

# Gender Differences of Citizen Participation in Local Government: The Case of Vietnam

Lily - Trinh Hoang Hong Hue

Department of Public Policy and Administration

National Chi Nan University, Taiwan

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## Abstract

Citizen participation has been largely considered as an important objective of improving democracy and government decision-making in Vietnam recently. Based on the dataset of the Public Administration Performance Index Survey data (PAPI), Vietnamese women tend to actively participate in local government rather than men do. Hence, this study aims to explore distinct factors affect gender differences of citizen participation in local government in Vietnam. Applying qualitative approach through in-depth interview, besides objective factors such as political institutions, policy environment, and social networking, this article finds out some subjective major factors influencing citizen participation such as belief of people, educational level, age, sex, household conditions. Furthermore, this study also identifies three crucial reasons that leading to the differences of citizen participation at the local level between women and men in the context of Vietnam including political attitudes and interests, role in family, and the role of mass organizations.

**Keywords:** citizen participation, gender, women, local governance, PAPI, Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

Citizen participation is certainly not new to political thought or practice. However, with the emergence of governance, it has become a central matter. Governance has played a prominent role in requiring the cooperation of all relevant stakeholders in solving the underlying problem. Participation may include a variety of different stakeholder groups, in which the citizenry has an important stake in the decision-making process (Martin, 2003). Generally speaking, citizen participation is considered as a core element of “good governance” as well as a major concern of “sound governance”, and it simultaneously advances “democratic governance” (OECD, 2001a; Farazmand, 2004; Fung, 2015).

Gender equality in representation is also one of the most prominent implications of

democratic governance (UNDP, 2011). Gender differences in citizen participation are remarkably considered through the term “a different voice” of Carol Gilligan (Schlozman *et.al*, 1995). Theoretically, there are fewer women than men participate in local governance, and males have a higher probability of participation than females (Brenya, Mensah, Nyarko, 2015; Fraune, 2015; Haque, 2003).

To pursue sustainable development strategies, both developed and developing countries are creating an environment that fosters democratic governance. Vietnam now is one of the most dynamic emerging countries in East Asia region. Although being a single party State, Vietnam has implemented many measures to strengthen governance system and citizen participation in decision-making (UNDP, 2006). The data analysis of Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) indicates that Vietnamese women tend to more participate in local government than men. In other words, province has more percentage of female tends to have higher citizen participation. This study aims at exploring factors that impact on gender differences of citizen participation in local government in Vietnam.

The article starts out by a brief literate review of citizen participation and gender representation equality, which focuses on a case of Vietnam. This is followed by an explanation of the research design. Next, through in-depth interview, we have some distinct findings to answer the fundamental question regarding to what the main reasons are leading to the fact that Vietnamese women highly participate in local governance rather than men. A brief conclusion is provided in the last section.

## 2. Overview of Citizen Participation in Local Government in Vietnam

### 2.1 Features of Local Government System in Vietnam

Vietnam covers an area that totals up to approximately 329,560 square kilometers; and its current population is around 92 million. The local government in Vietnam refers to three levels – the provincial, district and communal level. The provinces act like a second level of “central government” for lower levels of government (Malesky, 2004). From time to time, the number of local units has changed in accordance with the political and social conditions. For example, the number of provinces was 40 in 1986, then increased dramatically to 64 in 2005. Table 1 will depicts the changes in number of local government in Vietnam from 1986 to now.

Table 1. The changes in number of local government in Vietnam

<b>Number of local units</b>	<b>1986</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>June 2019</b>
Provincial level	40	64	63	63
District level	522	671	697	645
Ward/Commune level	9,901	10,876	11,111	11,162

Source: General statistics office of Vietnam 2019

As a socialist country with the single-party regime and the democratic centralism principle,

the concept of local government is interpreted in a different way. In particular, local government includes representative organ and administrative organ. The People's Council is the representative agency that carried out legislative and monitoring functions and is elected by the local residents. The People's Committee is the administrative agency or the executive branch of the People's Council at the same level. However, the memberships of People's committee and People's council often overlap each other. Simultaneously, the People's Council and the People's Committee are established at each level.

