2008, 96% of adult males and 90.6% of adult females in Vietnam are literate (Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey, 2008).

Table 1: Percentage of literature population aged 10 years old and over by sex and aged group (Unit: %)

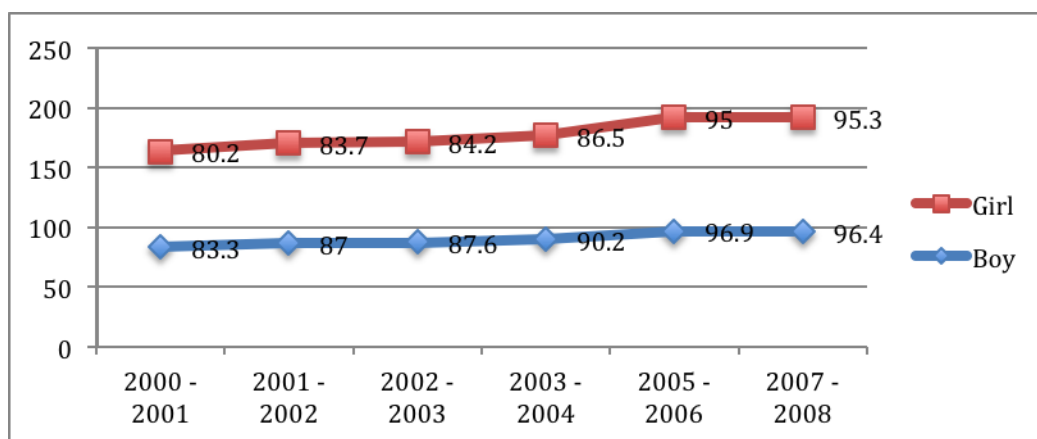
	2002			2004			2006			2008		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Whole country	92.1	95.1	89.3	93.0	95.9	90.2	93.1	96.0	90.5	93.2	96.0	90.6
Age group												
10-14	97.4	97.6	97.2	97.9	98.1	97.8	98.3	98.2	98.3	98.1	98.1	98.2
15-19	96.5	96.6	96.5	97.4	97.7	97.0	97.7	98.0	97.4	98.1	98.1	98.0

20-24	94.3	94.9	93.7	95.9	96.3	95.4	96.3	96.6	95.9	96.7	97.1	96.2
25-29	93.7	94.6	92.9	94.2	94.8	93.5	94.5	95.0	93.9	94.7	95.3	94.1
30-34	93.8	94.5	93.1	93.5	94.0	93.0	93.4	94.1	92.8	93.6	94.0	93.3
35-39	94.8	95.8	93.9	94.8	95.7	94.0	93.8	94.6	93.1	93.5	93.8	93.1
40-44	94.7	96.3	93.3	95.1	96.4	94.0	95.4	96.4	94.4	94.6	95.6	93.6
45-49	93.8	96.1	91.8	95.0	97.1	93.2	95.0	97.0	93.3	95.2	96.9	93.7
50-54	92.0	95.8	88.7	93.4	96.0	91.0	94.1	96.7	91.6	93.8	96.6	91.2
55-59	88.7	94.3	84.0	91.7	95.9	88.0	92.1	95.9	88.8	92.5	96.3	89.2
Over 60	75.1	89.7	64.2	77.9	91.8	68.0	74.9	90.7	63.9	76.6	91.3	66.3

Source: 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey.

The gross enrolment rate of boys and girls at primary education in the whole country is high and tends to increase in recent years. In school year 2003 - 2004, it is as high as 102.6% for girls and 107.4% for boys. In 2006, it is 104.7% for girls and 105.2% for boys. And the update statistics in 2008, it is 103.2% and 105.1% for girls and boys respectively (2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey).

