Mapping the field: Women's access to leadership opportunities in Higher Education in Vietnam

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Despite government commitment to gender equality and subsequent laws aimed at equal opportunities for women in Vietnam, the numbers of women in leadership roles is lower in comparison to other countries. Existing reviews on gender inequality include those focused beyond higher education, are discipline specific or focus on an international comparison using a small number of publications. To map the field, this review includes both published and grey literature from 1995 to 2022 and incorporates 17 studies thereby broadening the scope and number of items included in earlier reviews. This paper reports on work undertaken as part of a British Council funded project (EnPOWER) about gender inequality for existing or aspiring women leaders in Vietnamese higher education. The literature review reveals the barriers and opportunities which face women working in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs). Key issues that emerge explore not only the impact of personal, social and cultural factors but also government and university policies and processes on women's career advancement in Vietnamese HE.

Introduction

Gender equality is one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG5) and whilst studies have explored gender equality in higher education in the UK and USA (Shepherd, 2017, Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2004), Vietnam has received limited attention. Research in this area in Vietnam is important, as although Gender Equality Law aims to promote equal opportunities to women in Vietnam (Vietnam and Gender Equality, 2017) and there has been wide commitment to equality in government policies, there are

still few women in leadership roles and women are outnumbered in senior leadership roles in comparison to other countries (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020). Several studies have specifically explored the issues raised by women in higher education in Vietnam including the lived experiences of barriers and enablers to acquiring leadership roles (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020; Sorayaly and Khon, 2017). However, to date, a literature review has never been conducted on the topic of women's unequal access to leadership opportunities in Higher Education in Vietnam which includes both published and grey literature.

Earlier reviews include Scott and Truong (2007) and Truong (2008), but these were not specifically about higher education. Le (2011) focused on higher education but concentrated on arts leaders. Nguyet (2012) is about gender and academia with a focus on mapping the changing gender expectations of female academics and associated causes. The two most relevant reviews are Maheshwari (2021) and Maheshwari, Nayak and Ngyyen (2021) who review six and seven journal articles respectively (Hong, 2018; Kelly, 2011; Lazarian-Chehab, 2017; Dang, 2017; Mate, McDonald and Do, 2018; Nguyen, 2013; Soryaly and Khon, 2017). However, they do so through a comparative analysis between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States and Vietnam. This literature review aims to build on these earlier studies by focusing solely on the topic of women's unequal access to leadership opportunities in Higher Education in Vietnam through both peer reviewed and grey literature from 1995 to 2022.

This paper reports on work undertaken as part the *Enabling Progression of Women Researchers* or *EnPOWER* project which was funded by the British

Council Going Global: Gender Equality Partnerships grant in 2023. The project brought together academics from three university partners, a large modern university in the Midlands of England and two state-funded Universities with national Education remits in the South and North of Vietnam who were continuing their work around transnational education higher education (TNHE) partnerships (see Kendall et al. 2020). The EnPOWER project had multiple stages including a literature review, a survey, a collaborative ethnography and a Community of Practice (Birmingham City University, 2023; HCMUE, 2023).

Gender equality in higher education in Vietnam

Vietnam has 357 public universities and colleges and 88 private higher education institutions (HEIs) (Huong, 2018). Despite the introduction of the Gender Equality Law which is designed promote equal opportunities to women to reduce the Gender Gap Index score of 70% in Vietnam, there are still limited number of women in leadership roles in sectors including higher education (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020). Research suggests that although Vietnamese women and men in HE is said to be equal in all spheres of life, women's equality with men has not been achieved (Tran and Nguyen, 2000). The situation for women working in the Vietnamese higher education reflects national figures, with women comprising 12 per cent of Head of Department roles and eight per cent of Deputy Head of Department roles (Le 2011; Mate, McDonald and Do. 2018). The underrepresentation of women leaders in higher education has been highlighted in both northern and southern Vietnam (N.B.T. Nguyen, 2000; Dang, 2012). Soryaly and Khon (2017) noted that whilst 52% of academic staff were women in one university, only 32% had achieved a key

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position including Dean, Vice Dean, Chairman, and Vice Chairman of colleges and departments.

