

# SOCIAL POLICY IN GENDER EQUALITY, EMPOWERMENT AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN VIETNAM

## POLÍTICA SOCIAL EN IGUALDAD DE GÉNERO, EMPODERAMIENTO Y OPORTUNIDADES PARA MUJERES Y NIÑAS EN VIETNAM

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### ABSTRACT

Women have the right to be equal in all fields. This needs to be mainstreamed across the entire legal system, enshrined in both law and law enforcement, including positive measures such as quotas. As all areas of life are concerned with gender equality, efforts are needed to root out gender-based discrimination everywhere. Empowering women, and improving the status of women in society is a measure to accelerate the progress of countries towards achieving the goals of socially sustainable development. Vietnam is one of the countries that is always interested in women's empowerment and gender equality in the process of sustainable development of the country. From the analysis of gender and feminist theories, the article will point out the motivating effects of women's empowerment for socially sustainable development goals. Thereby, proposing solutions, contributing to the good implementation of women's empowerment, and improving the status and role of women towards the goal of socially sustainable development in Vietnam now and in the future.

**Keywords:** Social policy; gender equality; empowerment; women and girls; sustainable development; Vietnam.

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## RESUMEN

Las mujeres tienen derecho a ser iguales en todos los campos. Esto debe integrarse en todo el sistema legal, consagrado tanto en la ley como en la aplicación de la ley, incluidas medidas positivas como las cuotas. Como todas las áreas de la vida están relacionadas con la igualdad de género, se necesitan esfuerzos para erradicar la discriminación basada en el género en todas partes. Empoderar a las mujeres y mejorar la condición de las mujeres en la sociedad es una medida para acelerar el progreso de los países hacia el logro de los objetivos de desarrollo socialmente sostenible. Vietnam es uno de los países que siempre está interesado en el empoderamiento de la mujer y la igualdad de género en el proceso de desarrollo sostenible del país. A partir del análisis de las teorías de género y feministas, el artículo señalará los efectos motivadores del empoderamiento de las mujeres para objetivos de desarrollo socialmente sostenibles. Por lo tanto, proponiendo soluciones, contribuyendo a la buena implementación del empoderamiento de las mujeres y mejorando el estatus y el papel de las mujeres hacia el objetivo del desarrollo socialmente sostenible en Vietnam ahora y en el futuro.

**Palabras clave:** Política social; igualdad de género; empoderamiento; las mujeres y las niñas; desarrollo sostenible; Vietnam.

## INTRODUCTION

The World Bank has published the report “Perceptions of gender inequality in Viet Nam’s labour market”. Accordingly, Vietnam has achieved many economic and social achievements since the economic reform in 1986. Some specific achievements such as from a poor country, Vietnam has risen to become a middle-income country in 2015. The poverty rate fell rapidly. The percentage of the population living on less than \$1.90 per day decreased from 50% in the early 1990s to 3% in 2016 (IBRD and MPI, 2016). However, Vietnam is still facing many challenges. Poverty reduction achievements are not sustainable, especially in rural and ethnic minority areas. Productivity growth remains high throughout the economy and across sectors, but in agriculture is lower than in most countries in the same middle-income group.

Notably, the overall picture of positive employment still implies serious problems. Informal self-employment remains widespread, with nearly 60% of workers heading households in the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. In addition, employment for men and women is different: while women aged 15 to 24 work more in the formal sector than men, they find it difficult to find employment in the formal sector when they re-enter the labour market after leaving work to care for their families.

In recent years, the Government of Viet Nam has been recognized internationally for its remarkable achievements in promoting gender equality and the advancement of women. These achievements include the development and enactment of laws reflecting the principle of gender equality, and Viet Nam has reduced gender inequality faster than most developing countries over the past 20 years (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Viet Nam is recognized by the world as one of the 10 countries that best implement goal 5 on promoting gender equality and empowering all women and girls in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused inequality to increase and women and children to suffer more disadvantages. In this context, the Government of Viet Nam has always made efforts in implementing measures to ensure

social security, promote gender equality and prevent and respond to gender-based violence, especially violence against women and children. (Huu et al., n.d.) Gender equality is one of the goals of countries around the world towards a progressive, equal and sustainable society. In fact, both men and women are affected by gender inequality, but women and girls are still the more disadvantaged groups.

In Vietnam, gender equality goals have always received close attention from the Party, Government, agencies as well as organizations both at home and abroad. The state's policy and legal system is constantly being improved, the organization is implemented synchronously and drastically along with the strengthening of cooperation with development partners and UN organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women... to address issues revolving around gender equality. The goal is to solve the problem in the following aspects: ensuring substantive equality between men and women in terms of opportunities, participation and enjoyment in the political, economic, cultural and social fields, contributing to the rapid and sustainable development of the country. (Dineen et al., n.d.; Santill et al., n.d.)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the Law on Gender Equality, the goal of gender equality is to eliminate gender discrimination, create equal opportunities for men and women in socio-economic development and human resource development, move towards substantive gender equality between men and women and establish and strengthen cooperation, support between men and women in all areas of social and family life.