The gross enrolment rate of boys and girls at lower secondary education is also high and keeps increasing. Despite stable growth recently, there is still a gap between boys and girls in term of gross enrolment rate at lower secondary school. The difference is increasing year by year (3.1%; 3.3%; 3.4%; 3.7% in school year 2000 - 2001; 2001 - 2002; 2002 - 2003; 2003 - 2004 respectively).

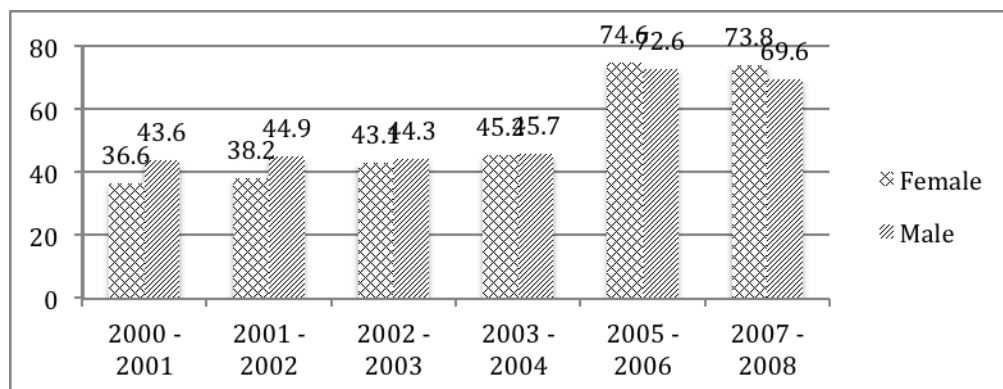


Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004; 2008 Vietnam household living standard survey

Fig. 2. Gross enrolment rate of boys and girls at lower secondary school from 2000 to 2008 (%)

According to survey in 2006 and 2008, the gap between boys and girls in term of gross enrolment rate at lower secondary school is decreasing. The difference is 1.9% in 2006 (95.0% in girls and 96.9% in boys), against 1.1% difference in 2008 (95.3% in girls and 96.4% in boys).

The gross enrolment rate of girls at upper secondary education in school year 2003 - 2004 is 45.2% and 45.7% in girls and boys respectively. This rate has been increasing constantly for recent years, narrowing the gap between boys and girls since the year 2000 (see Fig. 3).



Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004; 2008 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey

Fig. 3. Gross enrolment rate at upper secondary school by sex from 2000 to 2008 (%)

The percentage of gross enrolment rate of both girls and boys at upper secondary education in 2006 is relatively high compared in 2004. It is 72.6% for boys and 74.6% for girls. It is the first time the proportion of girls higher than boys. In 2008, it is 69.6% and 73.8% for boys and girls respectively. There is difference between some regions in gross enrolment rate of boys and girls at upper secondary school in school year 2003 - 2004. While the difference in the whole country is 0.5%; it is 2% in the North East, 5.8% in the North West, and 1.4% in the Mekong River Delta. However the rate is 2.5% higher in girls than in boys in Central Highlands.

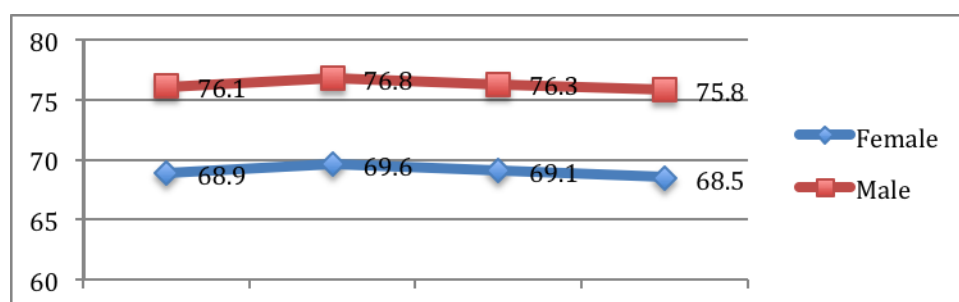
While the gender gaps in schooling have been continually narrowing (Asia Development Bank, 2002), the signs of sex segregation in upper secondary and university education are becoming more obvious, with females clustering in pedagogy, social sciences, and linguistics, while males dominate technical and scientific courses. This segregation potentially disadvantages women from fully participating in new industries, such as information technology, biotechnology, and application of new materials.

