

# Women leadership in Vietnamese higher education institutions: An exploratory study on barriers and enablers for career enhancement

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## Abstract

Barriers and enablers that the women leaders experience in the higher education (HE) sector have been a widely researched topic in many developed countries. However, the research on this topic is very limited in developing countries such as Vietnam. Despite the Gender Equality Law introduced in 2006 by the Vietnamese government to promote equal opportunities to women and also reducing the Gender Gap Index score of 70% in Vietnam, there are few women in leadership roles in several sectors including HE. This explanatory study has been conducted in nine universities in Vietnam to understand the barriers that prevent women from taking up leadership roles and the factors that motivate them in their career advancement to become a leader. The qualitative study was conducted with 21 participants (19 women and two men) working as senior leaders, middle managers, and lecturers in these universities. The study found that the main barriers in women's career enhancement were work-life imbalance, subordinates' perceptions regarding women leaders, social networking, and personal factors. The factors which motivated women leaders to advance in their career path were continuous family and mentor support, changing mindset of employers, and potential leadership competency of women leaders. The findings of this study would be beneficial for the Vietnamese HE institutions to determine policies and programs, which can support women's career advancement to leadership roles bringing diversity and inclusion at these institutions. The results might be a steppingstone to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality in Vietnam, which is one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

## Keywords

Vietnamese higher education, gender equality, female employees, educational leadership, barriers and enablers

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## Introduction

Vietnam has been ranked globally high in terms of the female participation rate in recent years with 79% of females either being in paid jobs or looking for the jobs and it has outperformed with its female participation rates amongst the Association of SouthEast Asian Nations as well as Western countries (Preet, 2019). The Vietnamese government established the Gender Equality Law in 2006 to promote equal opportunities to women in all the areas (Vietnam and gender equality, 2017). Vietnam is making good progress with a Gender Gap Index Score (GGIS) of 70% in the year 2020 as compared to the world's average GGIS score of 68.6% and is ranked 87th out of the 153 countries (World Economic Forum, 2020). Vietnam has also grown from 62% to 69% from the year 1995 to 2018 in Gender Equality Index (United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Reports, 2019). In 2019, female labour in Vietnam accounted for 48.4%; however, the representation of women at the top level is meagre (Preet, 2019). So, the question which arises is that with ongoing efforts from the Vietnamese government to reduce the gender gap and improve the past results in terms of GGIS, what might be the factors that are preventing women from reaching to the leadership roles?

Vietnam has 357 public universities and colleges and 88 private higher education institutions (HEIs) (Huong, 2018). As per the report from Women's Representation in Leadership in Vietnam (2012), the percentage of women leaders at director and vice-director level is only 15.7% at all government levels, and men hold the rest of the leadership roles. The percentage of female leaders is about 23% at the director and vice-director level in the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the government ministry which is responsible for administrating the quality of academic education and HEIs in Vietnam (Women's Representation in Leadership in Vietnam, 2012).

The report on two of Vietnam's most prominent social science and research departments – Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) comprising 31 national level institutions and Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology (VAST) having 24 national level institutions – represents that no women were working at the director level. However, only eight women were present as vice-director level in each (VASS and VAST) out of the 36 vice-directors at VASS and 59 vice-directors at VAST, respectively (Women's Representation in Leadership in Vietnam, 2012). Hence, in light of this, although the exact number of female leaders in HEIs is not available, it is assumed that women are underrepresented in leadership roles in HEIs.

As compared to other countries, Vietnamese women are underrepresented in senior roles in prestigious organizations (Pham, 2011). A few exploratory studies such as Nguyen (2013) and Mate et al. (2018) in a limited number of HEIs in Vietnam investigated the roles of Vietnamese women leaders in the context of universities. It is believed that Vietnamese women leaders face several barriers, such as the lack of available opportunities and gender inequality due to cultural intervention. The concept of gender equality has been implemented in many organizations, including the HEIs; however, it is not well-practised, and gender inequality is visible, particularly in the leadership roles.

## Background

### *Women in leadership in the international context*

In this era of globalization, countries across the globe have faced the social changes in many areas, including the education revolution by women. Despite the higher educational attainment level, women are still facing obstacles in taking up the managerial role, and globally there are only 36%

of women in leadership roles (World Economic Forum, 2020). The problem of gender inequality in leadership roles seems to be a global concern. It is well documented that women are underrepresented in leadership roles, including top management roles in HEIs globally (Burkinshaw et al., 2018; Xiang et al., 2017).

