

STRENGTHENING FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION – A SOLUTION TO PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract

Promoting female political participation is a core issue associated with the prosperity and sustainable development of each nation. Female political participation not only helps individual women to advance, but also enhances progress for families, communities, and national development. Female political participation enhances women's voices, representation, decision-making rights, gender equality, and social progress. This paper emphasizes the need to promote female political participation both internationally and nationally, highlights the importance of female political participation, and analyzes opportunities and challenges for women in politics. The article also proposes solutions to promote female political participation and to increase the proportion of women in politics in Vietnam, for which the Vietnam Women's Union, an important sociopolitical organization striving for the legitimate rights and interests of women, can play an active role.

Keywords: Challenges; Female political participation; Gender equality; Opportunity; Solution.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Strengthening female political participation is one of the solutions to promote gender equality, as each country's gender equality is measured by the World Economic Forum (WEF) with four indicators: political empowerment, economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival. Of the above important indicators, the political power index (also known as the political decentralized index) remains at a low level worldwide. Gender differences in the political field remain high compared to the rest of the indicators. Even though political empowerment is the index with the most effective improvement, the political sector has only narrowed 24.7% of the gender gap as of 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Promoting the participation of women in politics has always been an urgent issue. According to Mazad (2020), in general, women globally still suffer from inequalities in political participation as well as in all areas of social life. Women are still subject to gender stereotypes in political participation and face institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers. These barriers can be resolved with the coordinated and determined participation of government, society, the media, academia, young people, men, and everyone in society.

The Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum calculates the Gender Gap Index (GGI) based on the following indicators: (1) Economic participation and opportunity, represented by labor force participation rates, wage differentials, and participation in senior management positions; (2) Educational attainment, represented by the level of access to basic and higher education; (3) Health and survival, represented by life expectancy and sex ratio; and (4) Political empowerment, represented by the degree of participation in decision-making structures.

The Gender Gap Index ranges from 0.00 (inequality) to 1.00 (equality). The closer the index is to 1, the smaller the gender gap. The world has experienced an increase in the number of women in politics; however, the political power index is still the lowest of the above indicators, at 0.25 compared to the previous year. In comparison, indicators related to the economy (0.58), education (0.96) and health (nearly 0.96) are much higher (World Economic Forum, 2020). Therefore, countries need to make a greater effort to close the gender gap, especially the gender gap in the political and economic fields.

2. REQUIREMENTS FOR THE PROMOTION OF FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Promoting female political participation is both an international and national requirement, aiming to strengthen women's autonomy, promote gender equality, and social progress.

The United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* confirmed in Article 1 that all human beings are born equal in rights and dignity (United Nations,

1948). Article 21 affirms that everyone has the right to participate in government and politics. Thus, women have the same right to participate in politics as men.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966) emphasized that human beings have the right to self-determination and to determine their political position; they have the right to vote and the right to be voted for by others. In the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)*, the United Nations (1979) required States that are parties to the Convention to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in political life, ensuring that women are equal with men in participating in all elections and referendums and have the right to stand for election to all elected bodies (Article 7).

Next, the *Beijing Platform for Action* affirmed that gender balance in political participation and decision-making is an important international goal. Accordingly, women have the right to participate fully in all areas of social life, including participation in decision-making and access to power, which are fundamental to achieving gender equality and development (United Nations, 1995).

Most recently, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls in the Sustainable Development Goals 5 (SDG5), which includes empowering women in politics (United Nations, 2015).

Countries around the world have struggled for years to close the gender gap in voting rights. New Zealand in 1893 was the first country in the world where women won the right to vote. New Zealand men had the right to vote since 1853, 40 years ahead of women. In the United States, American women won the right to vote in 1920, about 50 years later than African-American men. Saudi Arabia was the last country in the world where women won the right to vote, in 2015. Thus, it took hundreds of years for women worldwide to succeed in gaining the right to vote. To achieve gender equality in politics, there is still a long and arduous way to go.

