

**GENDER STEREOTYPES
AGAINST FEMALE LEADERS
IN THE VIETNAMESE MEDIA**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



OXFAM

MESSAGES

News media content, be it online, print, radio or television, is biased against female leaders. Female leaders are portrayed and stereotyped in association with such female-identified issues as education, health care and culture, among others.

Journalists believe Vietnam needs to increase the role of women in society and economic development. However, for the majority of them a gap still exists between what they believe and what they do.

Most journalists hold stereotypical views about female leaders' skills and qualities. Such a biased perception influences their practices and news content.

Of the factors influencing journalists' gatekeeping roles in reporting on female leadership, the gender role divisions in their families have the strongest influence. Media stereotypes are also influenced by the desires of their public audience.

INTRODUCTION

Vietnam has been praised for its efforts in promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Since *Doi Moi* economic reforms began in the late 1980s, the representation of women in elected bodies including the National Assembly and People’s Councils has increased remarkably. Female leadership in the private sector has also improved. Despite these increases, women’s leadership still falls far short of gender parity in the general population.

Research and reports conducted in various countries show that women’s participation and leadership in decision-making positions is a prerequisite for economic growth, equality and sustainable social development.

Vietnam’s government and legislature have made commitments to increasing women’s representation in the country’s political system. A question still exists on why the number of female candidates chosen is often low.

In recent research conducted in three provinces in Vietnam’s northern, central and southern regions, Oxfam found that the public’s views of women are highly stereotypical. Voters believe that women have skills and qualities to lead, but also expect a good female leader to first fulfill her role as a mother and a wife before taking on her work responsibilities. One of the sources participants of the study frequently referred to back up their biased attitude to and stereotypes against women’s leadership is the mainstream media.

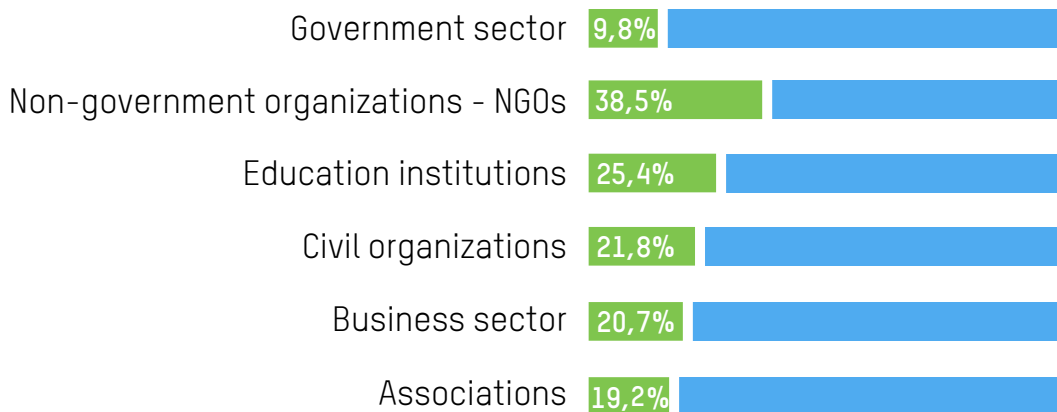
This research seeks to (1) investigate the coverage of female leaders in the news; (2) examine journalists’ perceptions, attitudes, and professional practices with regard to female leadership; (3) identify factors that influence journalists in news production; and (4) provide recommendations to improve news content.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AGAINST FEMALE LEADERS IN THE NEWS

Of the leader sources used in the news, female leaders accounted for a small percentage. Female leader sources are sought out primarily for female-identified issues only.

The timeframe for content analysis included two weeks in September and one in October. News media data were retrieved from *VTV1, VOV1, Tuổi Trẻ, Thanh Niên, VietNam-Net, Dân Trí, and VnExpress*. A total of 2,168 articles were selected with 3,429 leaders being interviewed, quoted or written about.

According to the results, male sources dominated in the news with a total of 2,938 sources or 85.7%. Meanwhile, female leaders accounted for only 14.3% of the sources. Of 3,429 leader sources in this sample, the majority were from the government sector (62.7%). However, the percentage of female leaders in this sector was the lowest, with only 9.8% as opposed to 90.2% male leaders. The proportion of female leaders from all other sectors was higher than the average:



Female leader sources were sought out more often for news stories on female-identified issues such as healthcare, education, children/family, social welfare, poverty, civil society, humanitarian and ethnic minority topics. Male leader sources, although dominating the news on every area including women's rights, were more likely to

be quoted or interviewed on such male-identified issues as the macro economy, budget, international relations, international events, public security, science and technology. Those are the issues that are weighted more heavily in the government's administration.

Information on family and appearance is more likely to be associated with female leaders

Our results showed a significant difference in how the portrayal of leaders is gendered. It is important to note that although female leaders are almost invisible in the news compared to male leaders, they receive greater attention from the news media with regard to information on family,

caregiving roles and appearance than their male counterparts do.

