

Women's participation in leadership in Vietnam: current realities and policy implications for gender equality and sustainable development

Dr. Nguyen Thi Thu Cuc

University of Finance - Marketing

M.A. Doan Bich Hong

Academy of Public Administration and Governance

Abstract: *Women's participation in leadership and decision-making is widely regarded as an important indicator of gender equality and governance quality. It also plays a significant role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Gender equality itself is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals established by the United Nations. This paper analyzes the current realities and the role of women's participation in leadership and decision-making in provinces and centrally-run cities in Vietnam. A mixed-methods approach is adopted in the research, combining descriptive analysis of trends in women's representation, a review of policy and legal gender equality frameworks, and recent evidence on gender equality across provinces. The findings reveal that while women's representation in provincial People's Councils has approached 30% on average, their presence declines sharply in higher tiers of authority, particularly within Provincial-level Party Standing Committees and top leadership positions such as Party Secretaries and Council Chairpersons. From a theoretical perspective, the study helps clarify the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation in positions of power within a decentralized governance system. Based on these findings, the paper identifies policy implications to strengthen women's participation in leadership and decision-making to support gender equality and sustainable development in Vietnam.*

Keywords: *Women's participation in leadership; gender equality; sustainable development; local government; Vietnam. .*

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1. Introduction

Vietnam has recognized women's participation in leadership and decision-making since the early stages of state-building following the establishment of the Democratic

Republic of Vietnam in September 1945. The 1946 *Constitution* affirmed the principle of equality before the law and acknowledged women's right to participate in state governance on the basis of merit and virtue. In the decades that followed,

this normative commitment was institutionalized through the national legal framework and further reinforced by Vietnam's international commitments to gender equality and sustainable development. Gender equality was identified in Vietnam's Agenda 21 as a priority area for strengthening women's roles and contributions to sustainable development (Prime Minister, 2004). This commitment was further elaborated in the National Strategy on Gender Equality for the 2021 - 2030 period (Government, 2021), which sets measurable targets for women's participation in leadership positions and decision-making bodies.

Despite a relatively comprehensive institutional and policy framework, significant inequalities persist in women's access to leadership positions, particularly at the local level, where many public governance activities are directly implemented. Although the proportion of women represented in elected bodies has shown signs of improvement, evidence from the Party's leadership structures and provincial decision-making institutions suggests that such progress remains uneven across localities and that substantial gaps persist in senior leadership positions. Women continue to be underrepresented in key leadership bodies, including Provincial Party Standing Committees, as well as in top leadership positions within People's Councils. This situation indicates that the challenge lies not only in the level of numerical representation but also in women's access to substantive power, including the authority to participate in agenda-setting and opportunities for advancement within leadership structures.

Against this background, the study examines women's participation in leadership and decision-making within provincial-level institutions in Vietnam. Specifically, it addresses three research questions: (1) What

are the current realities and distribution of women's representation across provincial-level institutions? (2) To what extent is descriptive representation translated into substantive leadership power? (3) How do structural and institutional factors explain inter-provincial variation and vertical disparities within leadership hierarchies?

Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive statistical analysis, an examination of the distribution of leadership positions, and a review of policy and legal frameworks concerning gender equality. By integrating institutional analysis with comparative data across localities, the study aims to identify systemic barriers and governance bottlenecks that constrain women's advancement to top leadership positions. Its findings offer evidence-based insights for policy intervention and contribute to ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in leadership and decision-making in Vietnam.

2. Country background

Vietnam was among the early countries to embed the principle of gender equality within its constitutional framework. Promulgated shortly after national independence, the *1946 Constitution* was the first to affirm the equal rights of citizens, including the right to participate in state governance regardless of gender. This constitutional commitment was subsequently institutionalized through a comprehensive body of national laws and policies designed to advance gender equality and strengthen women's participation in political, economic, and social life. Vietnam ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1982, thereby strengthening the legal foundation and international normative framework for national gender equality policies.

The 2006 Law on Gender Equality established a comprehensive legal framework to promote gender equality across sectors and clearly defined the responsibilities of state agencies, organizations, families, and individuals in implementing these principles (National Assembly, 2006). Building upon this foundation, the Government adopted the National Strategies for Gender Equality for the 2021-2030 period, which sets ambitious targets to increase women's participation in politics and decision-making. Accordingly, by 2025, 60% of key leadership positions in local governments and state management agencies will be held by women, and by 2030, 70% (Government, 2021). In parallel, the Program "Strengthening the equal participation of women in leadership and management positions at policy-making levels for the 2021-2030 period" establishes targets for the planning, training, capacity building, and development of female officials for leadership and management positions, targeting a minimum of 40% and 50% female representation in leadership succession plans by 2025 and 2030, respectively (Prime Minister, 2020). The 2025 Law on Amendments to Law on Election of Deputies to the National Assembly and the People's Councils clearly sets the quota for female candidates for deputies to elected bodies at all levels at 35% (National Assembly, 2025). Additional supporting policies have been adopted, including national communication programs on gender equality, as well as training and capacity-building initiatives designed specifically for female officials. According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2025, Vietnam ranked 74th out of 148 countries (World Economic Forum, 2025).