In Vietnam, women and men first had the right to vote in the first general election of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on January 6, 1946. Over the years, Vietnam has signed many important international conventions promoting gender equality and empowering women, thereby creating favorable conditions for women to participate and make active contributions in different areas of social life. The Vietnamese government has issued various important legal documents and resolutions to promote women's participation in politics. The *2013 Vietnamese Constitution* (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013) stipulates that "male and female citizens are equal in all aspects. The State has policies to ensure gender equality rights and opportunities" (Clause 1, Article 26) and "gender discrimination is strictly prohibited" (Clause 3, Article 26). Clause 2, Article 26 of the 2013 Constitution clearly states: "The State, society and family create conditions for women to develop comprehensively and promote their roles in society." This is a solid legal basis to promote the participation of women in all areas of social life, including politics.

Clause 3, Article 11 of the *Law on Gender Equality* (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2006) emphasized that men and women have equal rights to stand for self-nomination and to be nominated for election to the National Assembly and the People's Council. Men and women may stand for self-nomination and be nominated to be candidates for leadership positions of political organizations, sociopolitical organizations, sociopolitical-professional organizations, social organizations, and social-professional organizations.

Previously, Resolution 11-NQ/TW of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Vietnam dated 27/4/2007 on the Work for Women in the Period of Accelerating Industrialization and Modernization (Central Committee, 2007) clearly pointed out that the percentage of women involved in leadership and management is low and not commensurate with the capabilities and development of the female workforce. Moreover, the source of female cadres is still limited, and the proportion of female cadres has decreased in some fields. With the determination to encourage women to participate in politics, Directive 21-CT/TW dated January 20, 2018, of the Secretariat on continuing to promote women's work in the new situation (Central Committee, 2018) once again affirms the determination of the Party and State in strengthening the work of female cadres, creating favorable conditions for women to participate in all fields of social life and to develop comprehensively.

3. REASONS FOR THE NEED TO HAVE MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

There are many reasons for the need for more women to join leadership and management positions. *First, for the sake of fairness.* According to World Bank data, women make up 49.58% of the world's population (World Bank, 2019). With nearly 50% of the population, women need corresponding representation in decision-making positions so that they can represent their gender and promote progress and social justice.

Second, for the legitimate interests of each gender. Any policy or law aims to solve a specific policy problem to meet the needs of the beneficiaries. Women and men have different body structures and different needs and expectations, so policy decisions need to pay attention to the gender needs and gender interests of specific beneficiaries. Policy efficiency will not be high if the policy-making process relies solely on men, especially in the context of a patriarchal society. Promoting women's participation in leadership and management positions serves to increase participation, voice, representative roles, and decision-making rights for women, thereby ensuring the legitimate interests of women in relation to men.

Third, because of experience. Women and men experience life differently. Women need to participate in influential positions and to have a decision-making role to express their opinions. Women have experience in motherhood and experience as women, so they can come up with good solutions to ensure legal rights and interests for women and children.

Fourth, for sustainable development. In fact, parliaments that have more women enact more policies and laws designed to protect people and the environment compared to those with less female representation. Due to gender specificity, women are more interested in solving the problems of women and children – the future generation of the country (United Nations Development Programme, 2015). There cannot be sustainable development without progress on gender equality (United Nations, 2015), including gender equality in politics.

Fifth, women have certain soft abilities and powers in leadership. With the change of world politics, pure “muscular” power and manpower no longer bring the desired effect. Currently, “soft power” is considered a tool, tactic, or an advantage to improve the performance of many governments around the world. For example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel has succeeded in solving conflicts, crises, and migrant issues in Europe. She has been repeatedly ranked by Forbes Magazine as the most powerful woman in the world. From 2005 to 2021, she has steadily run Europe’s largest economy. Meanwhile, in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern gives people a new sense of soft power and receives their support (“A new kind,” 2020).

In addition, women are very flexible in responding to difficult situations. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, many female heads of state are highly regarded for their tough, assertive, and innovative responses to the pandemic, which have achieved impressive results. Obviously, they have shown outstanding leadership talent in crisis. The acumen, caution, and humanity of the woman – the mother in the family – makes them successful with their decisions in politics.

