Improving Roles of Women in Political System: Practice and Issues

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Abstract: Promoting the role of women and implementing gender equality are the issues that have been long raised by the Communist Party of Vietnam. Since the promulgation of the Law on Gender Equality (2006), more attention has been paid to improving the role of women and acknowledging gender equality in society, especially in the political sector. The Party and the State have also issued policies and guidelines, as well as setting targets and measures to gradually address gender inequality in all socio-political spheres. However, in reality, the results of such efforts fall short of expectations. Based on statistics and findings from a number of studies, this paper comments on the participation of women in the political system and people-elected bodies, as well as referring to how the role they play and their status can be improved in the future.

Keywords: Role of women, gender equality, women in the political system.

Subject classification: Political science

1. Introduction

In Vietnam, women have a right and duty to participate in politics, and they are increasingly proving the significant role they play throughout the country's political arena. In accordance with the Constitution and the law, women have the right and obligation to participate in the election process, to stand for election to people-elected bodies, participate in social activities, and so on. Women engage in the political system at all levels through the exercise of certain rights and responsibilities, and thereby they can be honoured, respected, and emulated by society. At the same time, women have a chance to develop and assert their status and position on the political stage, as well as establishing and claiming their rights, responsibilities, and role in society. An effective approach for evaluating the part women play in political activities is to analyse the proportion who are actually involved in the political system at all levels.

Nowadays, Vietnamese women are asserting the essential political role they play and the number of those who participate is growing considerably. This

can be seen by the increased number of women sitting in the Party executive boards, administrative bodies, the National Assembly, and people's councils at all levels. However, in reality, despite many attempts at encouraging, developing, planning, and training, the proportion of women participating in different organisations of the political system at all levels is below expectations and falls short of their potential. Based on statistics and findings arising from some studies and individual surveys, this paper reviews the current status of women's participation in people's councils and the political system during recent tenures. This in turn poses some questions which need answering relating to the promotion of women's roles in political and social activities.

2. Viewpoints of the Party and policies and laws of the State on women's activities and gender equality

President Ho Chi Minh, founder of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, clearly affirmed the position and role of women. He asserted "All citizens are equal before the law. Women and men share equal rights in terms of political, economic, cultural, social, and domestic affairs" [18, p.12].

The Communist Party of Vietnam has enshrined President Ho Chi Minh's ideology on equal rights for men and women into a framework of guidelines to realise gender equality and strengthen the role and status of women in political activities. The position on "gender equality", outlined in the political platform of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930, is more defined and comprehensive in the contents of its resolutions, through its Congresses and the specific resolutions adopted in each of its tenures.

The Politburo's Resolution No.11-NQ/TW on women-related activities in the period of accelerated national industrialisation and modernisation was adopted on 27 April 2007. It underlined the fact that strong formulation and firm development of a contingent of female cadres to be on par with the major role played by women are an objective requirement and an important content in the Party's personnel strategy. It also determined a number of important points of "striving to ensure that, by 2020, the ratio of female cadres participating in the Party committees at all levels reaches at least 25%; and female members of the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels accounts for 35% to 40%. Agencies and bodies with female representation of 30% or more must have key female leaders". On 20 January 2018, the Party Secretariat issued Directive No.21-CT/TW on the continued promotion of women's participation in the new context. It specified a number of points including: "Top leaders of the Party executive boards and administrations at all levels are responsible for synchronous measures to meet the targets laid out in Resolution No.11-NQ/TW on women's leadership training". According to Resolution No.26-NQ/TW dated 19 May 2018 issued by the 7th plenum of the Party Central Committee, 12th tenure, "the focus is to develop cadres at all levels, especially at the strategic one, and enhance their quality, capacity and credibility to meet the requirements of their tasks". It also identified the 2030 target: "There shall be female cadres on the standing boards at all levels of the Party organisations and committees. The

presence of women on the Party executive boards must reach 20% to 25%, and that in the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels must be over 35%".

