

# Position and Decision-making Power of Men and Women in Vietnam's Political System

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**Abstract:** Women's political participation is one important measure of women's rights. The National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2011 – 2020 period was set up with the goal of “strengthening women's participation in leadership and management in order to reduce the gender gap in the political sphere”. Reviewing the literature and analysing available statistical data on the relative proportion of men and women in the political system, this paper highlights the positions occupied and the tasks performed by male and female members of the Communist Party, the National Assembly, and People's Committees and People's Councils at different levels. According to our analysis, women make up a very small proportion of the political system, compared to men. Most of those women do not hold key positions and are responsible for tasks of less strategic importance. They have a voice in the political system, but they do not have much real decision-making power.

**Key words:** Women; men; equality; political participation; position; decision-making power.

## 1. Introduction

In Vietnam, the Party and the State always pay attention to women's liberation and gender equality. Many specific policies and legal documents relating to gender equality have been promulgated, aiming at promoting women's participation in leadership and management. Some of them can be enumerated here, such as: the 2007 Law on Gender Equality, the national strategy on gender equality for the 2011-2020 period, the national programme on gender equality for the 2011 – 2015 and 2016 – 2020 periods, etc. As a result, Vietnam has gained certain achievements in ensuring gender equality in the political

system. Over the past two decades, there has always been a woman holding the position of Vice President of Vietnam. The proportion of women who are high-ranking leaders in the State apparatus has also increased. The number of women taking part in the 12<sup>th</sup> Politburo of the Party's Central Committee (2016-2020) makes up 16.6% of the total, increasing by 4.1% compared to that in the 11<sup>th</sup> Politburo. Since 2013 up to now, 3 deputy ministers (or equivalent positions) have been female. Looking at the gender correlation, however, the proportion of women in the political

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system still remains limited. The increase in the number of female officials has been inconsiderable from term to term. Some targets on the female leadership proportion set in Resolution 11 of the 10<sup>th</sup> Politburo have not been achieved yet. The corresponding proportion in some areas even tends to reduce. This can be shown, for example, in the proportion of women taking positions in the Party committees at different levels. Besides, some scholars have argued that women's political and leadership participation does not always result in positive changes in issues directly related to women. In reality, research conducted in other countries demonstrate that an increase in the number of female representatives just ensure a "formalistic" representation [8]. The question is what positions and what decision-making power women and men hold in the political system of Vietnam at present.

To obtain information to answer this question, the author has reviewed literature and materials related to women's and men's political participation in Vietnam, including relevant research reports, articles, legal documents, policies, and statistical data from the websites of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the National Assembly of Vietnam.

## **2. Positions of women and men in the political system**

According to various research works conducted in the world, political parties are mainly dominated by men and this really affects the decision-making process and the selection of members for the key decision-making institutions [6]. Regarding the positions filled by men and women in the political system in Vietnam, statistics and research reveal that key leaders in the Party, people's committees, and people's councils from the central to the local levels, are mainly male. In the leadership boards, women are often appointed only as deputy heads. [4], [7], [8].

### ***In the Communist Party of Vietnam***

The Central Committee is the highest body of the Party for a tenure between two national congresses. In the recent four tenures, the number of members in the Central Committee ranges from 150 to 200, including both full and alternate ones, of whom the proportion of female members ranges from 7.8 to 10%. In the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress (1991), it was the first time a woman took part in the Secretariat. Only since the 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress (1996) have there been female members in the Politburo. The maximum number of female members in the Secretariat so far has been 2 and this occurred in only one tenure (the 10<sup>th</sup> tenure); whereas, the number of male members often ranges from 8 to 9. Until now, the position of General Secretary has been always held by men.