There are **two possible scenarios** for why female leaders were seldom sought out as news sources:

First, if the proportion of male and female leader sources in the news were *similar to that in reality*, it would show a huge gap between men and women in terms of representation in leadership positions.

Second, if what is portrayed in the news were *unrealistic*, the news media might have distorted the picture of gender equality in leadership presented to the public.

JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES TOWARDS MALE & FEMALE LEADERS

1) Vietnam needs to continue improving its gender equality situation, but men possess traits to be leaders and women do not.

Most journalists (53.7%) agreed that in the Vietnamese society discrimination against women still exists at a relatively high degree. The majority of participants (72%) suggested that Vietnam needs to continue improving its gender equality situation.

2) Men were more likely to possess qualities that are congruent with those of leaders than women.

Journalists believe that **male leaders** have stronger agentic traits including being *confident, capable, decisive, competitive* and *powerful*. **Female leaders** have stronger communal qualities such as *friendly, flexible, delicate, sympathetic* and *considerate*.

3) Female leaders' personal information is more important than that of male leaders.

Such details as education and working experience were important for both male and female leaders. However, information about family and children caretaking or physical appearance was seen as more important for reporting on female leaders than it was for male leaders.

4) Stereotypes in assuming relevance of issues to leader sources based on their gender

Journalists believe **male leaders** are better news sources on male-identified issues including *macroeconomics, business, military, science and technology, sports* and *politics*. **Women** are better news sources for three female-identified issues including *education, healthcare* and *family/children*.

Journalists hold gender stereotypes towards news sources. **Male leader** sources are seen more *intelligent, decisive, organized and efficient*, as well as *powerful* than female leaders. **Female leader** sources are more *honest* and *accessible* than male leaders.

FACTORS INFLUENCING NEWS PRODUCTION ON FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Journalists' gender-based role division at home and audience are the most influential factors on gatekeeping with regard to covering female leaders.

Journalists who live in **families with traditional gender role divisions** (i.e. *women take care of children; men are primary breadwinners; men's career is more important than that of women; and women do house chores*), tend to have

stronger stereotypical perceptions and attitudes towards female leaders.

The second most influential factor to the gatekeeping process with respect to reporting on female leaders is **the public audience**. Journalists say they select gender-stereotypical details when reporting on female leaders because they want to attract audience attention.



Photo: Do Manh Cuong

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study as well as the review of the literature in the field, the following recommendations were proposed:

1) FOSTERING CHANGES IN JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTION OF AND TRADITIONAL VIEWS ON FEMALE LEADERS' SKILLS AND TRAITS

- Training courses are needed to **provide knowledge of gender stereotypes to journalists**. If training courses are to be held, the length of the courses needs to be carefully considered for journalists to have enough time to capture the complex and subtleness of gender stereotypes as well as to connect with their journalism work. Trainers need to have expertise also in journalism, with a strong understanding of newsroom practices and news content production process in order to design relevant training programs.
- Incorporating gender stereotype topics into **formal journalism education at universities** in the country. We recommend the introduction of a semester-long course for journalism students. The impact of this intervention may not be immediate. However, it is expected to foster long term changes among future journalists.
- Developing sound journalism training with a focus on **changing journalists' perception of gender stereotypes and their daily routines** with regards to gender issue. We recommend that besides focusing on gender stereotypes related to journalism work, training courses need to aim at changing journalists' perception of and behaviors with regards to gender issues at home.
- Organizing trainings into which gender stereotypes should be incorporated to **build capacity and improve professional skills** in reporting on leaders for journalists.

2) INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATION CHANGES IN TERMS OF GENDER STEREOTYPES

- Incorporating regulations and guidelines on gender stereotypes into **professional guidebooks or codes of conduct** of news organizations. We recommend providing training on gender stereotypes guidelines to editorial teams so that they can apply, supervise and enforce the new rules.
- Continuing to develop **networks of core members** among journalists, who have the ability to influence, set routines, introduce new practices or create changes within their news organizations.

3) STEPPING UP THE ROLE OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS IN MONITORING MEDIA CONTENT

- We recommend capacity building for **social organizations working in the field of women's rights**. These organizations should step up their role in monitoring and holding dialogues with news organizations with the goal of ensuring gender-stereotype-free news media content. The success achieved in recent years by children rights organizations using a similar monitoring mechanism shows that gender stereotypical news content against women in general and female leaders in particular could be improved through closely monitoring the content and holding dialogues with news organizations and journalists in a timely manner.
- Currently in Vietnam, a number of double standards that can create or reinforce gender stereotypes have been propagated by local women's rights organizations. Thus, **building capacity and raising awareness for workers of women's rights organizations** are crucial in any campaign and advocacy work in this area.



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