

POLICY BRIEF

Comprehensive Leadership Capacity Building in Viet Nam – An Effective Way to Increase the Representation of Women



Ministry of Foreign Affairs



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This policy brief draws on the research report “Women’s Leadership in Viet Nam: Leveraging a Resource Untapped”, commissioned by the Women’s Leadership project of UNDP Viet Nam and the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on an analysis of 37 Vietnamese and global leadership programmes, the brief recommends how to best design an effective leadership capacity building initiative that will increase women’s representation in the political and public sector in Viet Nam. The policy brief also sets out the main barriers to women’s leadership growth. It is important that these barriers are understood and taken into account for any capacity building initiative to be successful.

Women’s representation in Viet Nam

Viet Nam has targets in place for women’s political and public sector representation. However, these do not reflect the current situation. For example, women’s representation in the National Assembly is 24 per cent, the lowest level in the last four terms. There are only 18 women members out of the 200-member Central Committee, the highest authority of the Communist Party, representing just nine per cent of Committee membership. Compared to other countries, Viet Nam has also seen a decline in women’s national political representation. In 1995, the country was ranked 9th globally, but dropped to 36th in 2010 and 50th in 2014. Only seven per cent of Director General positions within ministries are held by women. Clearly, much more needs to be done to increase women’s leadership in the political and public sector.ⁱ

What is hindering women’s leadership growth?

Discriminatory legal frameworks and policies

The 2010 Decree 18 outlines public sector training requirements for civil servants. According to Article 4 of the decree, certificates from government training programmes are required in order to be promoted in the public sector. However, significantly less women than men are nominated to take part in these official training programmes and as a result, they do not have the required certificates to be eligible for promotion.

One reason for the lower number of women in government training programmes is the participation requirement. Female and male civil servants share the same requirements: applicants must have three to five years of work experience and be on average 26-28 years old. However, as women in their late twenties are much more likely to be occupied with marriage, raising children and tending to a family, the number of women participating in training is much lower than men.

For example, more than half (59 per cent) of female civil servants have never attended a training course, and women only account for 10-20 per cent of participants in political theory and public



Mme Ton Nu Thi Ninh, former Ambassador and Member of Parliament, delivers advice on good leadership to senior managers in Da Nang

ⁱ See Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2012, www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm; EOWP, Women’s Political Representation in Viet Nam.

administration courses at the central level. Furthermore, while 38 per cent of female officials have attended one to two training courses, 42 per cent of men have, and the percentage of female and male officials attending three training courses is three and nine per cent respectively.ⁱⁱ

In addition, because women hold fewer senior leadership positions than male civil servants, their access to advanced training sessions is also limited and this restricts them from attaining the required certifications for further promotion.

“Civil servants and public officials can only be nominated for Master’s and PhD degrees before the age of 40, which is a barrier for women because women tend to have more free time for their profession after the age of 45 when their children are grown up, but they have limited opportunities with this policy.”

- Male participant, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics and Public Administration (HCMA) training programme

An even more serious barrier is Viet Nam’s retirement age regulation. The Labour Code states that women are required to retire at age 55, whereas men retire at 60. As a result of this five-year gap, leaders are more likely to choose men to be promoted because they have more time to contribute to public service.

“When women are the same age as men, the former tend to be more experienced and mature. However, Decision 27 on civil servant promotion presents challenges for women civil servants, especially young ones. Women civil servants have to be appointed before the age of 50 and men by the age of 55. While women have to retire at the age of 55, male civil servants can work until the age of 60. This hurts women because they do not have much time before or after the age of 40 to contribute intensively to their profession.”