## 2.2 Citizen Participation in Local Government in Vietnam

In Vietnam, the term "citizen participation" was originally emphasized in the Constitution of 1946 by the Vietnam Communist Party and the president Ho Chi Minh: "*All Vietnamese citizens have equal rights in all aspects: politics, economics, culture*" (Article 6), "*... are involved in government affairs according to their talents and his virtue*" (Article 7). The president Ho Chi Minh also pointed out the decisive significance for the success of revolution as civilian work "*quyen hanh va luc luong deu la o nhan dan*" (power and forces are in the people) (Ho Chi Minh, 1949). Then, the 1992 Constitution affirmed that "*The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Both state power belongs to the people ...*" (Article 2); "*Citizens use the state power through Congress and the People's Council ...*" (Article 6); and "*Citizens have the right to participate in the management of the state and society as well as in the discussion of common issues at national and local level, to give proposals to state agencies, and to vote at the referendum*" (Article 53). According to the 2013 Constitution, democratization and citizen participation in Vietnam fall into two dimensions, "*the people shall exercise state power through direct democracy (dan chu truc tiep) and through representative democracy (dan chu dai dien) in the National Assembly, People's Councils and other state agencies*" (Article 6).

With the different historical, political and cultural context, the interpretation and understanding concerning citizen participation in Vietnam also differ from other a countries. We should look at the history of viewpoints of the relationship between citizens and the state. First, Vietnam follows the Marxist theories with the enduring precept of "*nhan dan lam chu*" (the mastery of the people), implying the voice of the working class. The key second concept is "*tap trung dan chu*" (democratic decentralism), that broadly used to explain the horizontal unification of three major branches of government (legislative, executive and judicial), and the vertical integration of administrative levels from lowest local government to the central state. Another important term is "*dan van*" (mass mobilization), that indicates to the top-down approach of "citizen participation" in Vietnam. In fact, the Communist Party of Vietnam mass mobilization section will cooperate with the mass organizations (*to chuc doan the*) to convey government policies to the citizens and to help the people to understand and implement them. In theory, these mass organizations represent the interests of society to the state, and act as a channel for state policies to convey down to the citizens. In reality, they continue to be a mediated bridge between the state and citizen. For instance, the Vietnam Fatherland Front (*Mat tran To quoc*) is the huge political alliance of all the official mass organizations including the Veteran's Union (*Hoi Cuu chien binh*), the Women's Union (*Hoi Phu nu*), the Youth Union (*Hoi Thanh nien*), and the Farmer's Union (*Hoi Nong dan*).

Vietnam first put in place the legal framework for citizen participation in local governments in 1998 with the *Nghi định Dân chủ Cơ sở* (Grassroots Democracy Decree). This decree provided two well-known Vietnamese phrases *Dan biet, dan ban, dan lam, dan kiem tra* (People know, People discuss, People do, and People monitor), and “*Nha nuoc cua dan, do dan va vi dan* (government of the people, by the people, and for the people). Corresponding to the four steps of this first slogan, citizen participation at the local level in Vietnam can be defined into four dimensions. First, citizens have the right to be informed of local government’s activities that affect them and to have the opportunities of participating in economic, political and social life. Second, citizens can discuss and contribute to the formulation of certain policies or programs through citizen groups or associations, which may be officially established (such as in the case of mass organizations) or informal and unregistered (such as local clan, lineage and cultural groups). Third, citizens can voluntarily or required contribute to the development of localities through participate in local government activities. Finally, citizens can supervise and control the activities of local authorities. In brief, citizen participation in Vietnam is associated with to the exertion of citizens’ rights, discussion and contribution to the formulation of certain policies, participation in the local development activities and supervision local government actions. The latter slogan “of, by, and for the people” is more connected to representative democracy. In the context of Vietnam system, this refers the representative of the people and the nation of the National Assembly and People’s Council.