The current institutional context also presents significant changes affecting women's opportunities for leadership participation. Ongoing reforms of the state

administrative apparatus and the reorganization of administrative units at both the central and local levels - particularly the consolidation of 63 provinces and centrally-run cities into 34 provincial-level administrative units - have altered organizational structures and directly affected the number and distribution of leadership and management positions. As leadership positions become increasingly streamlined, competition for authority is expected to intensify.

Within Vietnam's political system, the Communist Party of Vietnam plays the leading role in the State and society as stipulated by the *Constitution*. Consequently, an analysis of women's participation in leadership cannot be confined solely to elected state institutions but must also take into account women's representation within Party leadership bodies at different levels. This institutional structure is crucial for understanding the distribution of power, opportunities for career advancement, and the extent of women's substantive participation in policy-making and decision-making processes.

3. Literature review and analytical framework

3.1. Women's participation in leadership

Political participation is a fundamental dimension of democratic governance, reflecting the extent to which citizens engage in public decision-making. It encompasses both conventional forms of engagement, such as voting and membership in political organizations, and non-conventional forms, including signing petitions, participating in policy discussions, engaging in social mobilization, or interacting politically through digital platforms (Brady et al., 1995; Leighley, 1995; Cho, 2015; Jeroense & Spierings, 2023).

In gender studies, women's political participation is conceptualized as a legitimate

right to engage in political life. It extends beyond participation in political activities to include the ability to run for elected office, hold leadership positions, and influence the formulation and implementation of public policy (Paxton et al., 2006). However, numerous studies have shown that women often face greater constraints than men in terms of resources, time, and opportunities for participation. Moreover, their political engagement is shaped by cultural barriers, gender norms, and social stereotypes concerning the appropriate roles of women in politics and leadership. These barriers may constrain women's access to power and impede their advancement within political systems.

In response to persistent inequalities in political representation, many countries have adopted institutional interventions, the most common of which are gender quota mechanisms. These measures are designed to promote a more balanced representation of women and men in decision-making bodies (Tripp & Kang, 2008). Nevertheless, increases in women's numerical representation do not necessarily translate into substantive leadership power or proportional influence over decision-making processes.

The balanced gender representation in decision-making at all levels and across all sectors is essential to a just society. It enables the inclusion of diverse perspectives and makes the process fairer and more participative. Existing research on public sector leadership consistently demonstrates that the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions - particularly at the highest levels of authority - remains a widespread phenomenon. This underrepresentation is shaped by key barriers, including stereotypes regarding women's leadership capabilities, biases in performance

evaluation and appointment processes, family responsibilities, career interruptions associated with caregiving roles, limited access to professional networks, and experiences of discrimination or workplace harassment (OECD, 2025). These barriers not only affect women's entry into leadership systems but also hinder the transformation of descriptive representation into substantive leadership power.

3.2. Gender equality and sustainable development

Sustainable development is defined as a process of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 1987). This concept is founded upon three core pillars: economic development, social equity, and environmental protection. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote comprehensive development for people, the planet, and prosperity, guided by the principle of leaving no one behind. Among these goals, Goal 5 focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Target 5.5 specifically emphasizes the need to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life. Indicators used to monitor progress include the proportion of women in legislative bodies, local governments, and managerial positions.

According to UN Women, gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men. This concept recognizes diversity among groups of women and men and requires that the interests, needs, and priorities of different

gender groups be considered fairly. In development studies, gender equality is regarded not only as a fundamental human right but also as a critical condition for sustainable development. Development grounded in gender equality should constitute a priority within the sustainable development agenda. A sustainable development pathway that integrates gender equality can enhance women's access to opportunities and new capabilities while strengthening their capacities and agency (Leach, 2016). Conversely, gender inequality may undermine the effectiveness of governance, constrain the mobilization of social resources, and hinder inclusive development.

From a governance perspective, women's participation in leadership and decision-making represents a tangible manifestation of substantive gender equality. The presence of women in leadership positions is not only an indicator of political representation but is also closely associated with governance quality, the inclusiveness of decision-making processes, and the capacity of institutions to accommodate diverse social interests. Accordingly, gender equality in leadership should not be assessed solely by numerical representation; it should also be evaluated by women's access to positions of substantive power and their ability to participate meaningfully in policy-making processes.