Read and Kehm (2016), showed that the women working as vice-chancellors in the UK and German universities were only 17% and 12%, respectively. The Higher Education Funding Council for England in the UK had set a target of 40% of females on higher education (HE) governing bodies by 2020. Fortunately, the UK was successful in achieving the rate of 40% women in governing bodies in 2019, which was 32% in 2014 (Jarboe, 2019), but now the challenge will be to sustain the progress made in HE in the UK. In the US, 26% of colleges and universities have female leaders (Parker, 2015).

Studies by Lie (2014), Muhonen (2016), and Christie et al. (2017) have shown that acceptance of women leaders is less as compared to male leaders across the globe. This problem seems to be higher in developing countries compared to developed countries. Women leaders in the HE sector in developing countries are still not considered a common occurrence, although the numbers have been increasing (Lie, 2014). Specific clusters, such as the natural sciences are male dominated with low female participation and few chances for women to progress. In contrast, sectors such as humanities and social sciences illustrate higher female employment and more female leadership positions (Christie et al., 2017). Women who wish to take up leadership roles do not always have a natural career path to follow, and they are commonly confronted with several constraints such as not being promoted to leadership positions and facing several challenges during the promotion process (Eagly and Carli, 2007). For instance, Muhonen (2016) identified in a Swedish HE setting that women in senior positions experienced gender harassment to a greater extent, in particular when their immediate superior was male as compared to their supervisor being a woman (Muhonen, 2016). The women leader faces many barriers to advance in their career, and these may include organizational, structural, cultural, or personal factors.

Prior studies have highlighted the reason why women are believed to experience low representation in HE leadership roles. Morley (2013) listed factors such as “the gendered division of labour”; “gender bias and misrecognition”; “management and masculinity”; “greedy organisations”; and “work/life balance challenges” for the low representation of women leaders. Leadership and senior management positions require several responsibilities with heavy workloads, which may lead to an imbalance in the work-life balance (Morley, 2013). Women do not commonly desire to be in the leading positions, and often face the dilemma between work and domestic responsibilities. Time management is a crucial issue, especially if women aspire to bring balance between the family and work life (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2006).

### *Women in leadership in Asia*

The primary responsibility of women in SouthEast Asian countries is considered to be taking care of the family, along with the household work (Benson and Yukongdi, 2005). Several other studies have also suggested that women are given fewer opportunities and are underrepresented at work in many Asian countries such as India (Gandhi and Sen, 2020), Japan (Williams, 2010), Pakistan (Mirza and Jabeen, 2011), the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (Gao et al., 2016), Thailand

(Andajani-Sutjahjo et al., 2015), and Singapore (Dimovski et al., 2010), where they mainly play the roles of homemakers and mothers.

Vietnam is one of the South East Asian countries primarily influenced by the PRC, and this has deeply affected Confucianism culture, where women widely accept their traditionally ascribed roles as housewives (Truong et al., 2017). Due to this, the female leaders frequently confront cultural obligations to take up the leadership positions. Women in Vietnam are perceived to have to work harder than their male counterparts in order to prove their “worthiness” while maintaining their duties in family and society (Lan Thi Dang, 2017). However, for a decade, Vietnam seems to be changing concerning its perceptions of female roles, and as a result leadership positions are on the increase at different levels in public and private sectors (Al-Husseini and Elbeltagi, 2016).

There are various studies on the barriers for women leadership in the public sector (i.e. bureaucrats and government officials), private sector (corporations), and general education (mainly schools); however, there are limited studies in HEIs in Vietnam on women leadership. To our knowledge till now, only a few studies have been done on barriers of women leaders in HE in Vietnam (Kelly, 2011; Lazarian-Chehab, 2017; Mate et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2013; Soryaly and Khon, 2017), and there are limited studies focusing on enablers (Mate et al., 2018). The studies done in the past have focused on the maximum of four local universities, and none of the studies focused on covering both international and local universities in Vietnamese HEIs. This research, therefore, aims to fill the gap and contribute to a growing literature in the broader context. The study also aims to analyse the current scenario of gender equality with the increasing education level of females, to determine what kind of barriers and enablers the women leaders face to advance in their career path and take up the leadership roles. In order to achieve these objectives, our study addressed two research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the barriers faced by the women leaders and aspiring women leaders in leadership roles at HEIs in Vietnam?

**RQ2:** What might be the enablers for the women leaders and women lecturers in order to advance in their career to take up the leadership roles?