To ensure citizen participation in the work of State management, Vietnamese government promulgate many laws was such as “*Luật Bầu cử Quốc hội và Hội đồng nhân dân*” (the Law on the Election of the National Assembly and the People's Council); “*Luật Tổ chức Quốc hội*” (the Law on Organization of the National Assembly); “*Luật Khiếu nại, tố cáo*” (the Law on Complaints and Denunciations). The conditions, forms and methods for citizens to participate are specifically regulated. For instance, the Assembly delegates and government agencies must receive and handle citizens’ proposals and complaints, or citizens’ comments on the promulgated legal documents, programs, socio-economic development plans. Other laws specify the role of socio-political organizations in the work of State management, such as “*Luật Công đoàn*” (the Law on Trade Unions), “*Luật Thanh niên*” (Law on the Youth of Vietnam) and “*Luật Mặt trận Tổ quốc*” (the Law on the Fatherland Front). Furthermore, many socio-economic development programs implemented to exercise citizens’ democratic rights and to improve local governance such as “*Chương trình mục tiêu quốc gia xóa đói giảm nghèo*” (the National Target Program for Poverty Reduction), “*Chương trình phát triển kinh tế xã hội các xã đặc biệt khó khăn, vùng dân vùng dân tộc thiểu số và miền núi*” (the Socio-economic Development Program for Most Vulnerable Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (known as Program 135), or “*Chương trình phát triển nông thôn mới*” (the New Rural Development Program). Vietnam also has a wider range of legal documents pertaining to consultations of citizens ranging from the 2013 Constitution to the Grassroots Democracy Ordinance through the new Law on Local Government of 2015. To summarize, in Vietnam, the current legal documents about the forms and methods of citizen participation in the management and development of policies and laws have been regulated rather detailed.

### 3. Literature Review

Originated from ancient Greece and Colonial New England, and from the last few years of the 1960s onward (Cogan & Sharpe, 1986), citizen participation has become a popular political word and a main topic of government agendas (Pateman, 1970; Hilliard; 1999; Royo, 2011; Sidor, 2012).

Citizen participation is one of the most important principles of local development. Simultaneously, local government plays an important role in citizen participation initiatives because it is the place where the concerns of the “grassroots” or locality intersect most directly with those of governance and the state (Gaventa & Valderrama, 1999). Participatory decision-making has greater usefulness at local level (Fung & Wright 2001; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Mizrahi *et. al.*, 2010). Therefore, citizen participation allows local government to understand more about citizen needs and concerns, while citizens can get information about services, monitor the quality of service delivery, and demand corrective actions of their government (Speer 2012: 2382).

Nowadays, to pursue sustainable development strategies, both developed and developing countries now are creating an environment that fosters democratic governance. Citizen participation and gender equality in representation are prominent elements of democratic governance (UNDP, 2011). In fact, citizen participation not only contribute to political stability but also build up a fairer and more equal society, in which power belongs to the people (UNDP, 2006). Meanwhile, gender equality in representation is considered as a social category shape and establishes one’s life chances in society and development like race, ethnicity and class (Pant & Farrell, 2007). It also is salient factor in participation in public decision-making. Pant and Farrel (2007) also point out that both women and men need to participate and be active in decision-making and policy formulation. However, in practice, women remain vastly underrepresented compared with men in policy and decision-making bodies because of limited access to resources and weaker capabilities. Women and men do not have equal social, economic and legal rights; in which women remain vastly under-represented in both of national and local government (World Bank, 2001).

The theory of representative bureaucracy seeks a way to legitimate the bureaucracy’s political power based on democratic value such as equal representation (Frederickson, 2012). When a bureaucracy reflects the interests of community, it can be considered as a representative institution. In political science, the most relevant systematic analyzes of citizen participation have focused on gender differences in the amount rather than the nature of participation. These findings indicate that women now equal or surpass men in voter turnout (Beckwith, 1986; Wirls, 1986) and that the disparity between men and women in terms of citizen activity is quite narrow (Andersen, 1975; Clark & Clark, 1986; Schlozman *et.al*, 1995; Verba *et.al*, 1993; Welch, 1977). According to Schlozman *et.al* (1995), they originally expect that males and female in relation to citizen participation have a “different voices”; but finally they find out more similarity than difference between women and men. In fact, “although women are slightly less active than men, there is substantial similarity in the overall pattern of the participatory acts they undertake. With respect to the gratifications attendant to participation,



women and men are similar in terms of how they recalled the reasons for their activity” (Schlozman, 1995: 267).