The percentage of highest educational level achieved by women is fairly good at some education levels. In 2006, for every 100 women age 15 and over, there are 23.7 primary graduates, 27.2 lower secondary graduates and 11.5 upper secondary graduates. Respective figures in male population are 24.4, 30.3 and 13.8. The difference between men and women is big in technical worker with 2.0 percent in women and 4.7 percent in men. The figure at college and university level is 3.8% in women and 5.0% in men. At post-graduate level, the percentage of women is half as many as men (0.1% in women and 0.2% in men).

In conclusion, impressive achievements have been made in regards to gender equality in education in recent years in Vietnam. The literacy rate of Vietnamese people is high with a very small difference between men and women. However, there are still many problems such as it is more difficult for ethnic minority women and girls in remote and mountainous areas to gain access to education than men and boys. The percentage of highest educational level achieved by women is fairly good at some education levels, but the signs of sex segregation are becoming more obvious, with females clustering in pedagogy, social sciences, and linguistics, while males dominate technical and scientific courses.

The changes of Vietnamese women in employment

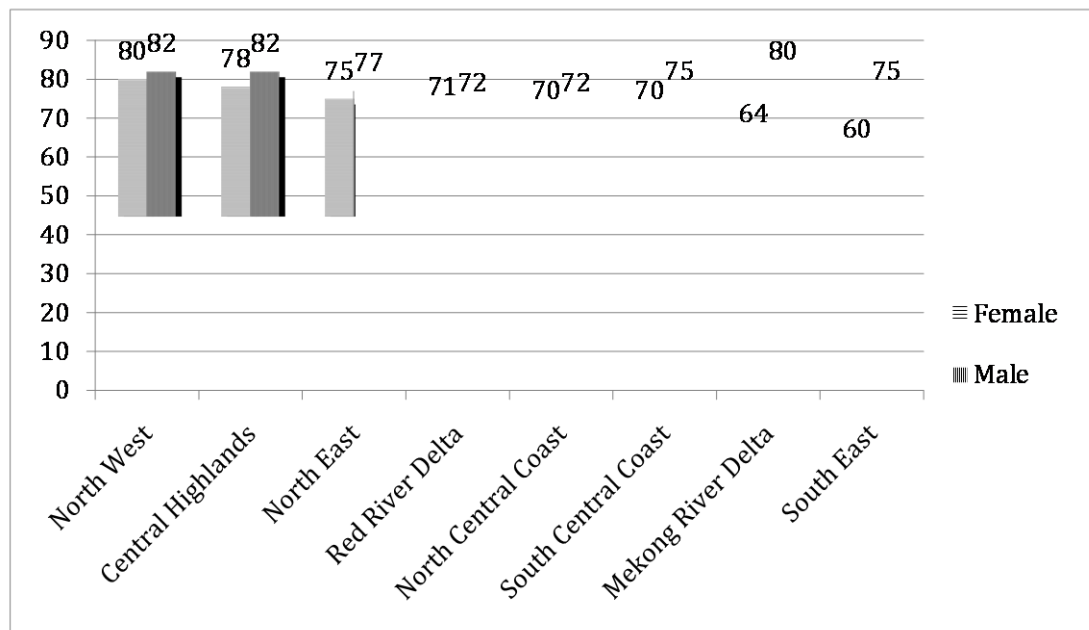
According to Engels, a woman cannot be equal if she is shut out from social productive labor and restricted to private domestic labor (Pothier, 2003). Lenin also presented opinion towards women when he argued that if we do not draw women into public activity, into the militia, into political life, if we don't tear women away from the deadening atmosphere of household and kitchen then it is impossible to secure real freedom. By drawing women into process of production, it prepares their way for emancipation (Pothier, 2003). Vietnamese is unique in that Vietnamese women have the highest rate of economic participation among women in the region and constitute a large share of the labor force (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004). Indeed, the percentage of economically active women in Vietnam is relatively high. In 2003, it was 68.5% in women and 75.8% in men.



Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig.4. The percentage of economic activity involvement by sex, 2000 - 2003 (%)

It is noteworthy that the percentage of economically active women varies among different regions. In 2003, the North West and the Central Highlands came first and second in this aspect with the percentage of 80% and 78% respectively. The lowest regions are the South East and the Mekong river delta with the percentage of 60% and 64% respectively. These are also the two regions with the biggest gap between men and women in terms of economic participation (Fig. 5). Thus, it is necessary to improve employment quality of population and female workforce in particular in the North West and Central Highlands. In the mean time, the issue of concern for the South East and Mekong river delta is to improve the percentage of economically active women to reduce the gap between men and women.

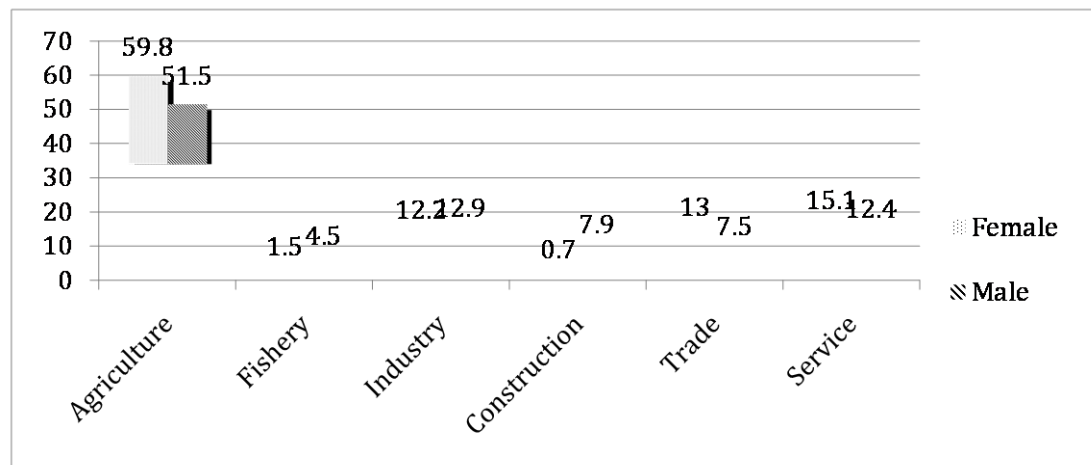


Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig. 5. Percentage of economic participation by sex and region in 2003 (%)

The percentage of women in permanent employment is also high. In 2003, this rate is 95.5% and 96.2% in women and men respectively (compared to 80% in women and 90% in men in 1998). The percentage of women in permanent employments is lower in rural areas. In 2003, it is 94.5% in urban areas and 95.8% in rural areas. The respective percentage in men is 95.8% and 96.3% (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004).

The concentration of female workforce is higher in agriculture and trade and male workforce is higher in fishery and construction. In 2002, per 100 female workers, there are nearly 60 women in agriculture; 12.2 in industry; 15.1 in service; 1.5 in fishery; 13 in trade and 0.7 in construction. Meanwhile per 100 male workers, there are 51.5 men in agriculture; 12.9 in industry; 12.4 in service; 4.5 in fishery; 7.5 in trade and 7.9 in construction.