## **Research methodology**

This qualitative study adopted the purposive sampling method for data collection, which can best answer the research questions of the study (Tongco, 2007). Most of the research in social science is adapting to the purposive sampling method as the most appropriate and convenient way to collect data from the sample within a shorter time (Tongco, 2007). The probability sampling technique is not appropriate in most of the studies in social science with a large population as it is not possible to know the probability of selection of each individual (Fowler Jr, 2013). The participants of this study comprised of 19 females and two males from nine universities in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and were divided into three levels: senior management level (President, Vice-President, Dean, Vice-Dean, and Director); middle management level (Programme Coordinators and HR managers); and the lecturers. The participants of this research were all working in HEIs in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, the two major cities covering almost 60% of the universities in Vietnam. We selected two male leaders from the HR department to get their perception on women’s leadership. The men selected in the study were the HR managers of the two universities, and they were introduced by the female leaders working in the same university.

The purpose of this study was first, to get the viewpoint of women in leadership roles (employee's perspective) in HEIs in Vietnam. The two men were chosen with an aim to get the views (employer's perspective) regarding women leadership. We were planning to include more HR managers; however, some HR managers (whom we interviewed) were already women and some men did not agree to participate, and hence we could just recruit two men in the study. Nevertheless, these views can be used as a pilot for the future work and provide a general overview from a male's point of view about women's leadership.

### *Data collection*

For university selection, we went through the structure of different Vietnamese universities provided by the Vietnam MOET (access via <https://en.moet.gov.vn/Pages/home.aspx>). For data collection, we selected only those universities which have women leaders. After that we sent emails to the university leaders, to request them to participate if they were women. If the leaders were men, we requested them to further introduce us to the women leaders. Those women leaders who agreed to participate through email, we further approached them regarding the next steps required for our research. The 21 participants for this study were recruited from existing contacts of agreed participants by a standard snowballing sampling technique (Handcock and Gile, 2011). The criteria of selection through snowballing sampling were described as the women who are working in the leadership roles as President, Vice-president, Dean, Vice-dean, Director, Program Coordinator, HR managers and lecturers in local and international universities. Data were collected from nine universities from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam from May 2019 to September 2019 using semi-structured interviews to get in-depth information from the respondents as this is well suited for the exploration of our study objectives. These interviews can be understood as social interaction between two people that allows the researcher to approach the interviewees and get an open ended input (Segal et al., 2006). Individual interviews were carried out for 45 minutes to 1 hour, and these were recorded and transcribed for the analysis except for two participants who did not wish their interview to be recorded, and hence the written notes were taken for those two participants. All personal details and information pertaining to the universities in which the participants' work were anonymized.

### *Data analysis*

Using a matrix of themes, the data were analysed thematically wherein some themes were pre-defined; and some emerged during the process of analysis (Smith and Firth, 2011). The codes for each university were assigned (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, and I) followed by their management level (senior management (SM) and middle management (MM)) and lecturers were assigned the code of L. Out of the total 21 participants, eight were working at SM level, seven at MM level (including two HR managers (male)), and six were lecturers. The age of the participants ranged from 26–50 years; out of those eight were married and the rest were single. Most of the participants were highly educated: six had PhDs; and 15 had Master's degrees. Approximately two-thirds of the women interviewed had been educated overseas, primarily at European or American universities. All participants had work experience ranging from six to 29 years.

After reading the transcripts of the participants, we analysed their narratives following Bazeley's (2013) two significant stages of coding: an initial stage of identification as per pre-defined themes; and a final stage of refining or interpreting to develop more emerging themes. The

final coding process resulted in eight main themes to support our fundamental aspects: enablers (four themes); and barriers (four themes).

## Research findings

The themes were analysed in order to fulfil the objectives of this study to investigate the barriers and the enablers which women still face in Vietnamese HEIs.

### *Enablers for women's leadership in Vietnam's HE*

*Mentor and line manager's support.* Much of the current literature on leadership pays particular attention to the nexus of mentorship and leadership in the context of HE. During the early period of leadership position, new leaders might need support as they face a lot of challenges in their work (Boerema, 2011), and this is where mentors might help to overcome these newly experienced challenges. According to Hezlett and Gibson (2007), mentoring can be defined as a cluster of professional assets that have been found to accelerate promotion, with both professional and psychosocial benefits accruing to the mentee. In the context of this paper, the role of mentors in the leadership development of women leaders and their leadership/mentorship style has been recognized by most of the participants in our study. In most cases, women leaders mentioned about their mentors that either they are supported or promoted in the current leadership position as illustrated in the extract by a women leader: "I have a really good relationship with the rector of the university . . . he encouraged me to take the higher leadership position" (F-SM2). The importance of mentor support in their career progression was acknowledged by 60% of the participants, and that they were very fortunate to receive the support from mentors or else they would not have thought of leadership roles.