Table 1. The Number of Male and Female Representatives in the Leadership Structure of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (Including those who left the Positions before the End of Tenure)

Position	2001-2005 (9 <sup>th</sup> tenure)		2006-2010 (10 <sup>th</sup> tenure)		2011-2015 (11 <sup>th</sup> tenure)		2016-2020 (12 <sup>th</sup> tenure)	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
General	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0

Secretary								
Secretariat	8	1	8	2	9	1	8	1
Politburo	15	0	15	0	14	2	16	3
Central Committee	137	13	168	13	182	18	180	20

*Source: Online newspaper of the Communist Party of Vietnam.*

At the local level, the proportion of female members in the Party committees of provinces, districts, and communes/wards in the 11<sup>th</sup> tenure (2011-2015) was 11%, 15%, and 18% respectively. During the past 3 sessions, the proportion of female members in the Central Committee has increased, but in an inconsiderable manner, at the provincial and district levels. In some of the Party committees, there have not been any female members at all. For the purpose of improving women's participation, the Party developed a roadmap on increasing the number of female members in the Party committees towards the year of 2020 by promulgating the Politburo's Directive No. 36-CT/TW dated 30 May 2014 on the Party congresses to be held at different levels before the 12<sup>th</sup> National Congress. The directive set the targets for the proportion of female members in the committees to be not lower than 15%, with the participation of female members in the standing committees. In some local Party committees, however, the proportions of female and young members for the 12<sup>th</sup> tenure (2016 – 2020) have not met the requirements in the directive. The proportion of female members has reached 15% or higher in only 21 out of the total of 63 provincial-level Party committees nationwide. In the previous tenure, the number of provincial-level Party committees meeting the requirement was just 10 (according to information from the Party Building journal on November 11<sup>th</sup> 2015).

The proportion of women taking part in the Party committees at the levels of provinces, districts, and communes is small, and the corresponding proportion in the standing committees and the proportion of women holding the position of the Party secretary are even much smaller. For all the sessions from 2001 to 2015, the proportion of female members in the standing committees was just 7 or 8% at the provincial and district levels and about 6% at the communal level. For the 2016 – 2020 tenure, there have been positive changes in the proportion of women in the Party committees in the provinces/cities under the central government, compared to previous tenures. In all 63 provinces/cities, the number of women keeping the position of secretary of the city/provincial Party committee makes up 4.7%. The three provinces, where the secretary of the provincial Party committee is female, are Ninh Binh, An Giang, and Vinh Phuc. Early in the previous tenure, the corresponding figure was 2. And, 17 vice secretaries of the provincial Party committees are female, making up 10.97% and increasing by 6.83% compared to the previous tenure (in the previous tenure, there were 6 female vice secretaries of the provincial Party committee). The proportion of female members in the Party committees is now 13.3%, increasing by 1.9% compared to the previous tenure. Yet, the proportion of female members in the Party committees at all levels has not been on par with the

proportion of females against the total members in the Party. Of the nearly 4.5 million Party members, the female ones account for 30%, equivalent to 1.3 million [1].

Table 2. Proportion of Female Members in the Party Committees at the Levels of Province, District and Commune

Position	Provincial level				District level			Communal level		
	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2015-2020	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015	2001-2005	2006-2010	2011-2015
Secretary	1.6	6.25	0.25	4.7	3.7	4.46	5.5	0.9	4.59	7.25
Vice secretary	6.6	3.88	4.1	10.9	5.1	5.54	-	-	7.25	-
Standing member	7.3	7.91	7.8	10.7	-	7.83	-	3.7	5.83	-
Committee member	11.3	11.75	11.3	13.3	12.8	14.74	15	11.9	14.36	18

Source: [6] and the Party Building journal on 11 Nov. 2015.

### ***In the National Assembly***

Statistical data and research findings show convincingly that women make up a very small proportion in the people's elected institutions; the differences in number of members from each gender remain, especially in the State leadership apparatus at the central level.