Theoretically and practically, women less participate in local governance, and males have a higher probability of participation than females (Brenya *et.al*, 2015; Fraune, 2015; Haque, 2003). Generally, in global governance, until now women active have represented in the governing institutions such as legislature, cabinet and bureaucracy. However, in most East Asian countries, women’s representation still remains relatively weak (Haque, 2003). Fraune (2015) identifies a causal mechanism in terms of gender gap in citizen participation in the German context. He also explores several reasons why men are more likely to engage in schemes in renewable electricity production (RES-E). Especially, Coffé (2010) distinctly discovers that there are significant differences between women and men in voting and engaging in political activities. For instance, women are more likely to voting and engaging in “private” activism; whereas men are likely to engaging in direct contact and being members of political parties.

There have been many various arguments about gender matters and citizen participation, mainly based on the view of women engaging in differing types of participation and based on different characteristics of each country. Nevertheless, current studies less discuss about citizen participation and gender differences in local government, especially in the context of Vietnam. Most of studies in Vietnam mainly examine the role of citizen participation in the development process and concentrate on how to increase citizen participation in local governance (ACVN, 2008; Dang, Thai & Le, 2015; Giang, Nguyen, Tran, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Dao, 2015; Nguyen, Le, Tran & Bryant, 2015; UNDP, 2015; Thai & Garcia-Zamor, 2017; Su & Bui, 2017). Other studies contribute to the literature on the term “civil society” by analyzing citizen participation in Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) since the *Doi moi* (Renovation) policy or the emergence of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Vietnam (Dalton, 2006; Wischermann, 2010; UNDP, 2006). Some researchers also investigate differences of citizen participation between large and small cities, between the poor and non-poor people; and the gap between urban and rural governance in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2015; Jairo, Nguyen, Tran & Phung, 2015). Several other studies indicate the effects of citizen participation and the importance of decentralization on public services delivery in the context of Vietnam (Wescott, 2003; Thanh, Zouikri, Deffains, 2012; Ramesh, 2013; Malesky, Cuong & Anh, 2014; Thi, 2016). Hence, there is a need to shed some lights on gender differences of citizen participation at the local level.

#### **4. Research Design**

In the middle of the year 2019, the total population of Vietnam is nearly 92 million, of which male accounts for approximately 49% and females around 51%. According to the 2007 Grassroots Democracy Ordinance, women have also equal rights to participate in governance both directly and indirectly like men. Based on the data analysis of Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI) - a largest tool to assess provincial performance in governance and public administration based on citizen’s experiences, women have tendency to more participate at the local level than men. This analysis indicates that in Vietnam, there might be

a reverse effect of gender on citizen participation. In other words, province has higher percentage of male tends to have lower citizen participation.

This research will answer the question “why Vietnamese women more actively participate in local government than men?” and explore “what factors influence on differences of citizen participation between female and male in local government”. This study applies qualitative research methodology. Questionnaires were used during in-depth interviews with 30 ordinary citizens located in Ho Chi Minh City, a largest municipality in Vietnam. Selection of study participants is guided by the target to maximize the possibility that a variety of perspectives could be expressed. Therefore, the sample was purposively selected to include both women and men with different academic degrees, different age groups, different class and different occupational segregation. The respondents were asked to answer questions based on their knowledge and opinions about citizen participation at the local level.

## **5. Findings and Discussion**

### *5.1 Factors Influence on Citizen Participation at the Local Level*

Most Vietnamese citizens are aware of basic governance structures, but their awareness drops off rapidly when asked about more detailed or complex topics, because they are more concerned about practical impacts of governance than about the slogans and theories used by officials (Dang, 2015). In fact, they can only distinguish the central and local level of the government structure. However, when detailed asking about Vietnam local government structure, some participants - majorly are ordinary citizens even do not know about the People’s Councils and People’s Committees that has provincial, district, commune, ward and township level. Especially, they even cannot recognize the differences between People’s councils and People’s committees. The provided main reasons are that these citizens are rather low education level and care little about politics than economic life. As one ordinary person stated that “Food, rice, clothing and money are put on their top priority affairs”. Clearly, in urban and more developed areas as well as in rural and mountainous areas, most citizens are apathetic to politics because it does not highly influence on their daily life and they are too busy working to have more time to pay attention to public issues.