One of the earliest leaders to take action to prevent COVID-19 was Tsai Ing-wen, the president of Taiwan. As early as January 2020, when the new epidemic appeared, she issued 124 measures to counter the epidemic. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has enacted tough measures since the first six cases of COVID-19. She completely banned foreigners from entering and quarantined for 14 days all New Zealand citizens returning home. In Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who holds a doctorate in chemistry, the country implemented Europe’s largest COVID-19 testing program, which helped detect the virus early to isolate and treat patients effectively. A Nordic country, Iceland, under the direction of Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir, conducted free COVID-19 testing for all citizens, achieving the highest rate of per-person testing in the world.

Meanwhile, Finland’s female leader, Prime Minister Sanna Marin, uses social media and celebrities to spread information about COVID-19 prevention. Prime Minister Erna Solberg of Norway made the breakthrough idea of holding a press conference for children to answer children’s questions across the country about COVID-19.

The success of female heads of state is remarkable as women make up less than 7% of world leaders (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020). The success of female politicians in responding to COVID-19 shows that gender equality is critical to public health and world security and that the world needs more female heads of state.

4. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD AND IN VIETNAM

The Women in Politics map, created by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women, presents global rankings for women in executive, government, and parliamentary positions. The map describes the global ranking of the number of women participating in law enforcement agencies and parliaments worldwide as of January 1 every year. In the last two years, the Women in Politics map shows many advances in gender equality in politics.

Women's role in political decisions continues to grow but slowly, despite the number of countries with female heads of state, ministers, and spokeswomen accounting for the highest rate ever (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020). The proportion of women in the national assemblies of the Nordic countries continues to lead the world with 43.9%, making the region consistently rank high in the index of women's power and gender equality. Significantly, most Nordic countries currently have a female head of state, namely, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway. This is followed by the Americas with a female share in the national assemblies of 31.3%, European countries (not including Northern Europe) with 28.8%, and sub-Saharan African countries with 24.4%. In Asia, the proportion of women in national assemblies is 20%, in Pacific countries it is 19.4% (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020).

Meanwhile, the 2021 Women in Politics map indicates that, despite the increase in the number of women at the highest level of political power, gender inequality persists and gender equality in politics is increasing slowly. The number of countries without women in government has increased. Only 25.5% of the members of parliaments are female compared to 24.9% in 2020 (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2021). Twenty-five years after the advent of the *Beijing Platform for Action* in 1995, with the goal of achieving gender balance in politics, the role of women's representation in the political field remains limited.

The Women in Politics maps from 2016 to 2021 confirm that gender equality in politics is progressing slowly in many regions as well as in various countries. This makes the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG5 on gender equality and empowering women and girls globally, difficult to achieve.

In politics, female national leaders show that their political bravery as well as their talent is not inferior to men, making a good impression on the people in the country and in the world. The youngest female head of a country in the world today is Sanna Marin, the female prime minister of Finland, appointed in December 2019 at the age of 34. Marin is the third female prime minister of Finland, a Nordic country with a population of about 5.5 million. As soon as she was appointed prime minister, she said that during her four-year tenure, she wanted to build a society where every child could become whoever they want, and that every citizen could live to old age with dignity ("Who is Sanna Marin," 2019).

Earlier, New Zealand's female national leader, Jacinda Ardern, was elected prime minister in 2017 at the age of 37. She is New Zealand's youngest prime minister in 150 years. Her words on the cover of Time Magazine in early 2020, "Know us by our deeds," along with her image became famous: on the one hand, expressing the strength and determination of the leader and, on the other hand, expressing a leadership strategy with specific actions.

In Asia, Tsai Ing-wen was re-elected as Taiwan's prime minister in January 2020 with a high level of popular support. Asian political history has recorded the names of female politicians such as the former South Korean president (Park Geun He), the former prime minister of Thailand (Yingluck Shinawatra), and the former president of the Philippines (Gloria Macaraeg Macapagal-Arroyo). In Vietnam, we have talented and prestigious female politicians, such as Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan, Dang Ngoc Thinh, and Nguyen Thi Binh. Obviously, women can competently take important positions in politics, effectively contributing to the development of the nation. The people of Asia and people worldwide have shown considerable support for the leadership of female prime ministers and presidents.