In the run-up to the congresses of the executive boards at all levels and the 13th National Congress of the Party, the Politburo issued Directive No.35-CT/TW dated 30 May 2019, which set out the following targets: "Strive to ensure that female cadres serving as members of the Party executive boards account for at least 15%; [at least one] female cadre is to be elected a member on the standing boards. The Party executive boards at all levels, especially the top leadership, shall proactively take responsibility for directing the review and assessment activities to train, foster and elevate female and young cadres". Ever since the early days of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Party has always been consistent in implementing the goal of "gender equality", and Vietnam's 1946 Constitution states that: "Women are equal to men in all respects"; "All Vietnamese citizens are equal in all aspects, including politics, economics and culture". In the first general election of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 6 January 1946, not only were women allowed to vote but they could also stand for election and participate in the state apparatus. The 1946 general election resulted in the appointment of over 300 deputies, of whom ten were women [34]. Vietnam is a signatory of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the country has gradually codified gender equality by issuing laws and policies related to the protection of women's legitimate rights and interests. The statutes include the Penal Code and the following laws: those on Gender Equality; Domestic Violence Prevention and Control; on Marriage and Family; and on the Election of Deputies to the National Assembly, as well as numerous other related laws.

In 2006, the National Assembly of the 11th tenure of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam passed the Law on Gender Equality, which clearly stipulates: "Men and women are equal in participating in the state management and social activities. Men and women are equal in self-nominating as candidates or in nominating candidates to the National Assembly, people's councils". It also provides measures to promote gender equality in political affairs, including: "To ensure the appropriate proportions of the National Assembly and people's councils' female members in accordance with the national gender equality goals"; and "To ensure the appropriate proportion of women in appointing officials to hold titles [of management positions - *translator's note*] in state agencies in line with the national gender equality goals" (Article 11).

The national strategy on gender equality for the period 2011 to 2020 identified the goal of ensuring true gender equality between men and women in all aspects by 2020. Of the seven key targets, this paper specifically singles out: (i) "to strive for at least 25% of female cadres serving as members of the Party executive boards at all levels during the 2016 to 2020 tenure; (ii) for the ratio of female cadres nominated as deputies to the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels to be at least 30% in the 2011 to 2015 term and rising to more than 35% in the 2016 to 2020 period; and (iii) for 100% of Party and State agencies, as well as socio-political organisations, to appoint at least one key female leader if the proportion of their female cadres, civil servants, public employees and staff is at least 30%".

Regarding the election management process and oversight mechanism in order to secure women's participation in political activities, the 2015 Law on Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and Members of People's Councils regulates that at least 35% of candidates on the official list for deputies to the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels shall be women. Resolution No.57/NQ-CP of 1 December 2009 issued by the Government affirms the statement: "To develop a mechanism to secure greater participation of women in decision-making processes and increase the proportion of candidates for the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels".

Ho Chi Minh Thought, documents issued by the Party, and the State's policies all clearly show and affirm the stance consistently taken, and the way to strengthen the role, rights, and obligations of women in political and social activities. During specific periods, the Party and the State have clearly set targets for women's participation in the political system at all levels, and regularly led, directed and scrutinised the implementation by Party executive boards and local administrations.

3. Current situation of women's participation in people's councils and the political system at all levels and a number of issues to be addressed

3.1. Women's participation in the Party system

In recent years, women have increased their active involvement in the Party executive boards from the grassroots up to central levels.

Table 1 shows that the proportion of women serving in the Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Party Central Committee has gradually increased over time. In particular, during the tenure of the 12th National Party Congress (2015 to 2020), three women were Politburo members, which accounted for 15.7%.