The participants equally appreciated the support they receive from their managers in their current role at the workplace: "What I feel proud about in my university is the protection and sympathy from managers . . . . . I always feel like I stay in a family" (F-MM1). This kind of support from the manager can enhance the work environment overall. Most of the participants had no self-motivation to take up the leadership roles, but it just came to them by chance or they were encouraged by their managers as stated by this participant: "The manager encouraged me to step up to this leadership position" (A-SM1).

*Family support.* Apart from the women's qualifications, personal ability, and efforts, strong support from their families was a decisive factor for women to become a leader. The male participants of our study felt that women might still be facing the challenges due to lack of their family support as stated by participants A-MM1 and F-MM2, respectively: "The challenges may be mainly from their family"; and "The primary challenge is from family". These views show that males still feel that lack of family support is a barrier, while female participants of our study completely shared different views. As compared to previous studies (Fazal et al., 2019), family support was seen as a barrier for women to take up the leadership role, while our study suggests that family support is one of the enablers for the women leaders to take up the leadership roles. Almost every married woman in the study felt that they were fortunate to receive family support: "I feel that I am fortunate as I have support from family" (C-SM1, F-SM2, F-MM1, C-SM2). Further, the participants acknowledged the importance of family support in helping with the work-life balance: "Family support is essential . . . to be a leader you need to stay focused and being serious about your work, and for

that, you need family support” (F-SM1). Further, it was also found that not only immediate family members were helping the women leaders, but the extended family was helping them too, as witnessed by one of the participants: “Luckily I have support from other people to take care of my daughter; I also have support from my sister in law” (A-SM1). Women leaders acknowledged the support from in-laws and parents in their career enhancement: “I received help from my parents and parents in law to take care of my child” (E-SM1).

*The changing mindset of employers.* Many previous studies on Asia suggested that there is gender discrimination in the organization and women are not provided with equal opportunities at the workplace (Alsubhi et al., 2018; Fazal, et al., 2019; Kholis, 2017). One of the women leaders responsible for hiring employees mentioned that “While hiring the leader, we mainly focus on expertise, capabilities of a person and not on gender given that the women can devote the time” (D-SM1). A similar view was shared by another female leader, who affirmed that age and gender have never been essential determinants in her university when they considered a leadership position: “We believe and promote people with good performance, ability and attitude, and we do not care about gender or age” (C-SM2). Even the male participants’ views suggested that women leaders are equivalent or even better than their male counterparts: “Women has good management skills” (F-MM2); and “The woman leader is performing well as compared to the male peers” (A-MM1)

These views on a changing mindset were mentioned by most of the female participants: “Vietnam society is changing the perception towards women leaders” (F-SM1); “I think this is the era of women leaders, although facing constraints, they still perform well” (F-SM2); “Women leaders are gaining respect as they perform well” (G-L1); and “I think everything is changing positively regarding the women leaders” (F-L2). 67% of the participants mentioned that they do not see gender bias from the management while hiring, the remaining 33% felt that still there is gender discrimination for a leadership role as commented by one of the participants: “Male lecturers are always preferred than women for the future leadership position or have been trained and prioritized for a leading position” (H-L2).

Most of the young women leaders (below 45 years old) perceived that currently, there is no gender inequality in their institutions: “I think that gender in higher education is not that important. The most important is the degree and the age” (I-MM1). This view suggested that the mindset of young leaders is changing, which was also witnessed by one of the foreign national participants in our study: “My experience with younger Vietnamese men under 40 was different. They were ready to take the opinions and listen to the woman leader” (F-SM1). Our study also included two male leaders in order to understand their point of view on women leaders who also agreed on the same: “I respect my female bosses, and I think there is no current gap between women’s and men’s ability to work” (A-MM1); and “I think there is no difference in perception between women and men leadership” (F-MM2). Further, the participant F-MM2 also mentioned “I think young generation have no difference in perception between men and women leadership”. Based on these narratives from participants, it is indicated that the organizational barrier of gender discrimination and lack of available opportunities is reducing, and with the generational shift of leaders and mindset, it might completely vanish.

*Potential leadership competence of women leaders.* The participants have been positively influenced by the leadership style of their past women leaders. Their thoughts on women’s leadership were related to valuing relationships and contributing to the growth of others. This emphasis on valuing people is also reflected in the literature as a key element of female leadership (Kloot, 2004). Most

of the discrimination at work happens due to the influential masculine culture, and there is a belief that men leaders are authoritative and aggressive and have more self-confidence. At the same time, women are seen to lack these qualities of a leader as they display characteristics such as empathy, kindness, and better understanding, which is a typical gender stereotype mindset.