- Male participant, HCMA training programme



Training courses that offer the opportunity to practice public speaking give women the boost needed to speak confidently

Gender-related stereotypes and norms

Patriarchal attitudes are still common in Viet Nam, including in the workplace, where there is a pervasive stereotype that men are more capable than women. As a result, when there are two equally qualified candidates for a leadership position or elected office, employers and voters have a tendency to choose men over women, based on the perception that they are more capable leaders. Another stereotype is the assumption that women will leave public service to have children and therefore contribute less work over time. Women also suffer from their own prejudices and underestimations, and many Vietnamese women are not confident about their competencies.

Lack of access to informal resources and levers of influence

Informal factors, such as career support networks and access to influential leaders, help both men and women to be promoted. Studies show, however, that men tend to have stronger career support networks than women. As there are fewer women in senior positions, there are correspondingly fewer support networks available to provide these critical relationships for women. Because of their family responsibilities, women also tend to have less time than men for social activities outside of the workplace that help to build peer networks.

ⁱⁱ See National Administrative Academy and AusAID, 2005, pp25, 29; Viet Nam Women’s Union, 2009; Jean Munro, Women’s Representation in Leadership in Viet Nam, 2012, p15.

Inadequate leadership training

The research report found that even when women do attend government-supported training programmes, these programmes are not gender-sensitive or comprehensive enough to empower a significant number of women to advance in the public sector. The programmes focus narrowly on skills attainment, and rarely attempt to assess the unique training requirements of women in leadership. As a result, curricula and training methodologies are often gender-blind and do not address the real needs of women. Furthermore, none of the surveyed government-funded programmes use gender as a criterion for selecting trainers. Non-government funded programmes on the other hand are often more gender-responsive and use a more participatory teaching methodology. However, these programmes do not provide the official certificates that are needed for promotion and they are often not financially sustainable in the long term.

In general, very few existing training programmes focus on building career support networks that can provide women with access to useful channels of power. Neither do they attempt to change attitudes among men and women about the value of women's leadership. There is also little effort to conduct systematic evaluations and assess long-term impact, or to provide gender-disaggregated data. As a result, there is little data on the number of women who participate in existing training programmes or the effect of participation on their further promotion opportunities.



Enhancing opportunities for all Vietnamese women ensures a more representative government

Key elements of a successful women's leadership initiative

In order to be successful, a comprehensive capacity building initiative to promote women's political and public sector leadership needs to take all these barriers into account when designing its approach. Being aware of existing barriers will, for instance, help to determine how to select participants, how to effectively address stereotypes and how to address women's training needs, such as helping them to build career support networks. In addition, any initiative, whether new or existing, needs to address the following recommendations if it is to have substantial impact.

Analyse formal barriers

As mentioned earlier, Vietnamese women face a range of obstacles that hinder their leadership advancement, including legal and policy barriers. These include policies on nomination for training opportunities, the age for promotion and retirement requirements. While a capacity building initiative on its own is not able to address all these barriers, it is important that training participants are aware and have a good understanding of external factors that hinder their advancement. As such, the training content should include a gender analysis of restricting policies and legal frameworks and identify possible ways to overcome these.

Focus on changing attitudes and provide support networks

An effective capacity building initiative needs to go beyond the objective of just improving knowledge and skills. The focus also needs to be on addressing the social and cultural barriers that prevent women from accessing leadership positions, and changing attitudes among men and women on the issue of

women's leadership. This means educating both men and women about the value of collaborative leadership, as well as the specific value of women's contributions to public life.

Changing attitudes also requires developing women's confidence and establishing peer support networks. Such networks can be set up through a structured mentoring programme, which supports women to expand their professional contacts. A well supported mentoring programme also helps women to better navigate office cultures.

Ensure all capacity building programmes provide official certificates



Building support networks for women should be part of a comprehensive leadership training programme

Unlike programmes supported by international organizations, Party and government-supported organizations that provide leadership and management training can confer an officially recognized degree or certificate. These certificates allow civil servants to be promoted or eligible for a salary rise. It is therefore essential that all training programmes, both existing and new, provide such certificates to participants. This will have a direct effect on women's promotion and career advancement opportunities.