Table 1: Women's Participation in Party System by Tenures

	Tenure 2000-2005			Tenure 2005-2010			Tenure 2010-2015			Tenure 2015-2020		
	Total	No. of women	Ratio	Total	No. of women	Ratio	Total	No. of women	Ratio	Total	No. of women	Ratio
General Secretary	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0
Politburo	15	0	0	15	0	0	16	2	12.5	19	3	15.7
Central Committee	150	13	8.6	181	13	7.2	175	14	8	200	17	8.5
Secretariat	9	1	11.1	10	2	20	10	1	10	9	1	11.1

Source: Tran Thi Minh Thi (2017), *Gender Equality in Political Affairs as Seen from Perspective of Institutional Framework, Culture and International Integration*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi.

Party Congresses at all levels during the 2015 to 2020 tenure inspired new achievements as targets for women's political engagement were realised. Referring to Figure 1, in particular the proportion of female members on the Party executive boards accounted for 19.7% at the communal level (a 1.4% increase on the 2011 to 2015 tenure), and 13.3% at the provincial level (a 2.0% increase on the period 2011 to 2015).

Figure 1: Proportion of Women Participating in Party Executive Boards by Tenure

Source: MOLISA (2018), *Report Reviewing Ten-Year Implemention of Law on Gender Equality*, Conference on Ten-Year Implemention of Law on Gender Equality, Hanoi.

Not only has the proportion of women sitting on the Party executive boards at all levels increased, but so has the percentage of women in a Party leadership role over tenures. This is clearly evident when comparing statistics at communal, district, and provincial levels between the 2005 to 2010 and 2015 to 2020 tenures. At the communal level, the proportion of female members of the executive board of the Party committee increased from 14.4% to 19.69% while corresponding figures of the Party committee standing board almost doubled - from 5.8% to 10.7%. At the district level, figures remained pretty much the same for the executive boards of the Party committees; however, female members of the standing boards of the Party committees increased sharply from 7.8% to 12%. At the provincial level, women's membership on both the executive and standing boards increased from 11.8% to 13.3%, and 7.9% to 10.7% respectively [36].

Party Congresses across the 63 provinces/cities nationwide elected nine women as Secretaries of the provincial Party committees for the 2020 to 2025 tenure. This is three times higher than the preceding 2015 to 2020 period when only three female Secretaries were appointed to the provincial Party executive boards (in Vinh Phuc, Ninh Binh, and An Giang provinces). Such an example

demonstrates the successful implementation of gender equality and the fostering of favourable conditions for women's political participation, as laid out in the Party's directives and resolutions, and State's policies. It also shows the increasing efforts of Vietnamese women themselves as they pursue opportunities and assert their position and authority.

Nevertheless, the proportion of women involved in the Party system has not yet met the target set out in the Politburo's Resolution No.11-NQ/TW [26, pp.58-63]. And the growth in female representation has shown some inconsistencies. Figure 1 compares the two tenures of 2010 to 2015 and 2015 to 2020. From 2015 to 2020, the proportion of women participating in the Party executive boards at provincial and communal levels was higher than that of the preceding 2010 to 2015 tenure; however, at the district level it fell from 15.7% (2010 to 2015) to 14.3% (2015 to 2020).

The proportion of women participating in the Party executive boards is often not high and does not correspond to the proportion of female representation against the total number of party members. Let us refer to the 2015 to 2020 tenure as an example: the figures of 13.3% at the provincial level, 15.7% at the district level, and 19.7% at the communal level, altogether correspond to less than 20% of the total members of the Party executive boards.

3.2. Women's participation in the National Assembly and people's councils at all levels

The high proportion of female deputies of the National Assembly has always been maintained; in fact, there has been a gradual increase. Specifically, it grew from 3% in the National Assembly of the 1st tenure to 24.4% in the 8th tenure (2011 to 2016) and 26.72% (133 females out of the 496 deputies) in the 14th tenure (2016 to 2021). Notably, the first ever Chairwoman of the National Assembly was nominated/ appointed in the 14th tenure. When it comes to women's representation in the political arena, instances such as the above have placed Vietnam second in the Asia-Pacific region and the 6th highest nation in Asia, which surpasses the average levels of 19% in Asia and 21% globally [17].

