



## 5 Women workforce participation

### Greater focus on job quality and societal norms needed to support women in meaningful work

Vietnam’s exceptional rate of workforce participation rate for women masks underlying challenges around work quality, pay, flexibility and gender stereotypes.

When women work, it’s a good news story for all. Household incomes rise and families benefit since women use their incomes differently. Research shows women spend 90 cents of every dollar they earn on their families, including on their children’s education, health and nutrition, compared with 30 to 40 cents devoted by men.

Women’s participation in gainful employment increases their economic security. Their control over assets is an important factor in preventing chronic poverty and that fate repeating across generations.

Having more women in the workforce, then, has significant positive multiplier effects on family, community and economic resilience.

**An ILO/UN study found the participation rate of prime-age men is 95 per cent, while the figure for women is just 52 per cent – a gender gap of epic proportions.**

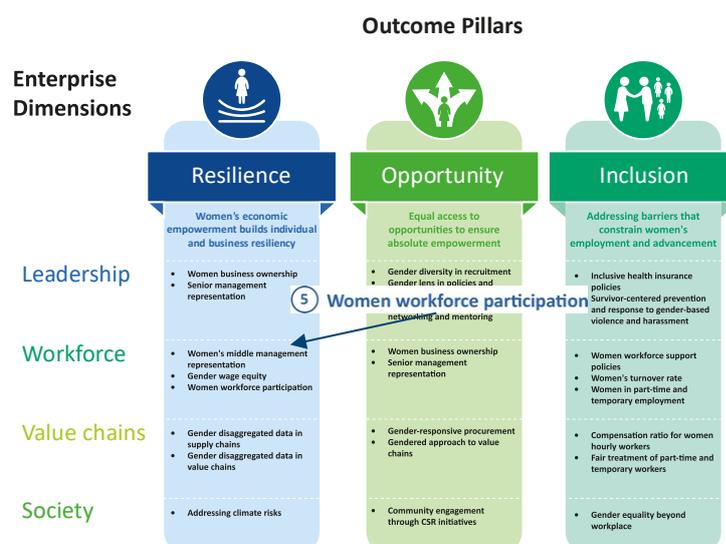
Despite this evidence, a study by the International Labor Organisation and the United Nations found that the participation rate of prime-age men is 95 per cent, meaning that almost all men aged 25 to 54 engage in the workforce. For prime-age women the figure is just 52 per cent, a gender gap of epic proportions.

By that measure Vietnam is doing extraordinarily well, achieving a women’s workforce participation rate of some 70 per cent for most of the past two decades.

Even with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, where the rate dipped noticeably, Vietnam continues to outstrip the best performers among advanced Western economies.

Sweef Capital Vice President Phuong Pham cautions that it’s important to look beyond headline statistics to realities on the ground, where the picture is usually more complex, fragmented and culturally challenging for women.

“A job per se doesn’t necessarily equate to secure and meaningful employment for many women – not just in Vietnam,



Sweef Capital Gender ROI™ indicator matrix

but around the world,” Ms Phuong said. “It’s critical to look at why women choose the type of work they engage in, and the quality of that work in terms of security, pay and career progression.”

Nguyen Thi Vinh Ha agrees. As Deputy General Director and Head of Business Consulting at Grant Thornton Vietnam, Ms Ha works with a wide range of clients including public and private enterprises, non-profit

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- Nguyen Thi Vinh Ha, Grant Thornton Vietnam

organisations and the public sector in all industries. This gives her a broad view of the market, and she acknowledges that gender barriers still persist across the workforce and into the senior echelons of many organisations.

“Grant Thornton has better policies (than most) for developing women,” Ms Ha said. “The situation is getting better, but the Vietnamese economy is very big, with many different forms and elements, so it’s not the same opportunity everywhere. We see many businesses where although the Vietnamese Government is calling for gender equality and the same opportunities for women, it’s not (yet) there.”

A key factor in the high workforce participation rate is Vietnam’s relatively large unofficial economy, which makes it easier for women to take on work or start a business while juggling family and household duties. Such work, though, is likely to be poorly paid and less secure, especially in rural areas.

Historical and cultural factors also influence women’s active role in Vietnam’s workforce, business leadership and entrepreneurship.

Ho Chi Minh City-based leadership coach, author and founder of Lightpath Leadership, Irene Öhler, said there was a view that Vietnam was a matriarchal/matrilineal society before Chinese domination in 111 BC, (based on rice agriculture where a female workforce was needed in the absence of men due to wars), “and some of this spirit still exists – hence there are a lot of strong, autonomous and powerful women”.