Article 18 of the Law on Gender Equality and Gender Equality in the Family is prescribed as follows:

1. Spouses are equal in civil relations and other relations related to marriage and family.
2. Spouses have equal rights and obligations in owning common property, equality in using common income sources of spouses and deciding on resources in the family.
3. Spouses are equal in discussing, deciding on the selection and use of appropriate family planning measures; use sick child care leave in accordance with the law.
4. Sons and daughters are cared for, educated by their families and create the same conditions for learning, working, playing, entertaining and developing.
5. Male and female members of the family have the responsibility to share household chores."

According to the Law on Gender Equality, husband and wife, men and women have the same rights and obligations in household chores. However, there are now many opinions that "equal rights and obligations" mean that whatever the wife has to do, the husband must also do those things and vice versa. If the husband does not do it, there is no equality in the family, which is very unfair to the woman. In fact, gender equality should not be understood in half by all jobs. According to the author, gender equality in the family is that each individual should do things that are appropriate to his level, expertise, abilities and according to the characteristics of his family. If in the family, the husband is the main source of economy, then the wife can stay at home to do household chores and vice versa. If the couple goes to work together, the household chores can be shared with each other, not imposed on which the wife can do, the husband must also do and vice versa. The implementation of gender equality in the family should not only emphasize the claim of rights for the woman and

the wife but should aim at the sharing of work, responsibility and understanding between the wife and the husband. Goal 5 of the group of 17 that Viet Nam is committed to implementing in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals emphasizes: "*Achieving gender equality, empowering and creating opportunities for women and girls*". (Bank, 2011)

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In a gender-equal society, men and women have access to education, health care services, vocational training, job creation, income increase, participation in economic, cultural, social and political activities... Gender equality means that there is no longer discrimination based on gender, women and men have equal status and opportunities for development in society. Equality here does not mean that men and women are exactly the same but that the similarities and differences between them are still acknowledged and respected.(Biology & 2021, 2021)

In Decision No. 622/QĐ-TTg dated May 10, 2017, the Prime Minister promulgated the National Action Plan to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The objectives of the plan are to maintain sustainable economic growth in tandem with the implementation of progress, social justice and ecological environmental protection, efficient management and use of resources, proactive response to climate change; ensure that all people can reach their full potentials, participate in and enjoy the fruits of development equally; building a peaceful, prosperous, inclusive, democratic, fair, civilized and sustainable Vietnamese society. Of the 17 development goals, "Achieving gender equality; empowering and creating opportunities for women and girls" falls under goal 5.

This overall goal has 8 specific objectives, including:

- Reduce and move towards ending forms of discrimination against women and girls in all sectors and everywhere;
- Significantly reduce all forms of violence against women and girls in public or in private, including sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation;
- Restrictions on the abolition of practices such as child marriage, early marriage and forced marriage;
- Ensuring equality in homemaking and family care; recognition of homemaking and unpaid care; strengthening public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, family support services, and child care;
- Ensure the full, effective and equal opportunity participation of women in leadership at all levels of policy-making in political, economic and social life;
- Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed upon in the agenda of the international conference on population and development, the Beijing Platform for Action, and documents on the results of conferences evaluating the implementation of this Program and platform;
- Ensure that all women, especially poor women in rural areas and ethnic minority women, have equal rights to economic resources, access to land use rights, ownership of other assets, financial services, inheritance rights and natural resources in accordance with national laws;
- Improve the efficiency of use of technologies and facilitation, especially information and communication technologies, to promote the empowerment of women. Create conditions for women to access and use information and communication technologies.(Mathematics & 2021, 2021)

Figure 1: Vietnam's gender index ranking

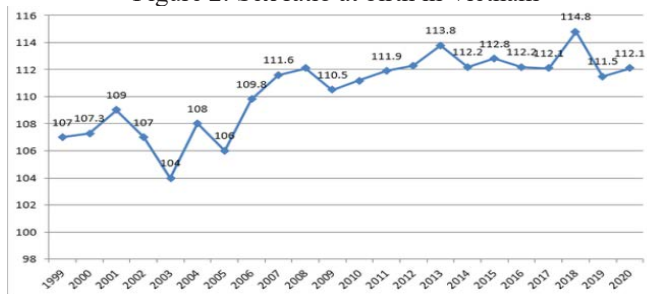
Index	2016	2018	2020	2021	Progress
<b>Global Gender Gap Index, World Economic Forum (156 countries)</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>87</b>	↓
Economic Opportunity and Participation	33	33	31	26	↑
Educational Attainment	93	101	93	94	=
Health and Survival	138	143	151	152	↓
Political Empowerment	84	99	110	121	↓

