

Governance and Participation

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REPORT

MEASURES TO ENHANCE GENDER EQUALITY IN POLITICS

International and national experiences
and recommendations for Viet Nam



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Measures to enhance gender equality in politics: International and national experiences and recommendations for Viet Nam

Viet Nam is approaching a critical phase with only two years left to reach the new target of 60 percent of women leaders in key leadership positions outlined in the new National Gender Equality Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030. To support this endeavour, UNDP has commissioned a working paper entitled ***“Measures to enhance gender equality in politics: International and national experiences and recommendations for Viet Nam”***, with the financial support from the Embassy of Ireland.

Utilizing qualitative research methods gathered through desk review and in-depth interviews, the report explores innovative and effective measures from international experiences that can be applied to Viet Nam’s context. It also examines measures that have proved successful at the provincial level in Viet Nam and could be potentially scaled up for national implementation. The report aims to provide recommendations to the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) on the best measures to achieve the national targets on women in politics set out in the current 2021-2030 National Gender Equality Strategy. Additionally, it also provides recommendations to achieve other national targets on women in politics set out by the Party.

KEY FINDINGS

1. International measures to enhance gender equality in politics.

Equalizing retirement age for men and women

Research by OECD, IFC, the World Bank and other organizations reveals that there has been a consistent trend to gradually eliminate the gender-based differential in retirement age, particularly in more developed economies. Simultaneously, there is an increase in the retirement age for all citizens due to longer life expectancies and fiscal pressures. Almost all economies in East and Southeast Asia, with the exceptions of Viet Nam, China, and Cambodia, are moving in a similar direction.

The lower retirement age for women exacerbates the impact of other interruptions in their working lives, such as child-bearing and domestic responsibilities. This results in fewer years worked compared to men and shorter careers for women, leading to lower wages, fewer training opportunities, reduced chances to be in the leadership pipeline, and fewer promotions to higher-ranking positions. Consequently, the limited promotion opportunities

hinder women from attaining the highest leadership positions and the highest salary grades, affecting not only their wages but also their eventual pensions. The broader implication of this situation is that, without a critical mass of women in senior decision-making roles, policies and programs continue to be planned and designed from a predominantly male perspective. This overlooks the needs, priorities, and interests of women, resulting in poorly formulated policies, laws, and decisions. For that reason, equalizing retirement age policy lays the foundation for advancing women in politics.

Party gender quotas

In Ireland, the introduction of compulsory legislative gender quotas called The Electoral (Amendment) (Political Funding) Act 2012 has proven to be a transformative success in enhancing women in politics. The Act mandates that political parties will have their state funding cut by half, unless at least 30 percent of their general election candidates are women. The quota increased to 40 percent in 2023. The result was far-reaching, with the number of elected women rising sharply (from 16 percent in 2011 to 22 percent in 2016 and 22.5 percent in 2020). Ireland's experience underscores the effectiveness of enforceable legal quotas. By obliging parties to make space for women among their slate of candidates, and by introducing a substantial financial incentive for parties to comply, opportunities for politically interested women have increased.

In Australia, the Australian Labour Party (ALP), one of the two main political parties in Australia, adopted the voluntary quota for their party. In 1994, the ALP adopted an Affirmative Action Rule that committed to achieving preselection of women for 35 percent of winnable seats at all parliamentary elections by 2002. In 2012, the ALP Constitution took another step to adopt a 40:40:20 quota model. However, the implementation of the gender quotas faced significant challenges. The party struggled to achieve their set targets because its organizational culture had not undergone substantial change with members still adhering to traditional norms. The ALP's experience highlights that the establishment of a voluntary gender quota within the Party is insufficient on its own. It necessitates continuous assessment and monitoring that will lead to motivation for cultural change over time. The setting of voluntary gender quota should adhere to a step-by-step progression, moving from lower to higher targets, with specific timelines set for each gender goal.

Making gender equality a core value of political parties

The Australian Green Party (The Greens) has made a significant contribution to gender equality through its extensive principles and goals on gender equality and women's empowerment. Their policy includes the goal of achieving 'equal representation of women and men in public life, including women from diverse backgrounds' and a commitment to 'actively promoting women's candidacy '. Although the policy sets expectations rather than

formal rules followed by sanctions for non-compliance, it serves as a powerful public statement of the Greens' values and a clear demonstration of the expectations they hold for their party members.

Enhancing gender equality in leadership at the ministerial level

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade provides a successful model for developing and implementing a Women in Leadership Strategy at the ministerial level, offering valuable insights for Viet Nam. The Ministry developed its Women in Leadership Strategy, which is structured around four key areas. Each area outlines specific actions required to achieve the goals of each field, designates a clear responsible unit for implementation, specifies reporting and monitoring mechanisms, and establishes a clear timeline. As a result, by 2019, women constituted a larger proportion of officers at the Senior Executive Service level reaching 40 percent, and 40 percent of mission heads were women.