Dang (2021) describes a gap between 'gender policies' which proactively commit to seek the promotion of equality in all spheres of Vietnamese life and the 'gender practices' that pattern and frame everyday experience. Dang notes that "traditional Vietnamese culture, which is still heavily influenced by Confucian and feudal ideologies, continues to affect adversely both men and women's perceptions of women's roles, status, and forms of participation in different spheres of life". Their study found that "the negative impact of these collective beliefs on…academic women leaders is pervasive and intense, regardless of their age." (2021:3). Tran and Nguyen (2020) suggest there is an unconscious preference towards male leaders which makes it difficult for women leaders to gain legitimacy. Moreover, the gradual increase in women leaders does not necessarily mean access to equal opportunities for leadership positions or perceived as equal to their male counterparts if they achieve leadership roles. Rather, the established cultural preference for male leaders suggests an ongoing problem regarding future opportunities for women leaders in Vietnamese HEIs.

Identifying Sources for Review

The project team agreed the timeframe from 1995 to 2022, which was in line with gender equality legislation in Vietnam (Vietnam and Gender Equality, 2017). The identification of sources for the review process commenced with an examination of three initial publications that were included in the funding bid

(Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020; Soryaly and Khon, 2017; Tran and Nguyen, 2020) and one thesis (Dang, 2012). A snowballing approach was then used to identify other published and grey literature by examining the reference lists of these studies. When saturation was reached, new searches were undertaken using Google Scholar, British Education Index (BEI) Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC), Education Abstracts (HW Wilson), Scopus, Australian Education Index (AEI) and Twitter.

Literature Search Process

The review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyse) conceptual framework which assists with decision-making at four phases of a review (Ezzani et al., 2021; Maheshwari, Nayak and Ngyyen (2021). The search process as shown in Fig. 1, depicts the four phases: Identification, Screening, Eligibility and Included with the latter being where the decision is made around which items to include.

Identification

Screening

Eligibility

Included

Total publications identified through database and online searches (n=71)

Total publications could not locate (n= 34)

Total publications in Vietnamese (n=13)

Publication abstracts assessed for eligibility (n= 37).

Eligible publications: (n=17)

Publications excluded based on eligibility (women's leadership in Vietnam was not included). (n=20)
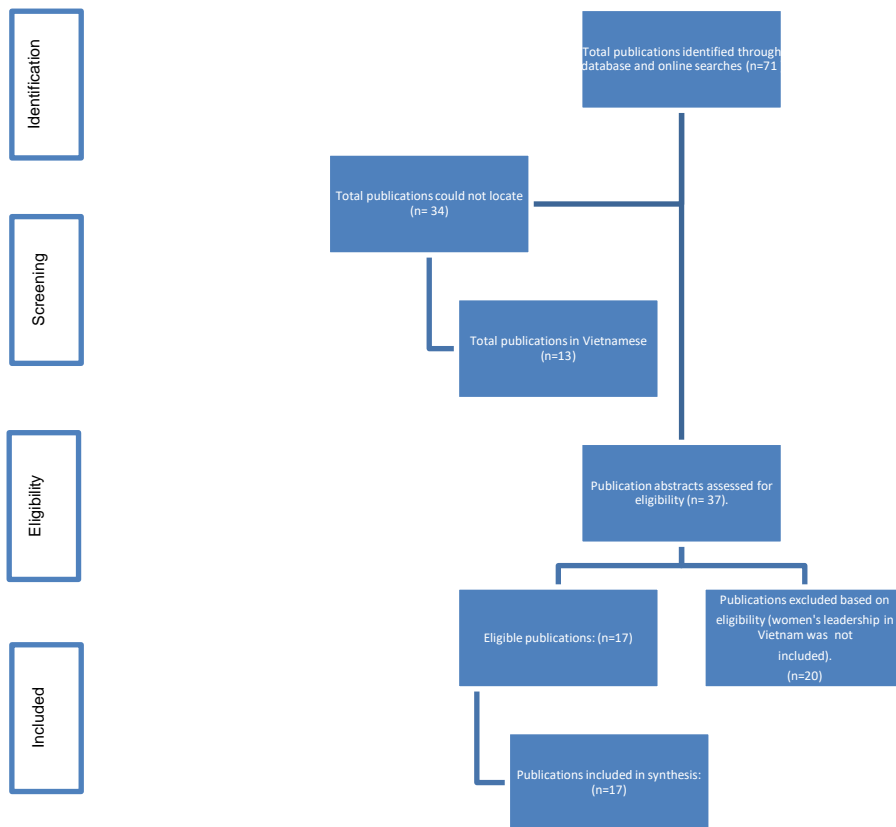
Publications included in synthesis: (n=17)

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram detailing steps in search process