The proportion of female members of the people's councils at the provincial, district and communal levels has also risen across the tenures. Analysing the 2016 to 2021 period as shown in Table 2, statistics reveal: (i) at the provincial level the ratio of women was 26.6%, which is a 2.7% increase compared to the period of 2004 to 2011, and 1.4% to that of 2011 to 2016; (ii) at the district level the proportion was 27.5%, representing an increase of 4.5% compared to the period of 2004 to 2011 and 2.9% to that of 2011 to 2016; and (iii) at the communal level the proportion was 26.6%, reflecting an increase of 7.1% compared to the period of 2004 and 2011 and 4.9% to that of 2011 to 2016.

The proportion of women who win elections as deputies to the people's councils has exceeded expectations in some localities, such as 43% for Ho Chi Minh City and nearly 45% for Cau Giay District, Hanoi [35].

Similar to the situation in the Party system, the proportion of women in the National Assembly and in people's councils is not really "sustainable" and shows variability. For example, the proportion of female deputies in the National Assembly

decreased across two consecutive tenures - figures show that, after the participation of 26.2% in the 10th tenure rose slightly to 27.3% in the 11th tenure, the 12th tenure saw a percentage drop to below the 10th tenure levels - 25.8%, and a second decrease came in the 13th tenure with 24.4%, before participation levels rose again in the 14th tenure with 26.72% [35]. In the 2016 to 2021 tenure, the proportion of women participating in the people's councils was 26.6% at the communal level, 27.5% at the district level, and 26.6% at the provincial level (Table 2). Meanwhile, the proportion of women in Hanoi's People's Council was 28.5%. These figures show little significant difference in the numbers at higher and lower levels. The percentage of politically active women at the grassroots level is currently underwhelming compared to the ratio at higher echelons and needs to increase.

Table 2: Female deputies in National Assembly and People's Councils at Provincial, District and Communal Levels by Tenure (%)

Content	Tenure 2004 - 2011	Tenure 2011 - 2016	Tenure 2016 - 2021
Number of women in the National Assembly/Ratio (%)	127/25.8	122/24.4	132/26.8
Proportion of female members in people's councils at all levels			
Province/city level	23.9	25.2	26.6
District/town level	23.0	24.6	27.5
Commune/ward/township level	19.5	21.7	26.6

Source: Luong Van Tuan (2018), "Realisation of Regulations on Women Participating in Political Affairs in Vietnam", *Journal of Legislative Studies*, http://lapphap.vn/Pages/tintuc/tinchitiet.aspx?tintucid=207433

Local political activities nurture talent and provide good grounding to enhance the participation of women at higher levels. The proportion of women participating in people's councils is still significantly lower than men. Table 2, as previously mentioned in this sub-heading, does highlight the proportion of women in these councils during the 2016 to 2021 tenure. The ratios of 26.6% at the provincial level, 27.5% at the district level, and 26.6% at the communal level show women account for just under one third of the deputies. However, the total number of men and women in Vietnam's population is roughly equal, hence, the gender split in politics is unrepresentative of the population as a whole.

3.3. Women's participation in the political system in Hanoi and some localities

In Hanoi, in the election of deputies of the National Assembly of the 14th tenure, and members of the people's councils at all

levels for the term 2016 to 2021, the authorities attached great importance to putting female cadres forward for election. After the third round of consultation of the candidates' list, 15 women out of 37 persons (40.5%) stood for the position of deputies of the National Assembly, and 66 women out of 178 candidates (37%) stood to be deputies of the people's councils. This is a fairly high proportion compared to the whole country. After the elections, the following were nominated: 30 deputies to the National Assembly, of whom nine were women (30%); 105 members to the city's People's Council, 25 were women (23.8%); 1,183 members of the districts' people's councils including 356 women (30%); and 15,816 members to the communal people's councils, of whom 4,510 were women (28.5%) [30].