In Vietnam, the National Assembly is the only body which is elected by all the people from the whole country. It undertakes the constitutional and legislative powers as well as decides on important issues of the country and performs supreme supervision over activities of the State (Article 1, the Law on National Assembly Organisation, 2014). As regulated, the total number of the National Assembly deputies (members) shall not exceed 500 (Article 23, the Law on National Assembly Organisation, 2014) and female members shall make up an appropriate proportion. Looking at the

proportion of female members in the National Assembly, we can see it was not stable during the past tenures. From the 1<sup>st</sup> (1946 - 1960) to the 5<sup>th</sup> tenure of the National Assembly (1975-1976), it was increased from 3% to 32%; then reduced from 32% to 18% from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> tenure. For the next period, it tended to increase, but unsteadily. The proportion of female members in the National Assembly for the 2011 - 2016 tenure was 24.4%. The unstable proportion of female members in the National Assembly through the tenures demonstrates that previous measures to improve gender equality in the political system remained not sufficiently strong and sustainable. For many years, the Party and the State tried to ensure the representation of women's voice and aspiration in the National Assembly by regulating that there shall be an appropriate proportion of female members in the Assembly. Many National Assembly deputies asked for the revision of

the regulation, aiming at specifying a minimum proportion of female members in the legislature. As a result, the Law on National Assembly and People's Council Election was promulgated in 2015. According to this Law, the number of women as candidates to the National Assembly election is prepared by the Standing Committee of the National Assembly based on the proposal by the Presidium of the Vietnam Women's Union;

the proportion of women, therefore, shall be at least 35% of the candidates for the National Assembly (Article 8). The specification of the minimum proportion of female candidates is an important factor, creating more opportunities for women to take part in the political system. What to be paid due attention to is whether the regulation is implemented effectively in practice or not.

Table 3. Proportion of Male - Female Members in the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly by Position

Position	Male	Female
Part-time members	66.4	73.8
Full-time members (at the local level)	12.7	12.3
Full-time members (at the central level)	20.9	13.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>378</i>	<i>122</i>

*Source: Data synthesised from information on the NA deputies from the NA website.*

In the National Assembly, female members make up a smaller proportion than the male ones, and even fewer of them hold key positions. Before Vietnam has Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan as the first ever chairperson of the legislature as of today, the highest position women have ever held in the Assembly was that of its vice chairperson. That occurred for the first time in the 12<sup>th</sup> tenure, when two vice chairpersons were female. Regarding other leadership positions, such as chairpersons/vice chairpersons of the councils/commissions of the National Assembly or full-time members, women also account for a smaller proportion than men.

According to the Law on National Assembly Organisation, the proportion of

deputies working on a full-time basis shall be at least 35% of all the National Assembly deputies (Article 23). In the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, this requirement has been met in the case of the total number of deputies, and the case of male ones. However, as regard female deputies, that target has not been achieved - the proportion of female deputies working on a full-time basis is just 26.2%.

For the entire tenure, full-time deputies shall spend all the time undertaking the National Assembly's tasks in the institutions of the Assembly itself or in the offices of the local Assembly delegations. Meanwhile, part-time deputies keep doing their current work, but they shall attend the two sessions of the legislature every year and spend at

least one-third of their annual working time performing the Assembly's tasks. The difference in the time spent on working for the National Assembly and undertaking the Assembly's membership tasks between full-time and part-time deputies has led to the fact that the two groups of deputies have different opportunities to make contributions. Comparing male and female deputies, we can see that female ones make up a greater proportion in the group of part-time deputies (73.8% vs. 66.4%). This means the contribution made by the female deputies is limited, as they do not have many opportunities to raise opinions.

The Standing Committee of the National Assembly is composed of the National Assembly Chairperson, Vice Chairpersons,

and the heads of the Assembly's council/commissions. The Committee has especially important power, compared to other institutions of the National Assembly. It undertakes the following tasks: to make ordinances; to design the Assembly's session agendas; to decide which ministers are to answer the legislature in Q&A sessions; to give comments on draft laws; to set up the election councils; to anticipate the number of deputies to be elected from each province/city under central management, as well as the numbers of ethnic minority and female deputies. For the past tenures, female deputies have never made up for more than 25% of the total in the Standing Committee.