Fig. 1 shows that 71 items were identified for potential inclusion in the review and the comments about these articles were tracked in a Microsoft word table. Thirty-four items were not able to be located and of these 13 were written in Vietnamese. The bid only allocated resources for the UK team to undertake the review, so sources written in Vietnamese were regrettably excluded. This left 37 items and the abstracts were subjected to a close reading where items were categorised into 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe'. The items in the no category were excluded and those in the 'yes' or 'maybe' were then read closely to determine if the content included findings in relation to the review focus. This process led to the identification of 17 relevant items on women in higher education

leadership in Vietnam. This comprises five journal articles by Trang and Nguyen (2020), Maheshwari and Nayak (2020), Hong (2018), Mate at al. (2018), Sorayaly and Khon (2017), Truong (2014), N.T.L. Huong (2013). There are six doctoral theses by Vu (2018), Lam (2018), Lazarian-Chehab (2017), Dang (2012), Dao (2011), and Nguyen (2000) and a MA thesis by Le (2011) as well as one report by Munro (2012) and two Conference proceedings by Kelly (2011) and Phuong (2022). Both Mate, McDonald and Do (2018) and Lam (2018) undertook a comparative study of women leaders in Australia and Vietnam but only the findings from Vietnam were included.

Data extraction/Analysis

The text of the 17 studies were explored for themes including frequency of words or categories. Units for analysis were identified and the items were allocated codes or categories in relation to the research question (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2017). Working iteratively, moving back and forth between the research question and literature, the units of analysis emerged (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This process allowed open and flexible coding and sub-coding categories to emerge (Mason, 2002). Ultimately, the main codes identified were: Personal and social /cultural factors which encompassed nine subcodes and Government / university policies and processes which encompassed eight subcodes. The inter-relationships between the two main codes and various sub-codes highlights that they are not mutually exclusive and operate on multiple levels as the discussion will illuminate.

Findings

The findings are split between personal and social /cultural factors including family background, ongoing education and training, but also government / university policies and processes including retirement age and promotion processes which will now be discussed.

Family and society

Whilst the presence of an intellectual family background emerged as an enabler in the study of female rectors Dao (2011) and the study of women at An Giang University by Soryaly and Khon (2017); other studies also suggested that ongoing familial support is crucial for women to progress professionally in Vietnamese HEIs. Vu (2018) highlighted how the combination of Confucian legacy, village culture and the Vietnamese government's commitment to collectivism have encouraged a form of 'benevolent sexism' which both men and women accepted. In Vietnamese this was characterised as 'double expectations', 'two goods' ('Hai tot'), the double burden', 'the double shift load' or 'double workday' (Mate, McDonald and Do, 2018; Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020; Nguyen, 2000). Where married women took time off after childbirth, they were then limited in the attainable leadership positions, due to the perception that they needed to prioritise family care.

The expectation around family care could be mitigated by other family members stepping up to support women in domestic and familial responsibilities (Mate, McDonald and Do, 2018). For example, Vu (2018) highlights that parental support often went beyond encouragement and investment in their

female children's' education to practical support with the housework and childcare once they became education leaders. Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) reported how every married woman they interviewed felt that they were fortunate to receive family support. Nguyen, Thi Lan Huong (2013) revealed how in their study, alongside a female Deans' personal ability and efforts, an additional decisive factor was the dedicated support from their husbands, parents, and/or parents-in-law. Nguyen (2000) and Vu (2018) reported how some husbands were happy to support their successful wives and allow them to work long hours, study and travel abroad. Similarly, Le (2010) discussed husbands who were supportive by helping their wives to balance work and family life. However, most of these female participants acknowledged that they felt very lucky to receive such support, which suggests that it is still not the norm in Vietnamese society. Moreover, these supportive spouses were relatively progressive and open-minded who had often also studied in the West.

Most frequently, however, where family support was offered it came from mothers and other women (Dao, 2011). Lam (2018) revealed that many husbands would not share the burden of raising children and looking after dependents including in-laws which remained the women's prime responsibility. Phuong (2022) reveals how women could only commit to their leadership roles and undertake business trips with the support of their mothers and other female home helpers who cared for elderly parents and children. In conclusion, Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) report that despite the support that many women received from their extended families, one of the biggest challenges for all participants was meeting social and cultural expectations about their family

responsibilities as mother and wife (and often daughter-in-law) and combining this with the demands of work.