In the Vietnamese context, gender equality in leadership refers to women's participation in leadership and management positions across the political system, including Party organizations, elected bodies, and state administrative agencies at both central and local levels (United Nations Development Program in Vietnam, 2024). This approach reflects the country's institutional configuration, in which the Communist Party of Vietnam's leadership role is fundamental to

the structure of political power and public decision-making. Consequently, assessing women's participation in leadership requires consideration of the political system as a whole rather than limiting the analysis to state institutions in the narrow sense.

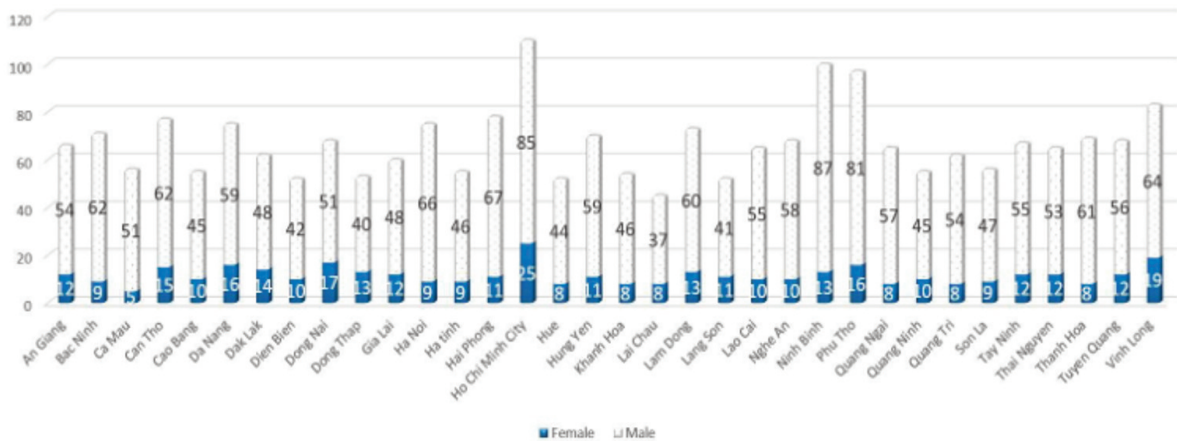
4. Results and discussion

4.1. Women's representation in the Central Party Committee and provincial-level Party Committees

The findings indicate that women's participation in Party leadership bodies remains relatively low, particularly in positions of top political authority. Within the current Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, women account for only a small proportion of members from provinces and centrally-run cities, with just 3 of 56 members being female (5.4%) (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2026).

At the provincial-level, women's representation is relatively higher, but it nonetheless reflects a marked gender imbalance. Of the 2,279 members of provincial Party Executive Committees, 393 are women, representing 17.2%, compared with 1,886 men, who account for 82.8% (see *Figure 1*). While these figures demonstrate the presence of women in provincial leadership bodies, they remain considerably below the threshold of gender parity. The underrepresentation of women becomes even more apparent when examining positions associated with greater political influence within the leadership hierarchy. The composition of Provincial Party Standing Committees follows a similar, or even more unequal, pattern, thereby reinforcing the view that increases in numerical representation do not necessarily translate into proportional access to top positions of power. This pattern represents a classic manifestation of the gap between descriptive representation and substantive representation.

Figure 1. Gender composition of provincial and centrally-run Party Committees



Source: Compiled by the authors (2025).

The gender composition of Party leadership bodies indicates that women remain severely underrepresented at the highest levels of political authority. Among the 56 members of the Central Committee from localities, the ratio of women to men is 3:53, equivalent to approximately 1:17.7. This disparity suggests that women's participation is not merely below gender parity but is structurally constrained within the highest decision-making bodies. The pathway for women to attain top leadership positions, therefore, continues to face significant barriers.

At the provincial-level, women's participation is comparatively higher but still falls short of gender balance. Women account for 17.2% of all members of provincial Party Executive Committees, corresponding to approximately one woman for every five men. Compared with the 5.4% representation of women at the central level, a clear pattern of vertical decline within the power hierarchy emerges. Specifically, women's representation at the central level is approximately 3.2 times lower than at the provincial-level. This suggests that, while women have achieved a certain degree of representation in provincial

leadership structures, their pathways to higher positions of political authority remain substantially constrained.

Comparative data across localities also reveal considerable variation. The size of provincial Party Executive Committees ranges from 45 to 110 members (see Figure 1), yet larger committee sizes do not necessarily correspond to a higher proportion of women. This finding suggests that women's representation is not determined solely by the number of available positions but is also shaped by personnel selection processes, institutional mechanisms, and the political context of individual localities. In this sense, women's representation is partly the outcome of governance choices.