These statistics show an increase in women's participation in these areas compared to the 2011 to 2016 term. Hanoi is also one of the localities with a woman serving in the top leadership of the people's councils for two consecutive tenures (2011 to 2016 and 2016 to 2021). These statistics demonstrate the sterling efforts of each woman in particular, and the great attention paid by the city leaders in supporting the cause of women's advancement. At provincial and district levels the proportion of female cadres, civil servants and public employees from ethnic minorities is also on the rise. For example, in Dien Bien Province, the prevalence of women working in the public sector accounts for 36%, of whom 18.7% are from the ethnic minorities. Respective figures at provincial and district levels for Lao Cai Province are 62.2% and 15%, and 56.84% and 12.5% in Kon Tum Province [17]. These statistics confirm an elevation in the status of women from Vietnam's ethnic minorities, and clearly a gradual improvement in their lives in both material and non-material aspects. Following the 2015 to 2020 Party committee congresses, at the grassroots level, the number of Party committee female members accounted for 19.69%, while some Party executive boards had a high proportion of women, such as 60% in Thuy Phuong Ward, Bac Tu Liem District (Hanoi), and also 60% in Ward 3, Binh Thanh District (Ho Chi Minh City) [14, pp.39-41,53].

In assessing the role of women in organisations with regard to expressing opinions and solving local social issues, it can be seen that the majority of female cadres did put forward their views in meetings of Party committees, local administrations, and people's councils. In particular, at the communal level more comments are put forward than at the district one. In the surveyed localities, the female cadres actively expressed their opinions on local social issues such as environmental protection, vocational training, prevention of social evils, child nutrition, and prevention of domestic violence [16, pp.48-61]. Female members of Hanoi Municipal People's Council spend high amounts of time and multiple efforts reviewing documents and draft policies submitted to the council before its meetings, conducting studies and collecting information to provide inputs to the drafts. They also participate in all the meetings with open and frank opinions, giving constructive critical feedback and comments, and making practical recommendations to enable the city's people's councils to take just and viable decisions. Statistics relating to the number of remarks and observations made

by female members in discussions on the socio-economic situation during Hanoi's people's council meetings show that six female members out of 18 in total made comments in the 6th meeting (33.3%), while the figure rose to eight female members out of 21 in the 11th meeting (39%). Many female members also proactively engage in the Q&A sessions requesting answers from the municipal administration, and activities of oversight, which are among the roles of municipal councillors [15].

Statistics and analysis point to a modest take-up rate of women who participate in the Party executive boards, the people's councils and the political system at all levels, which rather limits the role of women in the political arena.

For example, decisions relating to activities of people-elected bodies are taken by majority vote. Therefore, if the presence of women is small, then their opinions are in the minority, and their influence seems to be somewhat limited when votes are cast on gender-related issues with a conflict of interest in terms of gender [27, pp.19-25].

In addition, a fair size gap remains between male and female in decision-making positions, and such power at all levels still resides with men. In fact, the number of female leaders and managers in Party agencies remains modest with only 10% in the Party Central Committee 12th tenure and 15.8% in the Politburo (three members). In the 2011 to 2016 tenure, the proportion of chairwomen of people's councils was 6.35% at the provincial level, 5.5% at the district level, and 5.69% at the communal level. The respective figures for vice-chairwomen was 20.31%, 20.86%, and 13.67% [24].

4. Several barriers to women's participation in the political system

Opportunities for Vietnamese women's advancement still face some hindrances within the country's policies and procedures. Despite, for example, a change in the retirement age for women, some differences with their male counterparts still remain, such as age requirements for training schemes, minimum age for employment, and so on.

Gender stereotypes and the tendency to favour men over women still persist. Moreover, female cadres also face obstacles from their own female colleagues with gender stereotypes and prejudice. When it comes to appointing a manager, 25.2% of women respondents say they would appoint a man and only 8.7% would select a woman [24].