Table 4. Proportion of Female Deputies who are in the Standing Committee and Heads of the Councils/Commissions in Tenures (%)

Position	Tenure		
	2002-2007	2007-2011	2011-2016
Member of the Standing Committee	22.2	15.76	23.53
Head of the National Assembly council/commissions	25.0	22.22	11.11

Source: [6].

As the National Assembly is composed of a large number and with a diversity of deputies, various institutions are set up, such as the Standing Committee, the Council on Ethnicity, and commissions, to perform effectively specific tasks and powers, in addition to general activities done by the whole National Assembly. In the current 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, there are 9 commissions and 1 council on ethnicity (see the list of commissions in Table 6). The majority of the legislature's

activities are undertaken by the commissions. The Assembly's plenary sessions are convened twice a year and each of them often lasts for only a month. Analysing the proportion of male and female deputies of the commissions/council of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, we can see that 77% of the 122 elected female deputies of the Assembly are members of a specific commission/council; in the meanwhile, the corresponding figure for male deputies is 82.2%. The proportion of female deputies

working on a full-time basis is smaller than that of male ones (20.2% vs. 31.2%).

The Council on Ethnicity and each of the National Assembly commissions perform specific tasks and powers in a certain area. Looking at the membership of the commissions, we can realise the imbalance between men and women in both positions of commission heads and of mere deputies.

Of the 10 commissions, 4 have female leaders (including: the Commission on Social Affairs; the Commission on Judicial Affairs; the Commission on Culture, Education, Youth and Children; and, the Standing Board of the Council on Ethnicity). The total number of female

leaders in the 4 commissions is 5, of whom only one is the commission head and the rest 4 are deputy heads.

The male-female composition in each commission shows that the gender imbalance is less seen in the Standing Board of the Ethnic Council, the Commission on Social Affairs, and the Commission on Culture, Education, Youth and Children; whereas, it is more seen in the Commission on Defense and Security, the Commission on Judicial Affairs, the Commission on Financial and Budgetary Affairs, the Commission on Economic Affairs, and the Commission on External Relations. (See Table 5).

Table 5. Male – Female Composition in Each Commission of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly

Commission	Female proportion	Male proportion
Standing Board of the Ethnic Council	47.5	52.5
Commission on Social Affairs	39.6	60.4
Commission on Culture, Education, Youth and Children	35.7	64.3
Commission on Science, Technology and Environment	22.6	77.4
Commission on Legal Affairs	19.4	80.6
Commission on External Relations	18.9	81.1
Commission on Economic Affairs	16.7	83.3
Commission on Financial and Budgetary Affairs	13.2	86.8
Commission on Judicial Affairs	12.9	87.1
Commission on Defense and Security	5.6	94.4

*Source: Data on the National Assembly deputies from the NA website.*

Looking at the male and female proportions in the National Assembly commissions, we can see that all the

commissions consist of both men and women. However, the females tend to be more seen in the Standing Board of the

Council on Ethnicity, the Commission on Social Affairs, and the Commission on Culture, Education, Youth and Children, than in other commissions. Meanwhile, the proportion of male deputies is relatively similar in all the commissions (*See Table 6*). The male – female composition in each commission and the distribution of male and female deputies by the National Assembly commissions show a reality that female deputies tend to take part more in socio-cultural areas; whereas, male deputies tend to take part more in economic, financial, defense, and security domains.

This seems to be aligned with the specific fields of training of the Assembly's male and female deputies. According to the data on the fields of expertise of the deputies, the females have a higher proportion than the males in the areas of education, social sciences, and medicine. In their part, male deputies have a higher proportion than female ones in the areas of economics, finance, security, and military. This reality shows the necessity of dealing with the current gender stereotypes and gender patterns in the society generally and the area of education particularly.