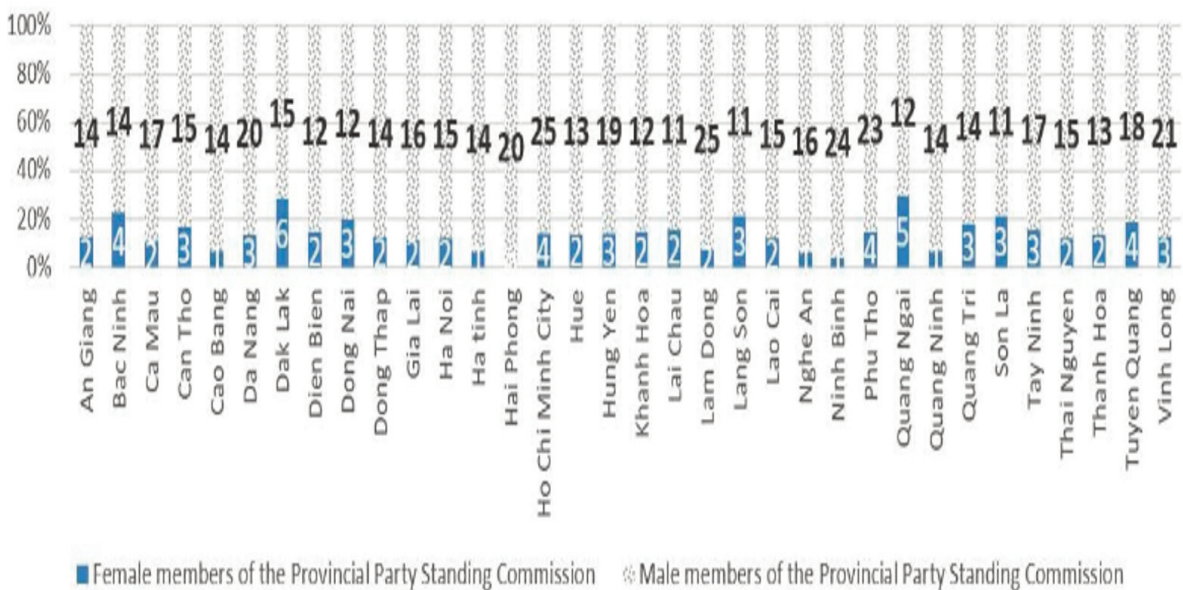
The proportion of women in provincial-level Party Committees ranges from 8.9% to 25.0%, with an average of 17.7%. The relatively low average, together with the fact that nearly half of all localities (16 out of 34) fall below this average and only eight localities have reached a representation rate of 20% or higher, points to the limited participation of women in local leadership structures. Even in the locality with the highest proportion of women (25%), representation remains well below the gender

equality threshold. This disparity becomes even more evident when examining provincial Party Standing Committees, which play a decisive role in personnel management, organizational affairs, and strategic development decisions at the local level. On average, women account for only around 14% of Standing Committee members (see Figure 2). Only two localities have achieved representation rates approaching 30%, while more than half of all localities fall below this already modest average. Notably, seven localities (20.6%) report female representation in the single digits, and one locality has no female members in its Standing Committee. Taken together, the low average level of representation and the fact that more than half of the localities fall below that average suggest that women's access to the core of provincial political power remains structurally constrained.

These findings point to a clear reality: women's presence in leadership bodies does

not necessarily imply equitable access to positions of substantive power. The gap lies not only in the number of women represented but also in their ability to occupy positions that exert significant influence over decision-making processes. This distinction reflects the difference between formal presence and the actual exercise of power within leadership systems. When measured against national ambitious targets, the scale of the challenge becomes even more apparent. The current level of approximately 14% female representation in key leadership positions within the highest provincial leadership bodies remains far below the target that, by 2025, 60% of state management agencies and local governments at all levels should include women in leadership positions. This substantial gap highlights the need for stronger institutional interventions, beginning with personnel planning, nomination, selection, and appointment processes, to promote women's advancement into senior leadership roles.

Figure 2. Gender composition of the Provincial-level Party Standing Committees



Source: Compiled by the authors (2025).

Among the 34 provinces and centrally-run cities, none has a woman serving as Provincial Party Secretary. Seventeen localities (50%) have no female Deputy Provincial Party Secretary; fifteen localities have one female Deputy Provincial Party Secretary; and only two localities - Dak Lak and Lang Son - have two female Deputy Provincial Party Secretaries. These figures indicate that women's presence in the highest leadership positions within provincial Party structures remains extremely limited.