In fact, the percentage of women's political participation is limited. In Asia, the proportion of women in politics has only reached 20% (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020). In Vietnam, the 1st National Assembly (term 1946-1960) had only 10 female delegates. The proportion of female members in the 14th National Assembly (term 2016-2021) reached 26.72% – a relatively high percentage compared to other countries in the region and the world, but not yet reaching the goal of 35%. During the 15th National Assembly (term 2021-2026), the proportion of female National Assembly members reached more than 30% (3.54% higher than the previous term). Some provinces have a high percentage of female National Assembly members, namely, Nam Dinh (50%), Dak Lak (55.56%), and Tuyen Quang (66.67%). Vietnam was ranked 71st in the world and 9th in Asia; now Vietnam ranks 51st in the world and 4th in Asia. Thus, we have made great progress in female political participation (Vietnam Women's Union, 2021).

5. ADVANTAGES AND DIFFICULTIES FOR WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN POLITICS IN VIETNAM

Vietnam has a relatively solid legal framework for promoting gender equality overall and in politics. As analyzed above, Vietnam has signed many international conventions to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in different areas of life. The Constitution, as well as Vietnamese law, clearly show solid views to promote the role, position, and great potential of women, contributing to the sustainable development of the country. Several important solutions have been implemented to promote women's participation in politics, such as the support policy to allocate women on the list of candidates to encourage the promotion of more women to the Party, etc. To improve the preparedness of female candidates to the National Assembly and to the People's Committee and to increase their chances of success, the Vietnam Women's Union organizes training classes before each election to prepare female candidates, to

equip them with knowledge and skills on gender equality and leadership, and to support the strengthening of women's political participation.

Along with the development of society, the role of Vietnamese women is increasingly being strengthened in social and family life. Women now have more opportunities to develop and to participate in cultural, political, and social life, and their qualifications and understanding are enhanced. Women are more confident and proactive in seizing development opportunities, including opportunities to participate in political arenas.

However, there are still many barriers limiting women's participation in the political field in Vietnam, including stereotypes about gender roles and inequalities in access to and control over resources.

Sociocultural stereotypes and traditional gender roles. Society has changed in a positive way, but the traditional gender view of "men are public, women are private" still exists. Society still expects women to take care of their families rather than to see them in politics. Besides, there is a prejudice about women's ability to participate in leadership, such as the perception of "male chief, female deputy" that makes women less supported in influential leadership positions. Often, women must make twice the effort to be admitted.

The institutional barrier has a significant impact on women's ability to participate in politics. The institutional barrier can be recognized through gender differences in retirement age that limit women's participation in senior leadership positions and their opportunities to be elected to higher positions. In addition, the percentage of women participating in the Party committee is still low. In the 2016-2021 term, female membership in the Party Central Committee only reached 10%; at the provincial level it was 13.44%, at the district level 17.21%, and at the commune level 21.48% (Vuong, 2019). With such limited party committee participation, women have not yet represented a large political force in society. In addition, the shortage of female staff in some important areas makes women's participation limited.

Difficulties in accessing educational programs for girls, especially in mountainous and remote areas. Although the Party and the State have paid great attention to improving educational access for children, especially girls in remote mountainous areas, access to educational programs for girls is limited. The gender gap is evident in the data on literacy rates of ethnic minority women and men. Specifically, at the age of 15 and over, only 72.7% of ethnic minority women know the Vietnamese language compared to 85.53% for ethnic minority men. For those aged 65 and over, only 39.08% of ethnic minority women can read and write Vietnamese, while the figure for ethnic minority men is 65.87% (Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs et al., 2018). The difference in reading and writing rates is also evident between ethnic minority women and Kinh ethnic women (72.7% and 94.69%, respectively) (Irish Aid et al., 2017). The percentage of ethnic minority women participating in the political system over the years is still low, reaching only 32.30% of the total number of female delegates

in the 14th National Assembly (Vietnam Women's Union & Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, 2019).