Table 6. Distribution of Male and Female Deputies by the National Assembly Commission (%)

Commission	Female proportion	Male proportion
Standing Board of the Council on Ethnicity	20.2	7.2
Commission on Social Affairs	22.3	11.0
Commission on Culture, Education, Youth and Children	16.0	9.2
Commission on Science, Technology and Environment	7.4	8.2
Commission on Legal Affairs	7.4	9.9
Commission on External Relations	7.4	10.3
Commission on Economic Affairs	7.4	12
Commission on Financial and Budgetary Affairs	5.3	11.3
Commission on Judicial Affairs	4.3	9.2
Commission on Defense and Security	2.1	11.6
<i>Total number of deputies</i>	<i>94</i>	<i>292</i>

*Source: Data on the National Assembly deputies from the website.*

### ***In the State apparatuses at the local level***

The gender bias in the leadership structure is also common in the State

apparatuses at the local level. When a woman is appointed to the leadership board, she often fills the position of the deputy head. In principle, the head is responsible



for all the activities of the institution/organisation; whereas, the deputy head is just in charge of some activities as an assistant for the head. Due to their positions, consequently, female leaders often have less power than the male ones.

The people's council is the State power institution at the local level. It represents the local people's aspiration and right to mastery. The council makes decisions on local issues, in line with the legal regulations. It is responsible for supervising the local compliance with the Constitution and laws as well as the implementation of its resolutions. In reality, the proportion of women, who have held the position of the local people's council chairperson/vice

chairperson, remains small over the past tenures. In many places, there have even not been any women in such a position at all. In the current tenure, the proportion of women filling the position of local people's council chairperson is around 6%. The corresponding proportion for the position of vice chairperson at the provincial and district levels is about 20%, but it is smaller at the communal level (14%). Although the proportion of women keeping the position of people's council chairperson/vice chairperson has been increasing, the trend is not yet stable or on par with the proportion of women/women leaders in the locality.

Table 7. Proportion of Women being Chairperson/Vice Chairperson of the People's Council at Different Levels (%)

Position	Provincial level			District level			Communal level		
	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016
Chairwoman	1.64	1.56	6.35	5.46	3.92	5.5	3.46	4.09	5.69
Vice chairwoman	8.19	28.13	20.31	11.42	20.26	20.86	5.6	10.61	13.67

Source: UNDP, 2012.

For the 2011 – 2016 tenure at the provincial level, of all the 63 cities/provinces, only one has a chairwoman of the people's committee (making up 1.59%); 31 ones have vice chairwomen (in Ho Chi Minh City alone, there are two vice chairwomen). The women holding the position of head of the provincial departments account for just 10.5%. At the district level, the proportion of the people's

committee chairwomen is 3.02% (smaller than the previous tenure); the corresponding proportion of vice chairwomen is 14.48% (increasing by 6.05% in comparison with the previous tenure); the women holding the position of head of the district divisions account for 13.9%. At the communal level, the proportions of the people's committee chairwomen and vice chairwomen is 3.42% and 8.84% respectively. Looking at the

above-mentioned proportions of women taking part in the State management institutions, we can realise that women still keep a limited role in decision-making and direction-giving at all levels of the executive system.

Table 8. Proportion of Chairwomen and Vice Chairwomen of the People's Committee (%)

Position	Provincial level			District level			Communal level		
	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016	1999-2004	2004-2011	2011-2016
Chairwoman	1.64	3.12	1.59	5.27	3.02	-	3.74	3.42	-
Vice chairwoman	12.05	18.08	-	11.42	14.48	-	8.48	8.84	-

Source: [6] and [4].

### 3. Decision-making power of men and women in the political system

Analysing the position of female cadres in the political system in Vietnam at present, we can see two fundamental issues related to the decision-making power of men and women.