Source: Human Development Reports and Global Gender Gap Index reports (2016 – 2021)

Vietnam's national strategy on gender equality for the period 2011-2020 has obtained many encouraging results, contributing to narrowing the gender gap in various fields, contributing positively to the country's socio-economic development. The Government's Report No. 362/BC-CP dated August 18, 2020 on the implementation of the national target on gender equality in 2019 and the period 2011-2020 shows that the proportion of women participating in the following Party committees has increased more than the previous one. Specifically: The proportion of women participating in the XI Party Central Committee is 8.62%, party ministries directly under the Central Committee are 11.4%, district level is 14% and grassroots level is 18.1%; by the XII course, the respective ratios were 10%, 13.3%, 14.3% and 19.07%, respectively. Vietnam is in the top 1/3 group of countries in terms of the proportion of women members of the National Assembly, class XIII reached 24.2%, course XIV reached 27.31%.(J. & 2000, n.d.)

Gender equality results are also reflected in the aspect of reducing the gender gap in the field of economy, labor and employment; enhancing the economic empowerment of women, increasing the access of poor women in rural areas and ethnic minority women to economic resources and labor markets; focus on developing high-quality female human resources. According to the results of the 2019 Population and Housing Census of the General Statistics Office, women make up 47.3% of the country's main labor force. As of October 2019, there are over 285.6 thousand enterprises headed by women entrepreneurs, accounting for 24% of the total number of enterprises in the country. The female literacy rate between the ages of 15-60 reached 97.33%, the rate of female masters reached 54.25%, the doctoral rate reached 30.8%.(Tran et al., n.d.)

Figure 2: Sex ratio at birth in Vietnam



Source: Human Development Reports and Global Gender Gap Index reports (2016 – 2021)

Along with that, ensuring gender equality in access to and enjoyment of health care services and family life has also achieved many achievements. According to the results of the Census, Viet Nam’s sex ratio at birth (SRB) has been controlled at a much stable level thanks to efforts to bring the SRB to the natural balance with 111.5 boys per 100 girls born alive. Thanks to the effectiveness of the health system in providing maternal health care before, during and after birth, the maternal mortality rate has decreased from 69 cases per 100 thousand live births in 2009 to 46 cases per 100 thousand live births in 2019. Efforts to address gender equality are also integrated in the field of culture and information through the promotion of communication activities, gender awareness raising and gender equality. (“Vietnam Country Gender Assessment,” 2011) In addition, in order to improve the state management capacity on gender equality, from 2011 to mid-2020, Vietnam continuously added and perfected the legal framework as a basis for solving gender equality issues. Specifically: The National Assembly promulgated the Constitution in 2013, 7 laws, 161 laws; The Standing Committee of the National Assembly promulgates 15 ordinances, including about 45 laws and laws related to gender equality; The Government promulgated 1,413 decrees and all were considered to integrate gender equality issues in accordance with the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents. (TRS) & 2022, n.d.)

In particular, in the past two years, in support policies for people and businesses facing difficulties due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, women and children have always been identified as priority subjects and have higher support, especially pregnant women, women infected with COVID-19, orphaned children whose parents died from COVID-19... This has contributed to helping disadvantaged women and children stabilize their lives, reduce pressure and risk of violence and abuse. And the selection of the theme “Ensuring social security, empowering and creating opportunities for women and girls to realize gender equality and eliminate violence against women and girls” for this year’s Action Month once again affirms Viet Nam’s priorities and commitments in promoting substantive gender equality. (del & 2022, n.d.)

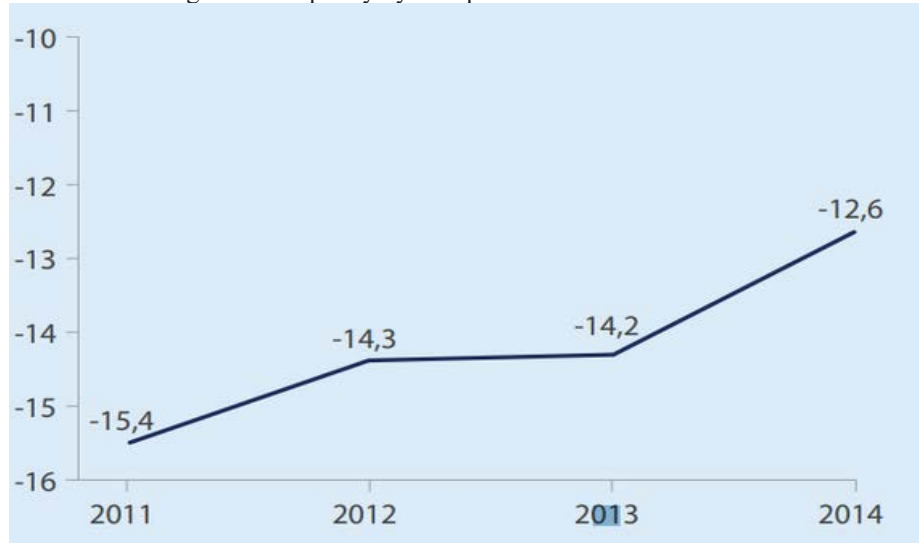
Figure 3: Structure of Vietnam’s national gender equality system





