

Traditional Attitudes on Gender Endure in Vietnam

Indochina Research

Vietnam has a young and dynamic population, with 54% of Vietnam's people under 30 and 25% under 15. While globalization and the communications revolution are connecting young Vietnamese to the outside world, a recent online survey has discovered traditional gender roles remain deeply embedded in Vietnamese society.

The Asia Foundation, in conjunction with two Vietnamese NGOs, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy, and Environment (iSEE), and the Research Centre for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development (CGFED) set up an interactive online survey and discussion forum called "Youth and Gender in Vietnam." This was designed to dig down and explore gender preconceptions and how these impacted the respondent's lives – from their vision of leadership to their choice of partners and careers.

The ultimate aim was to encourage a deeper debate on the subject of gender roles, engaging Vietnamese youth in these issues beyond the current focus on dramatic social change and its symptoms, towards a discussion on the very nature of inequality.

Over 2,500 people took the survey, which was conducted through three popular websites: News.zing.vn, VOZ forum, and Lamchame forum. This was followed up in greater detail through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students in the north, center and south of Vietnam.

The findings of this research have produced some sobering insights into how entrenched traditional gender attitudes are in modern Vietnam.



The Meaning of Leadership

Women make up 24.4% of the National Assembly, while female staff in State agencies at district and central levels account for 31% of all employees, according to Nguyen Thi Kim Thuy, Vice President of the Vietnam Women's Union.

However, according to the survey, 80% of respondents believed a leader should be "decisive," while 62% voted for "strong" – attributes that respondents overwhelmingly identified as associated with being male. Moreover, both male and females concurred in almost equal numbers and it didn't matter if they came from the city or the countryside, nor whether they were already working or still in school.

Male students voiced very strong views against the idea of having female leaders during follow-up focus group discussions held in February at universities in Hanoi and at a teacher's training college in Phu Yen province. As one participant in Phu Yen put it, "it's fine if they are talented women, but I still prefer a male superior." This strong gender bias is particularly worrying given that these sentiments are coming from future teachers whose job it will be to inculcate ideas about gender to future generations of young Vietnamese.

Choice of Career

Women constitute 51% of the population, make up 48% of the labor forceⁱ and comprise 25% of all entrepreneurs in the country creating tens of thousands of jobs. However, the number of women holding decision-making and policy-making positions remains low, for example, female leaders only account for 4% on people's committees and councils.

About 39% of women went on to higher education and attained master's degrees. Of these, 37% got their PhDs or became professors. Nevertheless, while over 80% of the survey respondents said being a university professor was equally suitable for both sexes, only about 50% felt it was appropriate for women to pursue careers as government leaders, economic experts, or entrepreneurs, with these views evenly shared between both male and female respondents.

Further exacerbating the issue, there is a large gap between women in rural areas and big cities, with women in remote areas having less opportunity to access information, education and training, and social security systems.



Expectations in a Life Partner

Educational opportunities in Vietnam are much more attainable for women in recent years, but finding a partner who respects her career options is the bane of many a modern young Vietnamese woman's life. Even to obtain a job, a woman must still

negotiate with her husband. The majority of males still prefer a wife that accepts the conventional role of housewife and Vietnamese women remain responsible for the well-being of their families while also holding down a full-time job.

Moreover, most parents are more impressed by their daughter finding a suitable husband than by them attaining an advanced degree.

In the survey, traditional female attributes of skillfulness (66%), industriousness (63%), and long-suffering self-sacrifice (33%) remain the key expectations that young Vietnamese men look for in a partner. Even Vietnamese women overwhelmingly identify stereotypical male traits in their perfect partner, with 81% wanting him to be "strong."

Interestingly, a quality that both sexes sought in their prospective partners were dynamism – identified by half of all respondents, recognition no doubt of the highly competitive nature of modern life.

These results show that Vietnam's younger generation, a group that is often held up as being very open and liberal, continue to hold on to traditional views of gender roles that will have direct impact on the choices they make in their careers, relationships, children, and friends.

As Vietnam struggles to find its place in a rapidly changing world, and the authorities remain determined to strike a balance between social cohesion and modernisation, both tradition expectations and contemporary demands appear increasingly on a collision course.

ⁱ World Bank Indicators, Female (% of total), 2013