In our study, the participants shared the positive views and praised the women leadership and mentioned that women leaders show better determination, dedication and communication compared to males, as commented by a participant: "There are many advantages for staffs if they have a women leader . . . women leader has the ability to share, understand and empathize better than man" (A-SM1). One of the participants mentioned: "I do not think women leaders are less productive than men. . . They are good at multitasking and better adaptive than man" (I-MM1).

The collaborative approach which many female leaders undertook through nurturing and listening to others appeared to have worked in their favour when gaining higher leadership positions. G-L1 and H-L1 respectively expressed that: "Women leaders are getting respect as they perform well"; and "Female leaders are more friendly and easier to talk with."

In summary, the participants felt that, despite their lack of self-motivation and self-confidence, they were motivated to advance in their careers due to the support received from the mentor and the family. They also felt that the mindset of the employees was changing, and this might shift fast with the coming young generation, and this was a motivating factor for them to look for their career advancement. The participants were all encouraged by the women leadership style and thought that this might bring more diversity at the workplace and result in a better work environment.

### *Barriers for women in Vietnam's higher education*

*Work-life imbalance.* One of the biggest challenges that all participants addressed was balancing work and family responsibilities despite getting family support. Almost all the participants (both married and single), admitted that although living in modern times being influenced by Confucianism culture, women still have to fulfil their family household responsibilities. This challenge was more visible in HEIs as compared to other business organizations where the pathway to academic promotion was research. The participants felt they had a huge workload in four different areas (teaching, research, supervision, and management) and also, they had to fulfil their duties at home, which adversely affected women's research productivity and their chances of career enhancement. The women leaders felt a lot of pressure to balance work and home life, and specifically narrated regarding this issue: "There are a lot of duties, which includes teaching, supervising students, doing research, but I think the most difficult task is the management. . . you also need to take care of housework and family" (C-SM1); and "Apart from leadership responsibilities, I need to engage in a lot of research projects and supervisions and need to take care of the family and I feel exhausted doing all these" (A-SM1). Attempting to achieve a balance between one's professional and personal responsibilities has been a significant part of the participants' lives, and if they were not able to fulfil the responsibilities at home, the women leaders felt guilty, which was expressed by many participants in this study.

*Subordinates' perception of women leaders.* The participants believed that traditional beliefs and cultural ideology are hard to eradicate from society. They felt that the mindset of employers is changing, and they are moving towards gender equality at the workplace, but amongst their colleagues, they still felt that women leaders are not respected. Hence, in terms of the working environment, women still perceived that there is gender discrimination in Vietnam's HEIs. Gender

discrimination has been observed by foreign woman leader as well: "There is [a lot] of sexism stuff. When a male manager says something, people will listen and follow. When I say stuff, I have to push it again and again" (B-SM1). She further shared her observation about how a woman leader in a Vietnamese university was treated at a conference: "There was an amazing woman at one of the universities and she organized conference. Whenever she wanted to talk, there were three men tended to talk over, or laughing, and it looked like the panel with most of the men were ignoring her speech".

Another woman leader expressed similar feelings at the workplace and commented that: "There are many female-dominated workplaces in Vietnam with 50% of female employees, but women's life is still difficult, and there is no guarantee of equal authority" (B-SM2). She also mentioned the stressful leadership position in view of different lenses. She further mentioned that before she became the leader she was comfortable that she had a shield in the form of the mentor but now after becoming a leader, she felt: "There is no umbrella to shelter me, and I have to hold my own umbrella and also provide the shelter to the people below me in order to protect them and to keep them away from the stress" (B-SM2). Further, she also mentioned that "women leaders have to work harder at setting the boundaries in order to get the respect they want, while men automatically get that respect".

Many other participants also shared the same views that their subordinates do not take them seriously, and hence they had to put on a fake-mask as they had worked hard to get that authority and respect. Due to all this gender stereotype mindset from the colleagues and also due to dual responsibilities at work and home, the women lack the self-confidence to take up the leadership roles, as they are hesitant about whether they would be able to establish the same authority as compared to their male counterparts.