The work of planning, training, and retraining female cadres, particularly from the grassroots level, is inadequate and not even strategically focused. The roles of those holding responsible positions, including heads of agencies and the Party executive boards at all levels, are of particular importance to the work of supporting female cadres' advancement. In some instances, in the Party executive boards and the administrations, there is still limited awareness of gender equality. Hence, gender mainstreaming is not efficiently embraced in training schemes for, and promotion of, female cadres [23, pp.46-59].

During the period 2011 to 2020 the gender equality targets in political participation were not integrated into local socio-economic development plans and the strategies devised by ministries/sectors. Gender mainstreaming is often difficult to implement due to the lack of leadership

commitment, appropriate strategy, available resources, and experienced staff, while a system of monitoring and evaluation and accountability is required, and more data for gender inequality analysis are needed [19, pp.25-28]. Mass political organisations have not fully played their part in recruiting, introducing, and especially fostering female candidates. In addition, there is not enough focus on nurturing basic skills which are necessary for female candidates. In-depth studies on women's leadership training are also insufficient.

Responsible agencies at all levels have not attached enough importance to promoting and utilising the position and role of women in society.

There is a lack of social support services to help women reduce the burden of household duties (pre-school education, public health, and so on), and men do not do their share of work in the home and family life. This indirectly affects women when they have to balance social activities and looking after the family.

A number of female cadres and civil servants are still insufficiently confident and pleased with what they currently have. This leads to a limited vision and poor creativity and dynamism in management. Such women are not proactive in overcoming difficulties, nor do they try to improve their overall knowledge to deal with new requirements [22, pp.8-13].

5. Conclusion

In the current context, with the trend in women's participation in politics in Vietnam, there has been an increase in the percentage of women on the Party executive boards, people's councils, and in the political system at all levels. However, this increase has not met the targets set for each period, which is not commensurate with the potential of women and available resources. This leads to a partial limitation in the role women play in the country's political activities. In the future, in order to maintain the increase in the proportion of women participating in the wide political arena and enhance their role, it is crucial to implement a number of measures at the same time throughout society, from dissemination and mobilisation to completion of the procedures and policies. Building a supply base of female cadres in the political system must fit the country's development characteristics and level, and meet the requirements of the current international integration process [6, pp.48-53].

In the first place, attention needs to be given to changing society's underlying perceptions of the position and role of women. There should be equality in the social position of men and women in all aspects. Both the sexes are entitled to jointly participate in all areas of social activities; they both have the right and a responsibility to participate in the country's leadership, management, and administration. It is also essential to abolish the social prejudice of "favouring men over women". In recent years women in people's councils and the political system at all levels have contributed strength and wisdom to leadership and management activities, thereby making a valuable contribution to socio-economic development both in each locality and nationwide. Therefore, within political organisations at all levels, it is important to remove the perception that securing a certain percentage of women in the political system

is done purely to “meet the set targets” or “to have a neat and tidy male/female ratio” [as a kind of window dressing - *translator's note*].

Having a woman qualified as an elected representative and holding a significant decision-making position requires a lot of time and effort. Therefore, it is essential to: (i) pay attention to the planning for and building a source of female cadres, and improving women’s capacity in all aspects since the early stages; (ii) combine the planning with training and retraining and utilisation of female cadres in a continual and sustainable manner; and (iii) learn from the experience of implementing the provisions set out in the law on gender equality, first of all, on regulations governing the age for employee training, retraining, career planning, job appointment and promotion, and propose timely solutions to address limitations in the work of supporting female cadres' advancement.

Policies on women need to be finalised in a synchronous manner to create all conditions for women themselves to proactively overcome difficulties and be able to assert themselves in life and work.

One aspect that cannot be overlooked despite the good mechanisms and policies in place is the female cadres themselves. They must overcome a bigger hurdle which is their lack of self-confidence to become more proactive and enthusiastic for affirming their status and role in society. Moreover, they need to enhance their knowledge, develop their skills, and maintain a strong position in order to assume the responsibilities assigned by the Party, the State, and their community. Women's social position and role should not be taken for granted. They are formed, shaped and developed through their active participation in all areas and levels of social and political activities.

Note

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