Source: 2002 Vietnam Household Living Standard Survey

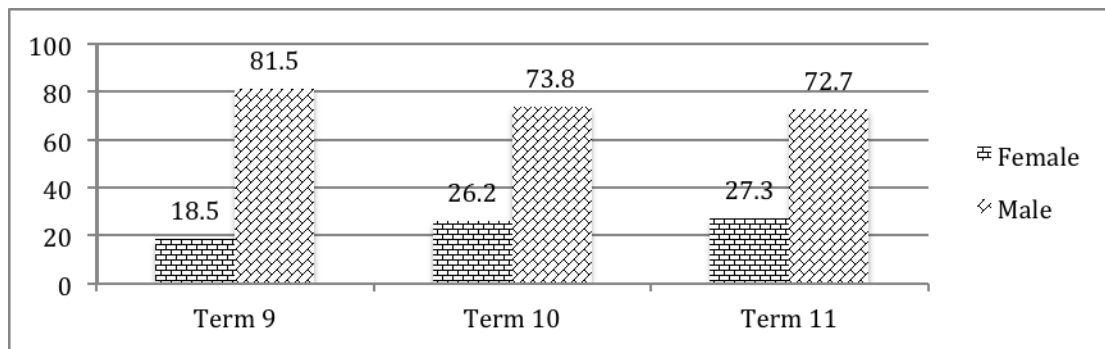
Fig. 6. Population aged 15 and over by sex and key economic sector (%)

The gender earnings gap in Vietnam appears to decline rapidly during the course of Doi Moi. According to the 1992 - 1993 Living Standards survey, women's income was 69% of men's (World Health Organization, 1995). By 1998, the wage gap between men and women narrowed to 22 percent (Asia Development Bank, 2002), and according to the latest Living Standards survey in 2002 and the gap fell to only 15 percent (Vietnam General Statistic Office, 2004).

The changes of Vietnamese women in political participation

Women have a better representation in management and leadership in recent years. It will be checked in these indicators: the percentage of female National Assembly deputies, People's Council deputies, members of Party executive committees, and leaders at various levels. Prominently the male/female structure in leadership has changed recently to be more balanced. The percentage of women in leadership has increased at all levels.

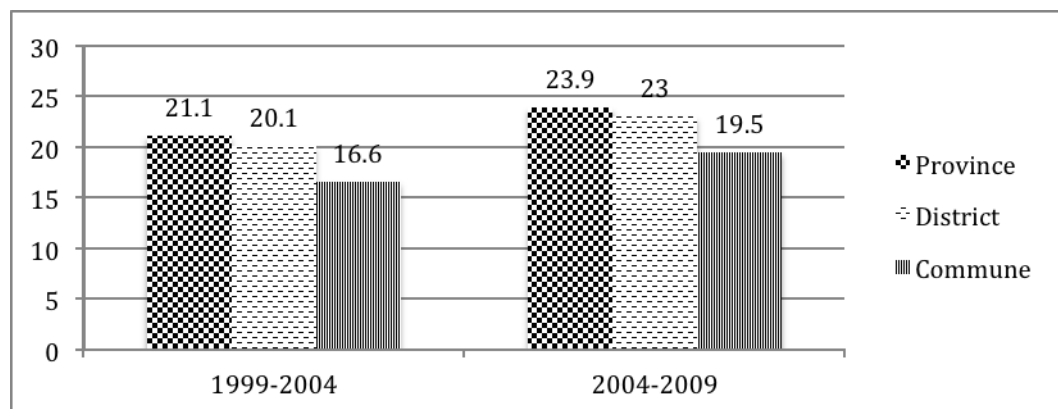
In 1975 women constituted 32 percent of the National Assembly of Vietnam; in 1997, the figure was 18 percent. The 1997 elections resulted in a significant increase in the percentage of women (from 18 percent to over 26 percent) in the National Assembly, the country's highest elected decision-making body. The percentage of female National Assembly deputies has increased continuously for three terms to reach 27.3% in 11th term (2002 - 2007). This makes Vietnam currently the second-highest ranking country in the Asia - Pacific region and the 9th among 135 countries in the World Inter-Parliamentary Alliance in the proportion of women in the National Assembly (Vietnam Women Union). *"Firstly we should note an increase in public awareness of gender issues, a change in society's attitude towards women, due to the implementation of many Resolutions and Instructions of the Party and the State...the leadership of the Party Politburo and levels of the Party, the attention paid by different levels of the Government to create favorable conditions for women, the guidance of the Standing Committee of the National Assembly, as well as of electoral committees at various levels"* (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004).



Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig. 7. Percentage of National Assembly deputies in 9th, 10th, 11th terms by sex (%)

The percentage of female People's Council deputies at all three levels has increased in the last two tenures, reaching 19.5% at commune/ward level, 23% at district/quarter level and 23.9% at provincial/municipal level for tenure 2004 - 2009 (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004) (Fig. 8)



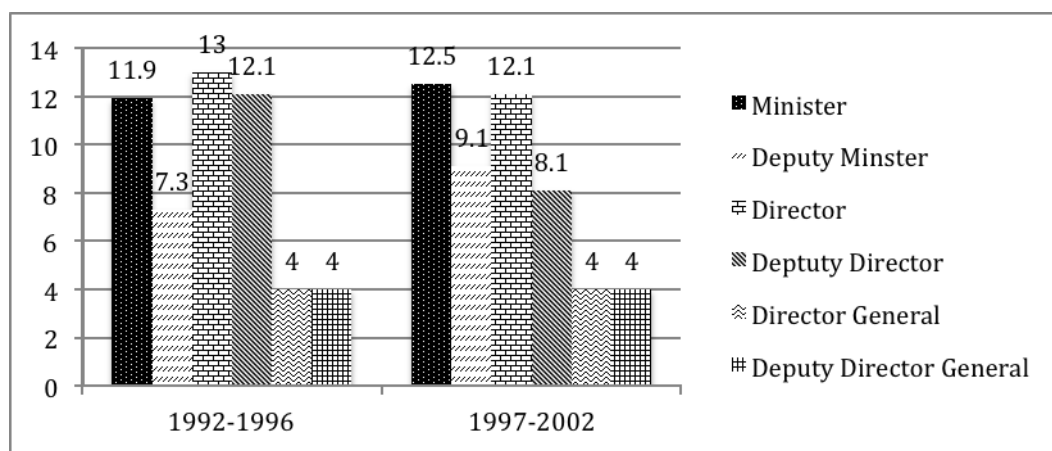
Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig. 8. Percentage of female People's Council deputies in 2 terms 1999 - 2004 and 2004 - 2009 (%)

It is thanks to the guidance and attention by Party committees at all levels to the planning and training of women cadres. In some localities, there have been policies supporting women cadres in education and training. Aware of their positions and responsibilities in the new situations, women have become more self-confident and proactive in overcoming challenges and striving for further progress. However, women's participation in leadership increases unevenly in different areas. At the central level, in the last two Party Congresses, women representation in Party Committee has dropped down. It remains unchanged in Party executive committees at provincial/municipal level. The rate, however, has slightly increased in Party executive committees at district and commune levels. Specifically at district level, it has increased from 11.3% in term 1996 - 2000 to 12.6% in term 2001 - 2005, and at commune level, it has increased from 10.7% in term 1996 - 2000 to 11.4% in term 2001 - 2005. Women percentage in the Party Central Committee has dropped from 10.6% in 8th Congress to 8.0 in 9th Congress (National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004).

It is notable that although the percentage of women in leadership has increased, such as in the National Assembly, People's Councils and Party executive committees, the growth is very modest, particularly in Party executive committees at approximately 1%. It means that men are still dominant in leadership positions.