However, Ms Öhler said “part of that (workforce participation) number is sheer necessity. If you look at the sectors where most people work, they are manufacturing and services; that’s also why you have so many women there, because these are not highly paid jobs. But there’s a necessity and a will by women to have their own money.” (See Spotlight article).

According to *The Economist*, women make up 55 per cent of the self-employed in Vietnam and typically start a business just to make ends meet. A report by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that more women than men participate in business startups, at 1.14 to one, ranking Vietnam first among the 54 economies surveyed. However, the rate of women participating due to necessity-driven motives is much higher than for men (18 versus 13 per cent).

Ms Phuong said the barriers to women’s participation in meaningful work were extensive but not insurmountable because they were well-understood and supported by a global evidence base. What’s required, she believes, is intentional action.

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- Phuong Pham, Sweef Capital

In 2021, the Vietnamese Government adopted a national strategy on gender equality with ambitious targets to boost women’s entrepreneurship and address deep-rooted gender stereotypes and the ‘gender-structured’ economy.

Ms Ha said a good number of her clients and friends were now running their own businesses.

“Common to these women business leaders is that they are well-educated, energetic and fascinated by the business and industry they’re working in,” she said. “They all have vision and determination. And somehow they still have kids and family to take care of.”

This dual workload becomes less of an issue further up the career ladder, in well-paid executive-level roles or where women have family support or financial resources to afford help at home. Such women report higher satisfaction with work than peers in other parts of the economy.

For most Vietnamese women, though, the reality of employment is a constant struggle to meet competing work, family and household obligations. These expectations are informed by practical considerations like flexibility and gender stereotyping of men as breadwinners and women as primary caregivers.

As a mother of three sons, Ms Ha is part of the new guard. She’s optimistic change is on the way. “My boys have to support housework – cooking and cleaning up,” she said. “When they move on to their university education, they’ll have to take it on themselves. I believe there will be change in the next generation, although when it flows through the real world, it will be slow.” #

### About the contributors



**Phuong Pham** is the Vice President of Vietnam at Sweef Capital.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/phuong-pham-69046213a/>



**Irene Öhler** is a Ho Chi Minh City-based leadership coach and author.

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ireneohler/>



**Nguyen Thi Vinh Ha** is Deputy General Director and Head of Business Consulting at Grant Thornton Vietnam.

<https://www.grantthornton.com.vn/meet-our-people/nguyen-thi-vinh-ha/>

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## Supporting Vietnam's women to lead change

For leadership coach Irene Öhler, behind every statistic is a story waiting to be shared. And in the case of working women in Vietnam, those stories are complex, nuanced and framed by a unique culture and history.

“What continues to amaze me is the sheer energy Vietnamese women are able to bring, in corporate jobs, as founders and as entrepreneurs,” Ms Öhler said. “There’s this resilience and resourcefulness that astounds me. And if I had a third word, I’d say grace. I think it’s different from other countries.” While positive and poetic, these qualities mask the tough realities of life for many working women in Vietnam.



“They are resourceful and resilient because they have to be, not because they choose to be or they’re a different breed of human,” Ms Öhler said. “Women still have to be the perfect wife, the perfect mother, the perfect daughter-in-law. They have to have a career and look beautiful 24 hours a day.”

Ms Öhler arrived in Vietnam in 2012 after 15 years of international experience in leadership development. She said she kept meeting accomplished women, in formal and informal leadership positions, and knew she’d found a huge treasure still “undiscovered”.

That epiphany led her to establish Lightpath Leadership, launch the Women’s Storytelling Salon and co-author an award-winning book on Vietnam’s women leaders, *Ba Trieu’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Daughters*.

Through her work Ms Öhler is privy to deep conversations about the lived realities of working women and women entrepreneurs and the practical barriers Vietnamese women face every day.

That means navigating sensitive topics such as domestic violence, the lack of workplace toilets for all genders and the frustration of talented individuals shut out of networking opportunities because of family duties.

“If you have to fulfill all these other expectations, you can’t be there when those post-work drinks are happening; you can’t be there when the training courses are happening, because they’re often after work or on the weekend,” Ms Öhler said. “You can’t do it because your father-in-law expects dinner at six, with fresh vegetables from the green market. Which means you have to leave work at 4.30 pm to do all of this. Or you can’t work early or late shifts as an engineer, because taking care of the family is still mainly women’s work.”

Change is occurring, but for Ms Öhler it’s too early to celebrate. Paraphrasing the final sentence in her book, she challenged, “if this is what women can achieve without specific support mechanisms and despite ongoing gender inequality – imagine what would be possible with equal opportunities and without expectations that hold them back”. #

For more about Irene Öhler’s work, visit [www.lightpathgroupleadership.com](http://www.lightpathgroupleadership.com)