From a gender equality perspective, this pattern clearly reflects the persistence of both the pipeline leakage and the glass ceiling in the process of political advancement. While women may hold certain deputy leadership positions, they rarely gain access to the top leadership roles within provincial Party organizations. This indicates that the barriers to women's political advancement are not confined to opportunities for initial participation but also involve constraints on their ability to transform representation into substantive leadership power.

Notably, Dak Lak and Lang Son - the two provinces with two female Deputy Provincial Party Secretaries - also belong to the group of localities with relatively high proportions of women in their Provincial Party Executive Committees (22.58% and 21.15%, respectively; see *Figure 1*). While no causal relationship can be inferred from these data alone, the findings suggest that higher levels of female representation within senior leadership structures may create more favorable conditions for the emergence of women leaders in senior positions. By contrast, the absence of female Deputy Provincial Party Secretaries in half of all localities reveals a weakness in the female leadership pipeline at the succession level and increases the risk of women's continued exclusion from senior leadership circles. Given that top leadership positions are typically filled by individuals with

prior managerial experience and established positions within influential political networks, the absence of women from deputy-level positions may substantially reduce their prospects for future advancement. This not only limits women's access to top positions as "natural" successors but also risks perpetuating male-dominated succession patterns within the political leadership system.

4.2. Women's representation in People's Councils

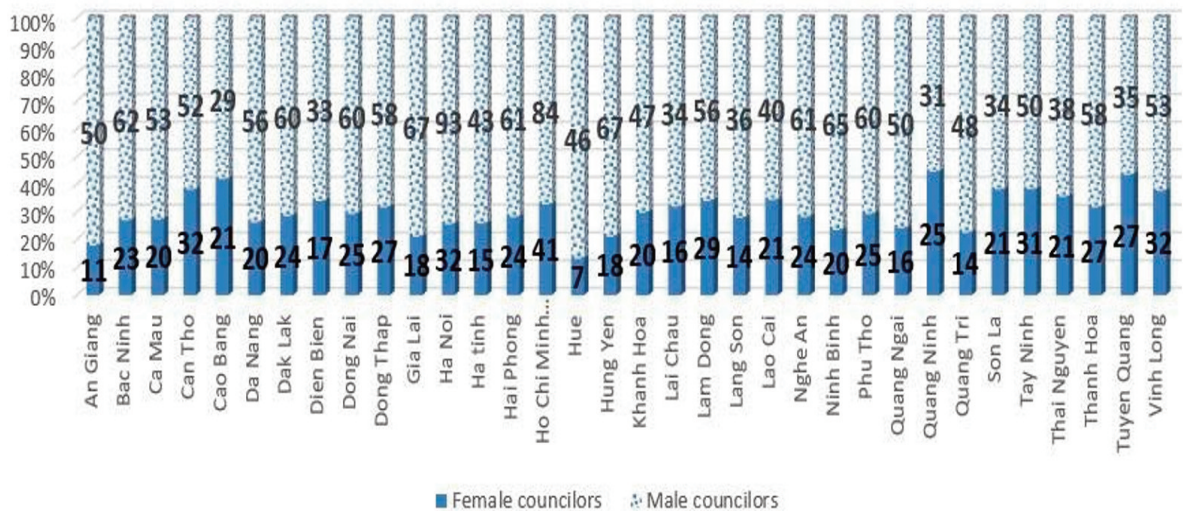
Compared with Party leadership bodies, women's representation in elected institutions is more positive, although substantial disparities remain in key leadership positions. At the provincial-level, women accounted for 26.54% of People's Council representatives during the 2016 - 2021 term, whereas only around 6% of People's Council Chairpersons were women, and approximately 20% of Vice Chairpersons were women. At the commune level, the proportion of women serving as Vice Chairpersons was even lower, at approximately 14%. For the 2026 - 2030 term, the proportion of female representatives in provincial People's Councils increased and has remained at an average level of approximately 30% (see *Figure 3*) while the corresponding figure at the commune level reached 31.55%. This represents a positive development and indicates an improvement in the descriptive representation of women within elected bodies. However, this progress has not been evenly distributed across localities.

The data reveals substantial variation in the proportion of female representatives across provinces and centrally-run cities. Women's representation ranges from approximately 13% in Hue to around 45% in Quang Ninh. These disparities suggest that, even within a common national institutional and policy framework, progress toward gender equality in political representation remains strongly shaped by local contexts and implementation practices. Notably, 19 out of

34 localities still report female representation rates below the 30% threshold. In contrast, several outperforming localities, including Quang Ninh, Tuyen Quang, and Cao Bang, have achieved substantially higher levels of female representation, approaching gender balance. These cases demonstrate that increasing women's representation in elected bodies is institutionally feasible, although such progress has not yet been realized consistently across the country.