*Firstly*, in terms of quantity, the proportion of women filling key positions in the political system is smaller than that of men and it tends to be unstable (sometimes increasing, and sometimes reduced; yet, when it increases, the increase is not significant). Regarding the management in different sectors and at different levels, women do not hold a management position; the decision-making, consequently, lacks the voice associated with the female gender. Nguyen Thi Thanh Hoa (2015) argues it is difficult to carry out gender mainstreaming in various areas due to the lack of women filling key positions in the political system. Besides, the fact that women make up a small proportion in the key and important positions is a warning of the shortage of female officials. According to a research

conducted by UNDP (2012), there are not enough women holding high-ranking positions to advocate and promote women's affairs. In the Politburo, the Party's commissions, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Commission of Human Resources (the Commission on Organisation) of the Party Central Committee, and the NA Standing Committee, there are very few women.

Leaders of the National Assembly play an important role in strengthening the influence on the legislative sector. Even when the number of female deputies is the same as that of male ones, the women still have limited power in affecting legislative activities, if they do not hold leadership positions [9]. On the other hand, the fact that "the head should be male and the deputy head can be female" is the usual leadership pattern. Because of the imbalance between men and women in the key positions, decision-making may be more gender-biased, especially when gender awareness has not been enhanced. Many aspirations and needs of women, particularly girls, are not met appropriately by local development projects/programs or

policies. The decision-making power is taken by those who fill the highest positions. Unfortunately, those positions are not often filled by women [8]. The absence of women in the key positions is seen for the entire political system, from the central to the local level. A research on women's participation in leadership conducted in Nam Dinh province shows that gender-based difference in leadership and management assignments makes women have less opportunity to fill important positions, which could help them play a strategic and decisive role in exercising powers in the province. The only sector, where women may have politically competitive advantage over men, is the field of socio-political or mass organisations in the province [3]. Remarkably, the leadership pattern of "male head and female deputy head" seems to be popularly accepted in the society generally and among officials at all levels particularly. One of the reasons given for this consensus of opinion can be described as below: men have more time for work; they have a lot of contacts and good communication skills; they are more resolute, more far-sighted, bolder, and more dynamic; they are more capable of making new things; and, they are less influenced by their family situation. In the meanwhile, women are more careful and industrious; they have better persuasive skills; they can provide counselling to and act as an advisor for the head, making up for the head's disadvantages [2].

*Secondly*, women are often assigned to undertake tasks in the so-called "gender-appropriate" areas, such as those related to social and cultural affairs. This make the voice of women limited in the areas considered "more suitable for men". In

grassroot organisations of the Party, the majority of the female Standing Committee members are mainly responsible for undertaking administrative work related to mobilisation or encouragement of activities, rather than strategic work. These differences have actually restricted women's influence in many spheres.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the political system, the proportion of women has increased over the past years, but it has not been yet corresponding to their potential. The proportion of women holding the highest management positions remains small. There are too few women taking part in the leadership. This makes women's voice not powerful enough. In addition, most of the women taking part in the political system do not keep the key positions and do not undertake strategic tasks. As a result, they do not have a decisive voice in the political domain.

The current policies aiming at increasing the proportion of women in the leadership apparatus do not seem to be effective for the proportion of women holding the highest position in institutions/agencies. Policies and regulations on the criteria and conditions for professional training, personnel planning, nomination and appointment etc. have not yet boosted gender equality at the levels of leadership positions. In reality, the proportion of female officials taking part in professional training as well as those in the personnel planning for future nomination and appointment remains very small. Furthermore, activities aiming at enhancing the proportion of female candidates in

election and the leadership apparatus have been carried out with low efficiency.

The research works conducted so far often provide information on proportions of women in legislative bodies, but not much has been known on how the elected women undertake their roles in the Assembly. There are not many research works on the positions, tasks, and capacities of female deputies in the legislature. As a result, we lack information and evidence for policy-making activities related to gender equality. It is, therefore, necessary to carry out research on the correlation between the proportion of female leaders and the improvement of women-related social issues such as educational opportunities for girls, promulgation and implementation of policies on reduction of women's homework burden, etc., in order to provide more scientific grounds to the practice of gender equality in the political sphere.

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