**Social networking obstacles.** Social networking is an efficient way to meet important people to gain insights after work and build stronger collaboration by expanding the network. In Asian culture, it becomes difficult for women leaders to spend time after work as they already have home duties. Like other businesses, it is of utmost important to meet the partners from the industry, and other associates to improve the university programmes and for this the leaders have to play an important role in these networking events. The participants of this study revealed that they were very uncomfortable going to these social networking events after work. The participants mentioned that how their family life was affected due to these networking events: "As a leader, you need to engage in night parties, dinner, travelling and meetings. These activities significantly affect family life and consume much time" (A-SM1). The women leaders also indicated that they feel isolated in these parties when men are busy drinking and women have to be there even though they do not feel happy about it: "Men, they can hang out at night, but as a woman, I do not want to go to these events" (D-MM1). Another participant also mentioned that drinking is a part of Asian culture, and she feels very uncomfortable being part of these events: "During the important events where VIP guests from the ministry are coming, I have to be there but I hate those parties and drinking" (I-MM1). Even though many women drink now, it still seems to be a barrier in the Vietnamese culture. Some of the participants also mentioned that they are not good at external communication during these social networking events, and hence they avoid going to these events.

The views discussed above suggest that inclusiveness and diverse groups' interaction in these social network events are missing, and women leaders felt left out, while men are busy enjoying the events. It might be assumed that women do not want to take part in these events, but the feelings from women's perspective were different as to why women would want to avoid these kinds of

social events. This barrier does not align with past studies, where female leaders felt that they were not given the access to social spaces and the opportunity for networking even though they wanted to get involved in those networking events (Diehl, 2014; Mate et al., 2018). However, in our study, the participants themselves are reluctant to go to these events even though they were invited, and this looked more of a barrier with local participants as compared to foreign participants.

**Personal factors.** Like many previous studies on women leadership in HE, in this study also many women had their personal reasons not to choose for leadership roles, and they were happy at the lower-ranked jobs. Living in a culture where women's primary role expectation is as a homemaker, some women were satisfied with doing a low-ranking job and taking care of their family, rather than getting promoted to leadership roles: "I am not that interested in leadership . . . I enjoy teaching, and I understand that the further you climb up, the less you have time with your family" (D-MM2). Even the women who were working as senior leaders, if given a choice they only want to be a lecturer instead of a leader, as shared by one of the participants: "I am currently a senior leader, but to be honest, I just want to be a lecturer" (C-SM2).

The participants lacked self-confidence or were afraid to take up leadership roles due to the extra workload and responsibilities. One of the participants commented: "To be honest, I just want to be a lecturer, and I do not want to step up further in the leadership roles" (D-MM2). Another lecturer (who is still single but can sense the pressure) commented: "Although I am not married, but thinking only I still feel challenged about work and family tasks coming together" (G-L1). Thus, these female leaders felt that they had to devote a lot of time in leadership roles at the expense of their own and their family's well-being. Hence, balancing multiple responsibilities seems overwhelming for most of the women participants as they strive to advance in their careers, especially if they do not receive family and spouse support. Most of the women in this study stated that they had the responsibilities of taking care of their families, and children in particular, so they did not want to advance to any higher leadership positions to avoid additional responsibilities. Hence, this affected the advancement of women even though they might have the expertise and all capabilities to become a leader.

Further, strongly influenced by Confucianism culture in Vietnamese society, women personally thought that housework and childcare were women's responsibilities in Vietnam. This practice is entirely compatible with Bem's (1993) explanation that the cultural "discourses and social institutions automatically channel males and females into different and unequal life situations". In other words, men-centered discourses are usually unequal and disadvantageous for women. Nevertheless, with the generational shift, the situation might change in Vietnam in the coming years. Hence, women currently faced some internal and external barriers. Internal barriers were work-life balance, social networking barriers, and personal barriers, while there was only one external barrier identified, which was the perception of subordinates towards women leaders.

## Conclusion and discussion

This paper has explored the barriers and enablers in the career advancement of women leaders in the universities in Vietnam. In order to achieve the purpose of the study, 21 participants (19 females and two males) were interviewed. The results from this study highlighted their experiences related to the career advancement and identified the enablers and barriers to their academic career progression in a fast-changing society such as Vietnam. Enablers included mentor and line manager support, family support, changing mindset of the employers, and the potential leadership

competence of women leaders. The barriers were double-shift load, subordinates' perception towards women leaders, social networking, and personal factors to excel and prove their worth similar to their male counterparts. Many participants shared that they were happy to be just the lecturer rather than advancing to the leadership roles due to the challenges they might face because of the heavy workload at work and home.