This study finds out that there are many different opinions among participants about what they think about citizen participation. Distinctly, only citizens with high educational level consist of both female and male have rather similar definitions as well as knowledge of citizen participation. For them, citizen participation often involves “the election to directly select their representatives to participate in the governmental agencies for ensuring their voice and right” or “political affairs to ensure the democracy”. Similarly, there is a consensus between female and male participants about rights and obligation of citizens; thus they highlight that “citizens should obey the regulation, the law and policies of the Communist Party and of the State of Vietnam”. Nevertheless, some women with high educational and professional backgrounds have also different opinions about citizen participation compared to men, they assert that “citizens have to participate in local activities and movements to contribute for socio-economic development of locality”. In fact, some young women mainly focus on awareness of citizens and uphold the role of social work. They propose that “citizens

participate in detailed issues such as environment protection or traffic regulation to have valuable contributions for development of a better society”. Specially, unlike older man, older women emphasize the role of citizen participation at the smaller administrative tier such as neighborhoods (“khu phố”) or Hamlet (“xóm, ấp”) and Village (“làng, thôn, bản”) as well as other mass organizations such as the Women’s Union (*Hoi Phu nu*), Association for the Elderly (*Hoi nguoi cao tuoi*) and the Farmer’s Union (*Hoi nong dan*).

Most of participants assert that Vietnamese government has not created many conditions for truly empower citizen to directly participate in local governance. Perhaps this reduces the motivation of citizen participation. Additionally, some people are still hesitant, self-deprecating, lack of confidence, lack of courage, afraid of collective activities, lack of professional knowledge and social interaction. In Vietnam, the form of indirect citizen participation through elected representatives is more popular. These elected representatives represent for the will and aspirations of citizens. However, instead of being involved in the nomination phase for their candidates, citizens just get information about elected candidates through their biography and “some candidates are not local inhabitants and are offered by central government”. Citizens do not have truly complete understanding about candidates, and they vote following their emotion. In addition, citizens through their representatives to reflect their minds, aspirations and recommendations; whereas sometimes these representatives do not have truly enough capacity and responsibility to do that. Once quality of delegates has not met the expectations of citizens- the direct ones who elect them, the citizens’ trust is not truly high. Furthermore, elected officials are mainly public servants, so it is very difficult for the scrutiny and evaluation of policies implementation.

Generally, besides objective factors such as political institutions, policy environment and social networking, this article explores some major subjective factors influencing citizen participation in local government in Vietnam such as belief of people, educational level, age, sex, and household condition. However, there also have many inadequacies. As one senior public servant argue that “whether citizens have enough competency as well as the State facilitates for them to participate in policy making” because the official regulations on citizen participation still lack a systematic, consistent view.

### *5.2 Gender Differences and Citizen Participation at the Local Level*

There are many different views about males and female related to citizen participation. Schlozman (1995) finds out more similarity than difference between women and men while Coffé (2010); Haque, (2003) and Fraune (2015) conclude that there are differences of participation between them. In case of Vietnam, women tend to higher citizen participation in local government rather than men in general because of disparities in resources, political attitudes and gender roles.

Vietnam was once a matriarchy, and then adopted the Confucian principle of male superiority, but women are arguably given more respect in Vietnam than in some other countries with some certain rights. In Vietnam, women are deeply prone to be interested in local affairs; whereas men are much keen on the bigger ones at national and global level. The main reasons consist of their different hobbies and the main role of women in family. Females not only are



responsible of housework chores but also financial management in the family. In addition, women only concern detailed issues of the locality that directly influence on their daily life. Thus, they can manage their time to mainly participate in periodical meetings at the local level as well as decide payments for voluntary contributions for the locality. Meanwhile, men mostly concentrate on working and making money. Specially, voluntary contributions is one of four sub-dimensions of the concept citizen participation of PAPI. Hence, once women highly engage in this aspect that leads to the fact that total index of citizen participation of women is higher than men.

