

Mdm Ton Nu Thi Ninh's talking points on "Vietnamese Women in Leadership"

The message: Vietnamese women are strong, they can lead and do lead in many fields and respects but they deserve more space and less hindrance to their all round empowerment and further advancement. Viet Nam cannot ambition to grow into a full-fledged developed, modern economy and society unless optimal conditions are created that enable women to develop and contribute to the best of their ability in all spheres of life.

1. Putting the issue in its specific historical and socio-cultural context

- Compared to other societies with a Confucian background, there has been for centuries greater equality, at least among working folks, between husband and wife: e.g. the traditional maxim "*Husband and wife of one mind can together scoop the East Sea dry.*"
- Gender equality was inscribed in Viet Nam's first Constitution in 1946, i.e. very early compared to the rest of Asia.
- The Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) with ramifications throughout the country down to the village level was set up back in 1930. It remains the organization of reference for most women in Viet Nam.
- Women have been an integral part of the nation's struggle for independence and sovereignty.
- The VWU has been at the core of the campaigns to eradicate illiteracy among women and girls (since the 1940s).
- With the opening up of the country and the economy thanks to the reform and renewal process (known as *Đổi Mới*) since the late 1980s, women have moved to occupy leadership positions in various fields but more prominently in small and medium size business and in the media as well as entertainment industry.

2. Where Vietnamese women leaders stand today: the strengths and weaknesses of the system and of women themselves

- Compared to before *Đổi Mới*:
 - Additional legislation related to women and gender equality has been adopted (2000 Marriage and Family Law; 2007 Law on Gender Equality; 2007 Law on Domestic Violence).
 - Women are more educated and more financially independent.
 - Young women are self-confident, mobile, and more connected to the world.
 - Women account for nearly a third of SME CEOs (in the top ten internationally).
 - Many diverse organizations and networks have emerged to defend and promote women's and girls' rights and empowerment.

- Compared to itself and to the region as well as the world, Viet Nam has been slipping behind in the political leadership advancement of women as shown by:
 - the very low female ratio in the highest instances of the ruling party and only 2 female ministers;
 - the proportion of female members of the legislative body (the National Assembly) falling for two consecutive legislatures (2007-2012 and 2012-2016);
 - the very low number of female provincial governors (only 1/63 for 2015-2020) or female provincial party heads (only 3/63 for 2015-2020).
- The main strengths of the system with regard to women's advancement
 - The declared goals and objectives
 - The legislation
 - A number of progressive policies such as: 6 month paid maternity leave; most recently, men's entitlement to 14 day paid paternity leave
 - No explicit discrimination
- The persistent hindrances in the system to women's advancement:
 - Weak law and policy enforcement and oversight
 - Underlying male patriarchal mindset, at nearly all levels of the system and the work place, resulting in stonewalling on issues such as retirement age differential or the "number two syndrome"
 - Social gender role stereotyping, continuing Confucian division of roles in the family
- The main strengths of women
 - Hard working, dynamic, entrepreneurial
 - Strong and resilient homekeepers
 - Good organizers
 - Ingenuity, adaptability and tenacity in the face of adversity
- Weaknesses of women themselves:
 - Sometimes lack of self-assertiveness
 - Remaining prisoners of the "sweet bias", of the social gender role stereotyping
 - Limited political ambition, preference for striving up in the economic, business sphere

Conclusion:

Overall, Vietnam does relatively well on gender equality, especially in business, but they still have to break through the glass ceiling at the top of large corporations. The weak spot remains women's limited political empowerment, a situation which will require the leadership to shed complacency about what has been achieved, show political will and take bold measures, and women to proactively involve themselves.