Significantly, prejudicial attitudes against women leaders are quite common among participants in all the workplaces even though the mindsets of institutions are changing towards women leaders. Unlike the other research in this field, such as Nguyen (2013), the "think manager–think male" attitude or gender discrimination is expressed only by some women leaders in this research. Women's double responsibilities at work and home act as a strong barrier for the leadership roles, and they face the challenge of achieving a successful work-life balance. Vietnamese women feel guilty if they are engaged too much in working or leadership activities and unable to devote adequate time to their families. The work-life balance has always been a barrier for many decades in the Vietnamese context, and this barrier is consistent with various previous studies, irrespective of culture women belongs to (Alsubhi et al., 2018; Fazal et al., 2019; Kelly, 2011; Nguyen, 2013). By deeper analysis of the literature, we found that in Vietnam, women leaders might face the structural barrier. The women's employment in Asian countries follows a M-shaped curve, which suggests that there are more breaks in their employment history (Cho et al., 2017). There is a larger percentage of women working in their 20s, with many women quitting their jobs in their 30s due to the responsibility of childcaring, and they return to work when they are in their 40s, while in Western societies women's employment curve is U-shaped when their employment rises sharply in their 20s and does not decline until they reach the age of 60 (Draudt, 2016). These breaks in Asian countries are due to their family responsibilities, wherein women are considered responsible to take care of a child, and this might be hindering their opportunity for promotion and their career growth. This is the reason why career-oriented women do not prefer to get married and have children, as some of our participants have mentioned that they cannot imagine as to how they would be able to manage their work if they get married and have children. Our study could not capture this barrier directly but views from the unmarried female participants and the review of the literature related to Asian countries, indicates that this structural barrier exists in Vietnam too.

Another barrier found was social networking issues, where the participants in the study were not comfortable to attend such events due to strong Asian cultures, where the women are expected to return home after work, and this barrier was different from other studies where women wanted to socialize in these networking events and were excluded and not invited (Diehl, 2014; Mate et al., 2018). In our study, this barrier was viewed differently, wherein the women were invited (showing the inclusiveness from male leaders) to social networking events, but they felt uncomfortable about participating in these events due to family responsibilities after work and feeling left-out by their male colleagues. The last barrier in this study was self-created by the women leaders, and they lacked the self-confidence to take up the leadership roles, and also family obligations were restricting them to advance in their career. The study by Jordanian educational institutions found that due to culturally derived stereotypes, the women leaders themselves underrated their leadership, and this was due to their own created personal barrier (Abu-Tineh, 2013). A similar barrier was also found in many previous studies where women do not think of themselves as leaders and hence, resist taking up the leadership positions (Kholis, 2017; Morley and Crossouard, 2015).

The women in Vietnam also face some other institutional barriers, related to government policy regarding retirement age. The retirement age is different in Vietnam for men and women. The men

retire at the age of 60, while the women's retirement age is 55 years (Munro and Of, 2012). This difference in retirement age can be viewed as a disadvantage for the women in their career advancement. They already have a shorter working life due to family commitments and breaks in their employment, and then this early retirement shortens their working life further. Although this has not been measured in our study, it might be one of the important factors in determining why women have fewer chances of promotion, reduced income, and limited ability to contribute effectively as they do not get enough time to be trained for leadership positions. Hence due to several reasons such as social-cultural barriers, short working life (institutional barrier), career breaks due to maternity leave and childcare (structural barrier), and gender stereotypes thinking from subordinates, women are much less likely viewed as competitive as compared to men and hence might suffer from fewer chances to become a leader in HEIs in Vietnam. Thus, the hindrance in Vietnamese women's career path is not only due to personal, societal or cultural factors, but also due to structural and institutional policies in Vietnam.

Despite all these barriers, women were motivated to advance in their careers. Lack of mentors' support was considered as a barrier based on the previous studies in Vietnam on women leadership (Ballenger, 2010; Dang, 2012; Kelly, 2011), but our study suggested this as an enabler instead of a barrier. One of the enablers for their career advancement included mentor support which is not in line with past studies in Vietnam wherein the women always lacked the mentor support (Dang, 2012; Lazarian-Chehab, 2017), and the mentor support was rather considered as a barrier instead of enabler in the past, and hence it is encouraging to see that the results of this study showed positive growth towards a mentor-mentee relationship. Also, in the past women generally lacked women mentors and they were not comfortable with male mentors, and in our study we found that the women were getting support from women mentors. The women were more comfortable to work with women mentors due to the collegial leadership style of women leaders, and women in general perceived as "easy to work with" and "friendly", and this kind of leadership is overall helpful in bringing a positive environment in academic institutions (Hallinger and Heck, 2010).