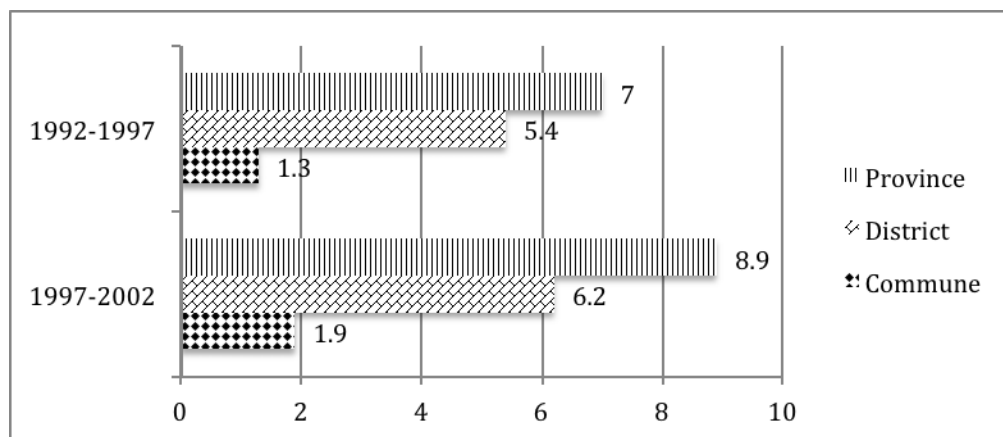
The male/female structure also differs at different levels of ministries and sectors. Ministers and deputy ministers are mostly men, though there is a little rise of female representation. The percentage of women as department directors and deputy directors has been falling in the last 10 years. Specifically the percentage of women as department directors has declined from 13% to 12.1% and as department deputy directors from 12.1% to 8.1% (Fig. 9).



Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig. 9. Percentage of women in leadership positions in ministries and state-owned enterprises under the Government from 1992 to 2002 (%)

It is remarkable that in the last two terms, the percentage of women key leaders at all levels remains very low, particularly at the grassroots levels. In the two terms of 1992 - 1997 and 1997 - 2002, the percentage of chairwomen and vice chairwomen of People's Committees is under 10% at provincial level and is under 2% at commune level (Fig. 10).



Source: National Committee for the Advancement of women in Vietnam and General Statistics Office, 2004.

Fig. 10. Percentage of women key leaders at different levels, 1992 - 2002 (%)

In short, women have a better representation in management and leadership in recent years. However, the improvement is modest and uneven among different levels and areas. It is noteworthy that the female representation at Party executive committees has declined at central and provincial/municipal levels. The percentage of women key leaders at different levels is generally low in the last two tenures. The limited participation of women in leadership and management, particularly in key positions, is due to the lack of guidance, monitoring and encouragement by Party executive committees to women promotion. Besides, there exist a stereotyped and narrow-minded thinking about women, distrust in their capacity and prejudices against female staff; the situation is also attributed to women's heavy triple roles and inferiority complex.

This requires more effective guidance by Party levels to women cadre work in the coming time. At the same time, there should be consistent cooperation among various agencies and organizations in fostering and introducing women candidates, thus to gradually increase women representation in management and leadership.

CONCLUSION

As in many other developing countries, Vietnam is now experiencing far - reaching changes and demographic transitions associated with continued rapid economic and social development. In the case of Vietnam, these have accelerated as an ongoing outcome of the renovation policies instigated since the latter half of the 1980s. These changes have in turn led to changes in gender roles, wherein women have gained better access to offices and positions of power in society. We find positive changes of Vietnamese women's position in education, employment and political participation. Vietnam provides basic education for everybody and asserts that lifelong education is the right and responsibility of each citizen. Since then more and more women got education. Although Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world and is affected by Confucianism, women's literacy rates and educational levels are relatively high. The gender difference in literacy has been steadily reduced. Today, women have strong representation in the economy. They are significant contributors in agriculture, trade, education and social service. In fact, the important change is that most of women now earn living independently of their husbands on a nation-wide scale. In Vietnam, women and men have equal rights to vote and stand for elections on all levels. These rights are guaranteed by the Constitution and are implemented in

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