Vietnamese women are more likely to participate than men at the grass roots level, reflecting the importance of the mass organizations at the local level such as the Women's Union and the Farmer's Union (ADB, 2012). Theoretically, these mass organizations represent the interests of society to the state, and act as a channel for state policies to convey down to the citizens. They involve representative democracy by monitoring nomination and election procedures for legislative bodies. The memberships of Women's Union and Farmers' Union accounted of a large portion of citizens, respectively with 12 million members and 10 million members; whereas other mass organizations only occupy smaller proportions of population such as General Federation of Trade Union with over 4 million members or Veterans Association with 2.6 million members. According to the table 2, the Women's Union alone accounts for nearly half of the total membership in mass organizations. In percentage terms, membership in the Farmer's Union rose the most quickly, from 6% to 10%.

Table 2. Changes in associational membership from 2011-2014

Type of organization	2011	2012	2013	2014
<i>Communist Party</i>	9	8	8	9
<i>Mass Organizations</i>	34	38	40	42
Women' Union	17	19	20	20
Famer's Union	6	8	9	10
Youth Union	4	4	3	4
Labor Union	4	4	4	4
Veterans Associations	4	4	4	4
<i>Other Associations</i>	8	8	10	13
Parent-Teacher Association	1	1	2	3
Sport-Clubs	1	1	2	3
Community-based Organizations	3	3	2	3
Religious Groups	1	1	2	2
Charities	1	1	1	2

Sources: UNDP, (2015:11)

As a governmental mass organization and a grassroots movement, the Women's Union in Vietnam emerges as a kaleidoscopic body to protect women's legitimate rights and strive for gender equality as well as promote women's participation to politics in multi levels and

sectors. It has a network that operates throughout the country at four administrative levels from central to grassroots level. In fact, the Women's Union always promote the role of women in proposing, supervising, obeying the law and policies. It is also the provider of welfare service, helping their members gain access to credit or agriculture supplies.

In addition, the Communist Party of Vietnam and central government implement many policies to facilitate participation of women in all social activities. There are a specific target for election of women candidates and female cadres in the People's Committee, People's Councils at all levels and the National Assembly. For instance, based on the Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW signed by the General Secretary of Communist Party of Vietnam in 2018, females must be members of all levels at least from 20-25%; females must be the National Assembly deputies and People's Councils at all levels with over 35%. In case of a choice between "equally qualified" men and women candidates, preference should be given to the woman (UNDP, 2015). Hence, participation of women in local governance has increased more and more.

## 5. Conclusion

This article finds out some main factors that impact on gender differences of citizen participation concerning socio-economic characteristics and political attitudes in the unique context of Vietnam. Originally, it is likely that there are some similarity between men and women in their electoral behavior and political interests. According to Nghi (2008), males are more active in electoral participation. However, this study explores that when women control for their political attitude and have an interest in politics and feelings of political efficacy equal to that of men, they would participate more than men. Female also attend local meetings regularly compared to male because females are more active in social and political activities. Additionally, with the main role of financial management in the family, women are willing for voluntary contributions of the locality. That also contributes to the higher citizen participation in local governance. In the past, traditional gender roles with family chores' burden that limited their participation to social and political activities. Nevertheless, at the present, the Communist Party and the central government significantly implement many policies for gender equality in politics, economics and culture. Simultaneously, mass organizations at the local level such as the Women's Union and the Farmer's Union also play crucial roles in facilitating women to participate at the grass roots. Therefore, women have more opportunities to participate in local governance than before.

With these findings, this study will proposed some suggested policies to enhance citizen participation in local governance. Instead of centralized policies of central government, each region should have policies that are suitable to its unique conditions and culture. Citizens should directly participate in local policy formulation and implementation. When the draft of policy is completed, they are invited to independently participate in consultation; and directly implement and supervise of local civil works. Especially, policies concerning education and training for citizens as well as the supporting role of NGOs should be hold up more. Citizen participation in local governance can be considered as the best way to achieve a stable balance between the efficiency of the bureaucracy and the representation of all social groups

in the decision-making process. Therefore, there is a need for the political system's commitment to create tools that encourage active citizen participation as well as promote the value of full participation.

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