The next enabler was the support provided by the family, and this has been common with many studies done in the past. The study done by Fazal et al. (2019) suggested this to be a barrier, but most of the studies suggested family support as one of the main enablers. The findings from this study do not support the Asian values of feminine characteristics as a barrier for women's advancement, as suggested by Luke (1997). In addition to the obstacles of family duties, several Vietnamese women leaders are being supported by their families to fulfil their responsibilities in both work and at home. Family support is another strong facilitator for the women leaders before and during their leadership roles. The last two enablers found in our study are the changing mindset of employers and potential leadership competence of women leaders, which is not in line with previous studies where sex discrimination was visible at work, and women lacked the opportunities to advance in their career. The older generation still find it hard to accept the women leaders, but young males have started accepting the women leaders. This "open-minded attitude" is recognized by young male colleagues, who can be classified as a young generation living in urban areas, and are increasingly being exposed to globalizing influences, and perhaps starting to "challenge and reconfigure gendered social norms" (Earl, 2014).

Some of the enablers and barriers for women taking leadership positions in this study confirmed findings from the previous studies, as discussed above. Our study captured the views of participants at both local and international universities, and there was no difference in their views regarding enablers and barriers. Out of the four barriers faced by women leaders, three barriers are similar to the past research except for the last barrier on social networking, which is in a

different context. In Vietnamese HEIs, the women were invited to these informal networking events. This barrier was also similar to past studies, but the perspective was different. In other studies, women were not invited to these events, so they faced this as a barrier, and in this study, the women avoided going to these events due to their own reasons, which again was considered as their own barrier. Regarding the motivational factors, female leaders in Vietnamese HEIs faced two common barriers identified in the existing literature as discussed above, but two enablers, changing the mindset of the employers and the potential leadership competence of women leaders, were seen to be new and rarely discussed in other studies. These two enablers certainly suggest that the effect of gender discrimination is diminishing at Vietnamese HEIs, and Vietnam might be able to achieve gender parity in the future under the influence of the new and young generation.

Vietnam has bridged 70% of its gender gap as compared to the Global Gender Gap Index score of 68% in 2020 (World Economic Forum, 2020). Vietnam is also one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, with more than 70% of females participating in the labour force and has a low female unemployment rate of 2.1% (World Bank Data, 2018). Vietnam can become an advanced and modern society only when women will be encouraged, and women's full participation will be practised in leadership at all levels and this might be a stepping stone to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UN SDG5). Even though most of the trends in Vietnam regarding the barriers and enablers are still similar to other countries, the changing perception of young leaders is something different in Vietnam as compared to other countries. As per the OECD, Development Centre (2017), Vietnam has a large youth population of approximately 63% below 24 years of age; hence, there are more chances that in future the women leaders will be seen with more respect and will be provided more opportunities as the younger generation has already started viewing women as their leaders without any discrimination.

## **Implications and limitations**

This study has made several potential theoretical, and empirical contributions. Theoretically, this study contributes to a growing body of literature on women leadership in HEIs, especially in the context of a developing country such as Vietnam. Empirically, this research will be useful to understand the obstacles the women leaders might be facing in the leadership roles. This study has four important implications for both local and international universities, which can encourage gender equality at work. First, universities might form new policies in terms of reducing workload for some areas (research, supervision, teaching, and management) for women leaders so that this can help them to manage the work-life balance, as most women leaders mentioned that research is an added responsibility in HEIs as compared to other industries. It is important to revise the leadership roles so that it can be more attractive to women. Second, formal networking events might be arranged during working hours, so that women might not feel that they have to sacrifice their own time after work. Third, introducing professional development opportunities for women can help in making them realize their professional and personal aspirations, and this might boost their confidence in taking up the leadership roles. Fourth, the literature suggests that inclusion of female leaders is beneficial for the universities as they might play an important role in promoting diverse leadership and this might improve organization's productivity (Cheung and Halpern, 2010). Hence the work culture should be built towards achieving this and providing due respect to the women leaders. The results of this study might be used in the countries, where the traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes are strongly influenced by Chinese Confucian culture, and how the universities can work towards the promotion of gender equality.

The current study reflects the perceptions of female leaders from academia who work in Vietnamese HEIs. Future research can extend the current study in many ways. First, it can focus on greater sample size and provide a more generalized account of female leadership in Vietnam and other East and SouthEast Asian academia, as at present our study is only limited to two major cities in Vietnam. Secondly, female leadership characteristics could be explored further in the future study, including participants at different levels such as subordinates, colleagues, and peers, to gather varying insights on female leadership to increase the data validity and findings. Next, future research can focus on finding the differences between universities in urban and rural areas in Vietnam as the working environment might be different in these organizations, and it may bring different results. Finally, the future study can focus on recruiting increased numbers of male participants to understand their views on women leadership and having a comparative study between male and female views on women leadership.

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