After the issuance of the Strategy, the Ministry starts the next step of bringing the Strategy to each unit within the department. This approach has proved to be a very useful experience for Viet Nam. Viet Nam can consider adopting this practice of specifying core actions for smaller units to discuss, commit to and implement at their respective levels. Importantly, we need to establish a specific reporting and monitoring system for implementation, along with clear accountability for smaller units to adhere to. This approach will be conducive to the achievement of the gender targets set out by the government in the National Strategy and the Party's resolutions effectively.

Measures to balance between political life and unpaid care and domestic work

Some initiatives have been taken to unburden unpaid care and domestic work, ensuring that these duties are not solely shouldered by women. Two key initiatives are: (1) childcare support policies and (2) flexible work arrangements.

Childcare support policies

In Australia, the House of Representatives passed a resolution enabling nursing mothers to vote by proxy if they were simultaneously tending to their new-born infants while fulfilling their congressional duties. However, in 2016, this rule was amended with the reason that no member, regardless of gender should be hindered from fully participating in the parliamentary affairs due to childcare responsibilities. As a result, members of the Parliament in the House of Representatives are now allowed to bring their new-born babies into the House chamber. In addition, an on-site childcare facility within the Capitol is available. Its operating hours vary based on parliamentary sitting days, allowing Members of the Parliament to effectively balance work and family obligations. The Australian government also further supports parents with childcare subsidies, which help reduce childcare costs.

In Finland, the government has a policy called "Vanhempainvapaa/Föräldraledighet" to support childcare responsibilities. Parental leave is granted to parents, usually after maternity and paternity leave, allowing both mothers and fathers to take care of their young children without losing their jobs. The benefit is paid by the government at 70 percent of their annual earnings level for 6 months.

Flexible work arrangements

The Australian Public Service Commission recognizes the need for flexible working arrangements to be available to both women and men. These arrangements can take various forms, including working part-time, job sharing, telecommuting, or working remotely, and varying the ordinary start or finish times. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Australia also emphasizes that "Workforce flexibility is not just a gender issue. It is ultimately about productivity."

Development opportunities

There are numerous capacity-building programs designated to encourage women to pursue careers in politics. For example, the "Pathways to politics for women", a collaborative initiative between Melbourne University and Queensland University in Australia or two programs called "the Women in Public Service Program (WPSP)" and the Women's Leadership Program (WLP) in the United States. These initiatives aim to empower women with the tools and support needed to navigate and excel in the political arena.

Drawing from international successful experiences, capacity-building programs should ideally incorporate essential components such as a thorough needs assessment, sufficient timeframe for participants to engage in experiential learning, interactive and participatory methodology, follow-up with participants, cultivation of alumnae networks and other means of ongoing support.

Networking opportunities

Experiences from the United States indicate that states successful in promoting women's participation in their legislatures have consistently established regular, formal networking opportunities for women who are in office or considering running for office. Furthermore, it strongly recommends the creation of more formal networking opportunities that would link potential candidates with each other and with current women politicians. The result will be more women candidates, with a better grasp on the resources and strengths they have.

In Australia, political parties also have established networking frameworks to promote women's political participation. These networks have significantly contributed to the long-term success of political parties in Australia. Interestingly, parallels can be observed between the structure and functions of these networks and the Women's Union in Viet Nam.

Mentoring and coaching programs

Experiences from global training programmes, including the Women in Public Service Program (WPSP), Leadership Beyond Boundaries (LBB), the Irish Institute for Public Administration (IPA) and the NEW leadership programme of the Center for American Women in Politics (CAWP) pointed out that mentorship and coaching can positively affect participants' career prospects and foster long-term personal growth, particularly for women who lack entrenched informal networks. The reason researchers identify coaching and mentoring as "the key element of learning and development" is because one-on-one sessions can provide critical confidence-building, role models, and access to social capital, especially professional connections for career advancement and guidance based on relevant experience.

2. National measures to enhance gender equality in politics

In Viet Nam, several successful measures at the provincial level have effectively promoted gender equality in politics, demonstrating the potential for national scale-up implementation. The report examines several case studies at the provincial level to identify factors that have contributed to their success.

The selection of these provinces was based on four criteria: (1) high percentage of women in key leadership positions at the provincial level; (2) presence of innovative and specific initiatives to enhance women in politics; (3) diversity in geographical regions; and (4) availability for in-depth interviews. Among the provinces meeting these criteria, Bac Kan in the North and Binh Phuoc in the South were chosen, as they are among the top provinces with the highest percentage of women in key leadership positions in Viet Nam. In addition, the report also conducts a desk review of secondary data available in several provinces such as Yen Bai, Lang Son, and Tuyen Quang.