Overall, the distribution of the data indicates that most localities cluster between 20% and slightly above 30% female representation, with only a small number of cases exceeding 40%. This pattern reflects a general trend of improvement in numerical representation while simultaneously suggesting that progress remains uneven and insufficient to conclude that women have achieved balanced representation within local elected institutions.

Figure 3. Gender structure of the provincial-level People Council for 2026 - 2030



Source: Compiled by the authors (2025).

While provincial Party Committees continue to exhibit a male-dominated pattern of representation, with women's participation generally concentrated within a relatively narrow range (approximately 5 - 25%), provincial People's Councils display considerably greater variation in gender representation. The proportion of female People's Council deputies across localities ranges from slightly above 10% to the mid-40% range, indicating substantial differences in the achievement of gender equality in political representation among provinces and centrally-run cities.

Improvements in numerical representation do not necessarily translate into proportional access of women to leadership positions. Of the 2,528 deputies serving in provincial People's Councils, 758 are women, representing 29.98% of the total (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, among the 123 positions of Chairperson and Vice Chairperson of provincial People's Councils, only 35 are held by women, equivalent to 28.5%. The gap becomes even more pronounced when focusing exclusively on the highest leadership positions.

The position of Chairperson of the People's Council provides the clearest evidence of the

glass ceiling. Among the 34 provinces and centrally-run cities, only five localities, namely Dak Lak, Dong Nai, Ha Noi, Lang Son, and Quang Ninh, have a woman serving as Chairperson, accounting for 14.7% of all localities. This finding indicates that women remain significantly underrepresented in positions where decision-making authority is most concentrated and where agenda-setting power is exercised. Thus, while women's representation in elected institutions is considerably stronger than in Party leadership structures, their access to the highest-ranking decision-making positions remains highly limited.

Another notable pattern is that women are more likely to be appointed to deputy positions than to top leadership roles. Nationwide, 30 women serve as Vice Chairpersons of provincial People's Councils, substantially exceeding the number of female Chairpersons. This suggests a gendered stratification of leadership roles, whereby women are more frequently represented in supporting or deputy positions than in the highest offices at the center of political power.

Data from several localities illustrate particularly clearly the gap between numerical representation and substantive power. A number of cases demonstrate that women may be "present but not empowered." For example, Ho Chi Minh City has 41 female deputies among its 125 People's Council members, yet no woman serves as either Chairperson or Vice Chairperson. A similar pattern can be observed in Da Nang and Hai Phong, where women make up a substantial proportion of deputies but hold none of the positions of Chairperson or Vice Chairperson. Even in localities with relatively high levels of female representation, numerical presence does not necessarily translate into leadership authority. Cao Bang, for instance, has 21 female deputies,

accounting for approximately 42% of all representatives, yet no woman serves as either Chairperson or Vice Chairperson of the provincial People's Council.

These findings suggest that, although women's representation in elected bodies has improved, it remains largely a form of descriptive representation - that is, representation in numerical terms - rather than substantive representation, which entails meaningful access to decision-making power. In other words, women have gained a presence in political institutions, but they have not been allocated positions proportionate to their numbers in roles with authority over agenda-setting, resource allocation, and high-level oversight.

5. Discussion and policy implications

5.1. *There must be a shift from descriptive representation to substantive representation*

The findings reveal a significant disparity between women's presence in political institutions and their access to positions of substantive power. While women's representation in certain elected bodies has improved, it declines markedly at higher levels of leadership where decision-making authority is more concentrated. A persistent pattern of women's "power deficit" remains evident. Increases in numerical representation have not automatically translated into meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

This finding suggests that policy approaches focusing solely on overall representation rates may be inadequate to promote substantive gender equality in leadership. If such approaches focus mainly on the number of women included in political institutions without considering their positions and influence within power structures, there is a real risk of creating a pattern of "presence without power." In other words, equality in representation does not necessarily imply equality in power.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the need to broaden the assessment of gender equality in leadership by clearly distinguishing between descriptive representation and substantive representation. In addition to indicators measuring the proportion of women among total members, greater attention should be paid to women's presence in key leadership positions, particularly those that play a central role in agenda-setting, resource allocation, and decision-making. Gender equality policies should therefore move beyond formal representation (the number of seats occupied by women) toward substantive representation (the exercise of meaningful power and influence).