6. SOLUTIONS TO FOSTER FEMALE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

To promote the participation of women in politics, it is necessary to carry out comprehensive solutions. On the one hand, this requires solving limitations and removing barriers for women to participate in politics; on the other hand, promoting women's capabilities and creating favorable conditions for women to access and control key opportunities are also needed. Some of the following specific solutions may be promoted.

Eradicate gender stereotypes in society. Raising gender awareness and eradicating gender stereotypes regarding female leaders and politicians is needed at several levels. At the macro level, it is necessary to strengthen the elaboration, amendment and supplementation of laws and policies on gender equality and to promote the implementation of resolutions and policies on gender equality and women's work. Multilateral and bilateral international cooperation should be promoted regarding gender equality, mobilizing resources to fully implement the National Strategy on Gender Equality in specific periods. At the intermediate level, ministries and bureaus should consider gender equality as an ongoing goal, promoting its development along with other economic, political, and social goals. On the other hand, it is necessary to pay attention to narrowing the gender gap in regions and localities both in terms of awareness and action.

Ministries, agencies, and organizations should promote propaganda to raise awareness of officials and communication activities towards people to change gender stereotypes, roles, and positions of women, strengthening the commitment of the head of the organization in directing the implementation of policy legislation on gender equality. At the micro level, each citizen needs to raise their determination and responsibility to eliminate gender stereotypes and social prejudices, to make efforts to best promote their potentials and strengths, and to contribute to the sustainable development of the country.

Continue the implementation of gender quotas in parallel with improving the quality of female candidates to parliament and people's councils at all levels. Gender quotas are an important requirement to ensure participation by women, and they are considered an appropriate solution to address the limited proportion of women participating in politics (World Bank, 2012). Currently, 130 countries apply gender quotas to ensure female participation in electoral bodies. The introduction of gender restrictions has increased the proportion of women participating from 23.4% in 2017 to 24.3% in 2018 (up 0.9%), and growth has continued to 24.47% in 2020 ("New IPU Report," 2019; World Economic Forum, 2020). However, implementing gender quotas is not enough; it is necessary to combine quotas with improving the quality of female candidates as a basic long-term solution. This solution is relevant to the theory of participation and decision-making rights. Accordingly, participation is insufficient;

more importantly, participants must have a voice, the right to representation, and the right to make decisions. Besides, women themselves need to constantly learn and improve their qualifications to meet the continuous requirements of the times.

It is necessary to affirm the position and important role of sociopolitical organizations, especially those of the Vietnam Women's Union, in promoting women's political empowerment. The Vietnam Women's Union should strengthen the role and contribution of professional departments such as the Policy and Law Department, the Department of Propaganda, and the Vietnam Women's Academy in propagating policy and legislation on gender equality and women's participation. The Union should strengthen research, seminars, and communication activities on female political participation, and promote the teaching of gender topics and modules, such as gender in public policy and gender in politics to students, female staff, and official ministries and bureaus. The staff and every member of the Vietnam Women's Union need to raise their responsibilities in promoting the confidence of women and girls, so that they can be the driving force for change. In the long term, the Vietnam Women's Union should consider setting up a Women's Talent Support Center (Vietnam Women's Academy, 2018), thereby promoting the training of young female talents and introducing them to leadership positions.

7. CONCLUSION

Promoting women's participation in politics is essential to ensure the voice of representation and the realization of women's experiences and aspirations. This is an important condition for closing the gender gap in each country and globally, as increasing political power is one of the key indicators to promote gender equality, along with economics, education, and health. National and international law, therefore, must support the promotion of women's political participation as a solution to promote gender equality and women's progress.

Worldwide, as well as in Vietnam, the percentage of female political participation is low. Vietnamese women are motivated by favorable provisions of laws and policies; however, they still face various gender obstacles and social prejudices. To motivate women to participate in politics, it is necessary to implement comprehensive solutions at the macro, meso, and micro levels. In addition, it is essential to have male support for female political participation and representation. In other words, to motivate women to participate effectively in politics, it is necessary to have the determination of the whole Party, the entire people, the political system, everyone, family, and society.

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