Common characteristics drawn from successful experiences in Binh Phuoc, Bac Kan and the mentioned provinces include strong political will of leaders; the formulation and effective implementation of personnel policies; innovative capacity building program to prepare young women ready to lead; close monitoring by leaders to achieve the targets on women staff; great performance by the provincial women's union in its personnel advisory role; the establishment of a gender-friendly organizational culture; long history of women in key leadership positions; the effectiveness of women leadership's networks; proactive efforts by women to assert and affirm their abilities; and lastly the crucial supports from families of women leaders.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing upon the international experiences and successful practices observed in certain provinces of Viet Nam, the researcher proposed the following recommendations to ensure the achievement of national targets on gender equality in politics set by the government and the party by 2025 and 2030.

Complete the legal framework to ensure substantive gender equality between women and men in all stages of the personnel management process: In the long run, Viet Nam can consider the experiences of many countries that have established equal minimum retirement ages for men and women. As of December 2023, the retirement age gap between men and women in Viet Nam stands at four years and nine months. In the short term, Viet Nam may consider two specific solutions. The first solution involves adjusting the leadership pipeline, training, fostering, rotation, long-term secondment, and appointment policies for men and women to align with the differences in their retirement age. The second solution is to consider developing specific policies for women and men in the leadership pipeline, training, fostering, rotation, long-term secondment, and appointment policies to ensure equality of opportunities and substantive gender equality in personnel policies.

The government may also consider issuing a parental leave policy for both parents that is long enough to ensure adequate childcare. This measure aims to mitigate bias against women in recruitment and career advancement, stemming from traditional norms placing primary childcare responsibility on women.

Develop a strategy for Gender Equality in Politics at the ministerial, departmental, and provincial levels: Every ministry and province must develop their strategies for gender equality in politics following the national targets. Strategies at ministerial (and equivalent) and provincial levels should start by conducting a realistic assessment of the status of women's participation in leadership and management, considering influencing factors affecting such participation. Building on that assessment, the strategy can set up a specific quota system for women officials within a 2-year roadmap tailored to the unique circumstances of each agency. The strategy should provide clarity on reporting processes, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and accountability for specific stakeholders within each agency. Moreover, it should include a strategic and comprehensive list of actions aimed at removing barriers to women's participation in leadership and management. Following this, units within each ministry and equivalent, province and equivalent will then develop their action plans with targets and actions aligned with the agency's overall strategy. These action plans should be accompanied by a clear system of reporting, monitoring, evaluation, and clear accountability for leaders.

Establish and implement the Women Leadership Index in the public sector in Viet

Nam: Viet Nam should consider establishing a Women Leadership Index with clear indicators and sex-disaggregated data to monitor the implementation of all national targets stipulated in the Party's resolutions and the National Strategy. This Index should be implemented across all public sector agencies, from central to local levels, to measure progress in achieving women's leadership targets every two years. State agencies and provinces can then be ranked based on their performances. Agencies /provinces with high rankings can share their experiences with lower-ranking ones, fostering a collaborative learning environment to enhance overall progress.

Raise awareness and foster responsibility within party committees and the leadership board for effective implementation of gender equality in politics: Organize training sessions on gender equality in politics for agency party and government leaders; Incorporate the achievement of gender equality targets into the criteria for evaluating task completion progress and criteria for annual performance review of members and leadership boards at all levels; the Party Committee and the Leadership Board should request an annual report from agency leaders regarding the progress made in achieving gender equality targets in personnel management of their agencies; Organize mandatory training on unconscious gender bias and gender-based discrimination for all officials and employees of the agency.

Develop and implement flexible working hours, remote work, and working from home policies, and evaluate performances based on results: This is to address challenges between political life and unpaid domestic work and child-care responsibilities.

Develop a pilot model of a gender equality organization: Mainstream gender equality into the core values of the organization/agency with leaders serving as role models for their colleagues in implementing these values; Build mechanisms to encourage initiatives that promote substantive gender equality; Pilot a model for day-care services tailored to the work schedule of officials within the agency/organization. If the model proves successful, consider replicating it; Implement a pilot model to support travel expenses, accommodation, and childcare-related expenses for officials with children under 36 months (about 3 years) attending training sessions of the agency/ organization.

Establish and develop networks of women leaders and mentoring programs for women officials; develop and implement innovative and sustainable capacity-building programs: These actions are aimed at enhancing leadership and management skills, promoting gender equality among women officials by drawing on successful capacity-building programs globally and in Viet Nam.

This Executive Summary is from the report "Measures to enhance gender equality in politics: International and national experiences and recommendations for Viet Nam", conducted by Dr Luong Thu Hien, Director of Gender Studies, and Women's Leadership (Gelead) under the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, with the technical support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), from October 2023 to December 2023. The Embassy of Ireland and UNDP in Viet Nam have jointly funded this study. The full report will be publicly available in January 2024.

Note: The views and opinions expressed in this report executive summary do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).