Accordingly, monitoring and evaluation systems for gender equality should be redesigned to capture the quality of representation rather than focusing exclusively on numerical participation. A dual-target approach should be adopted, comprising a minimum proportion of women: (1) Among the total membership of political and administrative bodies; and (2) Within positions of substantive authority. Policy attention should focus not only on "how many women are represented" but also on "which positions women hold," including leadership roles and positions responsible for chairing, decision-making, and oversight functions. The incorporation of indicators measuring women's representation in senior leadership positions would provide a more accurate assessment of progress toward gender equality in leadership. At the same time, such indicators would offer an empirical basis for designing more effective policy interventions. It is therefore necessary to establish minimum targets for women's representation in the highest positions of authority and to require the annual publication of data on the

distribution of women across different levels of leadership, including committee membership, key leadership positions, deputy leadership positions, and head positions.

5.2. Institutional processes should restrain pipeline leakage

The findings point to the fact that women's representation does not automatically increase in localities with larger organizational structures, and that substantial variation exists across provinces and centrally-run cities. This suggests that women's representation is largely shaped by governance choices rather than being an inevitable numerical consequence of institutional size. Gender disparities in leadership, therefore, appear to reflect not only differences in representation outcomes but also variations in the degree of commitment to and implementation of gender equality goals across localities.

The absence of women in Chairperson or Vice Chairperson positions in some People's Councils, even where women constitute a relatively high proportion of representatives, suggests institutional bottlenecks in leadership selection processes rather than a shortage of qualified women candidates. The key barriers may therefore lie not in women's initial access to political participation, but in the mechanisms through which candidates advance to key leadership posts and top offices. In this regard, the concept of pipeline leakage offers a useful analytical lens for explaining why women's representation at entry and intermediate levels does not translate proportionately into representation at higher levels of authority.

A key policy implication of this finding is that gender equality interventions should not focus solely on expanding opportunities for initial participation. Greater attention should be devoted to the institutional processes that

shape pathways to leadership advancement. These processes include long-term personnel planning, candidate selection, appointment procedures, nominations, and the development of female leadership talent. Unless such mechanisms are designed to reduce gender disparities and support the continuous development of women leadership talent, the gap between numerical representation and substantive power is likely to persist. To address this challenge, gender-balanced candidate lists should be adopted for senior appointments and elected leadership positions. Where gender-balanced candidate lists cannot be achieved, written justifications should be required. In addition, a formal succession pipeline should be established at the provincial-level. Each locality should maintain and annually update a pool of qualified female candidates for key leadership positions, linked to leadership development programs, capacity-building initiatives, and rotational assignments. Without accountability mechanisms that carry meaningful institutional obligations, gender equality targets risk remaining largely symbolic.

The substantial variation observed across localities further highlights the need to strengthen result-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Such mechanisms should move beyond overall representation rates to examine the gender distribution across leadership tiers and women's access to strategically important positions within power structures. This approach would facilitate the identification of institutional bottlenecks while providing an evidence base for more context-sensitive policy adjustments across localities. Possible governance instruments include provincial-level public gender equality dashboards to monitor women's representation across institutions and leadership tiers; gender audits of personnel planning and leadership appointment

outcomes, accompanied by corrective action plans for localities that fail to meet minimum targets or have no women in senior leadership positions; and the integration of gender equality indicators into local government performance and leadership evaluation frameworks. These frameworks could include recognition mechanisms for localities demonstrating strong performance in advancing gender equality and mandatory improvement requirements for those that consistently fail to meet established standards.

5.3. Strengthening succession opportunities and career advancement pathways to top, senior leadership

The findings underscore that, despite a gradual increase in women's participation in political institutions, their presence remains concentrated primarily in deputy positions rather than in the highest positions of authority. This pattern points to a gender-based stratification of power, whereby women can enter leadership structures but are less likely to gain access to top positions or roles that exert decisive influence over agenda-setting.

The pattern of performative representation is particularly evident in several major localities, where women constitute a relatively large proportion of elected representatives yet hold none of the highest leadership positions within the People's Councils. In such cases, women remain structurally excluded from positions that control resources, determine policy priorities, and exercise key oversight functions. This represents a classic manifestation of formal participation. The findings suggest that increasing numerical representation alone is insufficient to ensure a more balanced distribution of power within political institutions. In other words, women's presence within organizational

structures does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation in strategic decision-making processes.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need to focus more explicitly on women's leadership advancement pathways rather than solely on expanding participation at the entry level. As long as women remain concentrated in deputy roles or in areas with limited influence, their capacity to accumulate relevant leadership experience and advance to top decision-making positions will remain constrained. Gender equality policies should therefore give greater attention to the distribution of leadership responsibilities, access to professional development, and the inclusion of women in strategically important positions within leadership systems.