Train women at all levels of government, also those not yet in leadership positions

Public sector leadership training mainly targets senior civil servants. However, as such a high proportion of the present leadership in Viet Nam is male, few women are able to participate. Training programmes for women in the public sector should therefore also focus on women aspirants. This will help more women obtain official training certificates and therefore more opportunities to be promoted. Training must also be more widely accessible to women already in leadership. Overall, it is essential that there is government accountability to ensure the minimum 30 per cent women participants in all political training courses, as stipulated in Resolution 11-NQ/TW.

"There was a training on leadership and management skills for department heads and deputies; there were no female participants. To deal with this, there should be flexibility in the criteria for participation. If the criteria for selection remain based upon one's current leadership position, women should be eligible to participate when they are in the pipeline for high leadership positions, as well as those who currently hold these positions. By expanding the pool of eligible applicants, the organization prioritizes gender equality and prepares women to be a resource for leadership and management positions in the future. These ideas should be put into formal human resource policies."

- Male participant and department leader, HCMA training for the Government Inspection

Identify long-term government funding

Leadership and management training offered by the Party and government-supported organizations benefits from regular state funding. It is similarly important to ensure regular funding from the state for other capacity building initiatives targeted at promoting women to senior positions. Dependable resources will allow for long-term planning and financial sustainability. A budget line for women's leadership capacity building initiative should also be included in legal documents on civil servant training, such as Decree 18.

Use interactive training methods and focus on practising skills

Many of those interviewed from the Vietnamese programmes said they would like to limit time spent on theory. They also reported that they learned a lot from the interactive teaching methods offered by international trainers. During training, it is important to allow time for group discussions, sharing experiences and practising skills. Role-playing and other participatory methods can help to boost the confidence and presentation skills of less assured women. Trainers can find the appropriate balance of training methods by conducting needs-based assessments and gathering feedback from participants during and after the training.



Interactive and participatory training methods have greater impact than traditional lectures

Both national and international trainers, as well as men and women trainers, should be used. International trainers often employ participatory exercises and facilitate dynamic discussions, while national trainers are closer to participants in terms of culture and communication and can offer relevant practical experience.

Programmes that include insights and real life examples from practitioners provide participants with a broader perspective on the issues being discussed. For women in particular, providing access to senior female leaders and their practical experience can help to demystify leadership and show how other women have overcome the challenges associated with a public career. Active alumni networks and mentors also provide useful on-going support and guidance.

“Academic theories on leadership and management should be included but more examples should be deployed to illustrate the abstract theories and help participants grasp the content faster. The theoretical content should be reduced and the practical content should be increased.”

- Female participant, HCMA training programme

Make best use of existing resources

Among the Vietnamese programmes that were analysed, there was no significant effort to coordinate training, share resources or build on the successes and lessons learned of other programmes. For example, although it could be very beneficial, curricula is not shared between training organizations and programmes. In order to maximize the impact of any leadership capacity building initiative, it is important to make use of existing infrastructure and knowledge within current successful initiatives and identify opportunities to collaborate across organizations.

Set up a comprehensive evaluation process to track impact

Currently, few training programmes carry out evaluations and this makes it difficult to accurately assess long-term impact. Ideally, any leadership initiative should conduct an initial baseline assessment, ongoing evaluations to monitor feedback, as well as a final programme evaluation. It is also useful to conduct a long-term impact assessment sometime after the end of the programme. Only by conducting systematic evaluations is it possible to ensure that training meets the specific needs of women and modify approaches to increase the impact. Any monitoring and evaluation tool should also be coded and analysed by gender in order to provide gender-disaggregated data and feedback on the training.

Collectively, these recommendations will ensure a comprehensive, effective and sustainable women's leadership capacity building initiative that dramatically increases women's opportunities and empowers a significant number of women to advance in the public sector. This, in turn, will create a more inclusive, gender-responsive government that is able to better serve its citizens.