In addition to their achievements, women and girls remain vulnerable to risks and need more equal opportunities. There is still a problem of mistreatment of women, especially in low-income areas, gender stereotypes still exist and cause a lot of damage not only to the vulnerable but also to the whole society.

Figure 4: Inequality by occupation of Vietnamese women



Source: WB (2015)

Gender inequality is also considered one of the major causes of domestic violence. The 2019 National Survey on Violence Against Women in Viet Nam by the General Statistics Office in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs shows that nearly 2 out of every 3 women (nearly 63%) experience one or more forms of physical violence, sexual, mental and economic violence as well as controlling behaviour perpetrated by their husbands in their lives and nearly 32% of women experience current violence. This can have serious consequences for economic development and women's physical and mental health, even negatively affecting the behavior and spirit of children in families where women have been abused. The report also estimates that violence against women is causing economic losses to Viet Nam estimated at 1.8% of GDP in 2018.(1735-188X) & 2022, n.d.)

In terms of economy, in the labor market, the proportion of female workers in vulnerable jobs amounted to 59.6%, much higher than the 31.8% of male workers. According to the General Department of Vocational Training (Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs), the average monthly salary when doing the same job of female employees is about 4.58 million VND, lower than the average of 5.19 million VND of male employees.(Onaran et al., n.d.)

Worryingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused gender inequality to increase. According to the report "Overview of Gender Equality in Viet Nam 2021", the COVID-19 pandemic has hit women in Viet Nam harder, exacerbating the gender gap that already exists in the labour market. For example, women's labor force participation rates fell more deeply than men's, causing the gender gap to rise slightly to 10.8%. Before the pandemic, there was no difference in the unemployment rates of men and women, but this gap has been around since the third quarter of 2020.(Santill et al., n.d.)

## DISCUSSION

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), social policy in gender equality, empowerment and opportunities for women and girls in Vietnam today are:

- End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
- Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in public and private, including human trafficking, sexual exploitation and all other forms of exploitation
- Eliminate practices such as child marriage, forced marriage and female genital mutilation
- Recognizing and promoting unpaid domestic work and family care through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and promoting the sharing of responsibilities within the family in accordance with national conditions
- Ensure the full, effective participation and equal opportunity of women in leadership positions at all levels of policy-making in political, economic and social life Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health as well as reproductive rights adopted in line with the Programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development, Beijing Platform for Action and documents on the outcome of conferences evaluating the implementation of this Programme and Platform
- Undertake reforms aimed at giving women equal access to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control of land, other assets, financial services, inheritance rights and other natural resources, in accordance with national law
- Increase the use of women's facilitation technologies, especially information and communication technologies, to promote women's empowerment
- Adopt and strengthen favourable policies and highly effective legal systems to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels

## CONCLUSIONS

The increase in trade and international integration brings both opportunities and challenges to Vietnam's economy. Gender inequality can therefore be reduced but also increased. Vietnam's export-oriented economic sector is home to a large concentration of women. Although increasing industrialization has resulted in more job opportunities for women, at the same time the quality of new jobs created remains a concern. Many jobs require women to work long hours, often with low safety conditions. In addition, there are also many limitations in professional training and skills so that women can occupy higher positions in the career ladder. Over the past 20 years, the national gender assessment has been carried out every 5 years in Viet Nam. These multidisciplinary efforts aim to provide an overall picture of the progress made in the field of gender equality based on key socio-economic indicators, while providing analyses and recommendations to address barriers to progress and narrow the gender gap. Each report identified gender issues or inequalities across every sector considered – from governance, labour, agriculture, business, transport and connectivity, urban development and especially family life. This clearly shows that gender equality is not a fringe issue, but crucial to the quality, permanence and progress gained from Vietnam's socio-economic development. With a commitment to the responsible implementation of the sustainable development goals, indicators on gender equality in the family are important to assess the advantages and challenges of achieving this goal in Viet Nam today.



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