The findings further underscore the importance of developing clear and continuous leadership pathways for female officials. These pathways should enable women to gain managerial experience, engage in high-impact policy areas, and benefit from institutional mechanisms that support capacity development and preparation for senior leadership roles. Such an approach would help narrow the gap between formal participation and substantive leadership authority.

Several governance instruments may be considered. *First*, minimum representation targets for women should apply not only to Vice Chairperson positions but also to Chairperson positions and other top leadership roles. *Second*, specific measures should be introduced to promote women's advancement to top offices, including the systematic monitoring of promotion rates

from deputy to chief leadership positions by gender and the requirement that localities explain persistent gender disparities in advancement outcomes. *Third*, women should be given equitable opportunities to serve in high-impact portfolios such as finance, budgeting, planning, steering, and oversight rather than being concentrated in sectors traditionally associated with lower levels of institutional influence. *Finally*, leadership development initiatives should be integrated into a structured career advancement framework. Such a framework should include mentoring and coaching programs, rotational assignments, and targeted capacity-building activities designed to prepare women for senior leadership responsibilities.

5.4. Gender equality in leadership targets should be linked to sustainable development and governance quality

The findings indicate that although women have achieved greater representation in certain political institutions, this participation has not been proportionately reflected in access to positions that exert substantial influence over decision-making processes, resource allocation, and leadership and oversight functions. This suggests that gender equality in leadership is not merely a matter of political representation but is also directly linked to governance quality and the capacity to promote inclusive development.

Inclusive leadership that advances gender equality should be regarded as a governance capability that supports sustainable development. From a sustainable development perspective, the full and effective participation of women in leadership constitutes an important component of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.5. At

the same time, it has broader implications for the development of governance institutions that are inclusive, accountable, and more responsive to social needs. Accordingly, gender equality in leadership may be viewed not only as a social justice goal but also as an essential component of governance capacity for sustainable development.

A central policy implication of these findings is that promotion of women's participation in leadership should be more closely integrated into local governance and development assessment frameworks, rather than being monitored solely as a stand-alone gender equality indicator. Such an approach can help connect gender representation targets with broader goals relating to governance effectiveness, public service quality, and inclusive development. Furthermore, the substantial variation observed across localities highlights the potential for horizontal policy learning. Localities that have achieved relatively strong outcomes may serve as "policy laboratories," enabling effective leadership practices to be translated into lessons for broader national reference and inter-locality learning. Provinces and centrally-run cities that have achieved more positive outcomes in women's representation can provide valuable practical insights into the recruitment, development, and utilization of female leaders. However, such lessons should be approached with caution, as local outcomes are shaped by differing institutional, political, and organizational conditions and therefore cannot be replicated mechanically.

6. Conclusion

This study examined women's participation in leadership and decision-

making at the provincial-level in Vietnam, using a mixed-methods approach that combined descriptive data analysis with a review of the gender equality policy framework. The findings indicate that although women's representation in local leadership has improved to some extent, particularly within elected bodies, where women account for approximately 30% of representatives, this increased presence has not been reflected proportionately in access to the highest positions of leadership authority. Women remain significantly underrepresented in top leadership roles and are more frequently concentrated in deputy or supporting positions. The marked decline in women's representation in positions with substantial decision-making authority suggests that gender inequality in leadership is not merely a matter of numerical representation, but also one of substantive power. While women have achieved greater representation in People's Councils, they remain substantially underrepresented in Party leadership bodies and rarely occupy the highest leadership positions. Moreover, the considerable variation observed across localities suggests that representation outcomes are influenced not only by demographic factors or individual qualifications but also by institutional arrangements, levels of political commitment, and local policy implementation processes. The fact that some localities have achieved relatively strong outcomes, with women's representation in People's Councils approaching gender parity, demonstrates that further progress is entirely feasible within the existing institutional framework.

From an academic perspective, the study underscores the importance of distinguishing

between descriptive representation (numerical presence) and substantive representation (access to positions of power) when analyzing gender equality in leadership. Women's presence within organizational structures does not necessarily imply equitable access to positions that exercise decision-making authority. From a policy and practice perspective, the findings suggest that gender equality policies should move beyond targets focused solely on aggregate representation rates and place greater emphasis on women's advancement pathways to leadership, access to key positions of power, and the substantive quality of their participation in decision-making processes. Although the study relies primarily on descriptive data and therefore does not permit a comprehensive examination of causal mechanisms, its findings demonstrate that, while women's representation in leadership within Vietnam's political system has improved, gender equality in leadership has not yet been achieved in terms of substantive power. Narrowing this gap is not only a requirement of gender equality but also an important condition for strengthening inclusive governance and promoting sustainable development.

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