Access to ongoing education and training

Ongoing access to education and professional development emerged as a strong enabler for women leaders in Vietnamese HE. Soryaly and Khon (2017) emphasised the importance of achieving higher degrees (e.g. Masters or Doctorate) for women to be considered for Vietnamese HEI leadership opportunities. Relatively few people in Vietnam have Doctorates so they can make a real difference to women's HE employment prospects (Lam, 2018). In their study of six female Deans Nguyen, Thi Lan Huong (2013) suggest that beyond any individual abilities the achievement of a doctorate (most often studied at an overseas university) was the main factor for career advancement. Dao (2011) discussed how almost all the women Rectors in their study recognised the advantages of oversees education, not least for the increase in self-confidence. Many female leaders in Vu's (2018) study had more than one postgraduate qualification; were much younger and had extensive experience living and working in developed countries. Furthermore, achieving overseas degrees had given them knowledge and skills (e.g. critical thinking, problem-solving and time management) and helped to build the international networks. Those in the study who had obtained their degrees abroad, especially doctorates, had a much quicker ascent to leadership; highlight the importance to professional advancement in Vietnamese HE.

Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) and Soryaly and Khon (2017) reported how some women had to seek permission from their husbands to pursue PhDs

overseas (which was often their only route to a doctorate and involving complex family arrangements). Unfortunately, Lazarian-Chehab's (2017) study showed that some women were not able to study overseas due to their family responsibilities and instead were reliant on less prestigious local universities. Nguyen's (2000) highlighted how some participants regretted or felt ashamed that they had had to refuse overseas opportunities due to family responsibilities. These studies also reported concerns from some husbands around the increased workload that leadership roles entailed.

Le (2010) reported that the women in their study were overwhelmed with domestic duties and large workloads. While female participants across many studies suggested that they had to work much harder than male colleagues to undertake family care, teach, lead and undertake research, yet were still considered inferior to men (Truong, 2014). However, despite so many women reporting a lack of support, time and mentoring, the majority revealed they were functioning effectively at home and work, even with their limited resources and time (Lazarian-Chehab, 2017).

Female leadership and management styles

Lam (2018) suggests that the Vietnamese culture has an influence on men and women's leadership styles. Studies consistently showed that men often stereotyped women as being less efficient than themselves and doubted the ability of females to achieve standards of workplace efficiency, as defined by executive male leaders. Le's (2010) work suggest that females were expected to be soft, tender and caring and all the female participants employed a democratic and participative leadership style with two demonstrating

transformational leadership. They suggest that this leadership style aligned to wider social assumptions and expectations about women, as discussed above, which were beneficial for their professional advancement in HE (Dang, 2012).

Kelly (2001), moreover, reports that while women were expected to be gentle and flexible in manner and leadership style, organisations expected masculine behaviours from men, such as toughness, decisiveness, and assertiveness (Soryaly and Khan, 2017). This was reflected in Lazarian-Chehab (2017) findings who highlighted how women leaders took this more collaborative approach, regardless of their age or length of time in employment. Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) interviewed two male HR managers who suggested that the collaborative approach which many female leaders undertook by listening and nurturing others was helpful when gaining higher leadership positions. Staff working for female bosses in the study by Trang and Nguyen (2020) were largely positive about female leadership which they characterised as compassionate, friendly, easier to work with and less focused on rules and regulation.

Other studies discussed how typical female leadership styles could be viewed as a weakness. Nguyen, Thi Lan Huong (2013) found that female academics were thought to be indecisive, less active, with limited thinking and risk averse. In Dao's (2011) study some female Deans also believed that women were less active than men and their capabilities were limited due to their level of training (for reasons that are discussed above). There were studies which suggested that successful female leaders were able to combine male and female styles such as Dao's (2011) female Rectors' who did not transform into a 'feminine Rector' but created a leadership style described as inspiring,

cooperating and empowering staff combining traditional male traits including decisiveness with traditional female traits of collaboration and support. In Dang (2012), four of the five gatekeepers noted, that although women leaders were harder working, committed and closer to subordinates, they were often shy, indecisive and did not use their full rights around equality laws, which are important to advance women's careers.

Lack of confidence, assertiveness and speaking out

Personal attributes including lack of confidence, assertiveness or not speaking out to save face were barriers to women's leadership progression. Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) reported how women leaders often lacked self-confidence whilst the subordinates in the Tran and Nguyen (2020) study perceive that women leaders' lacked assertiveness. In Dao's (2011) study women would not speak out to due concerns about the loss of face in a cultural aspect.

Le (2010) suggests that traditional gender roles and socio-cultural norms together with the selection process and stereotypical tasks, lowered women's self-confidence and career aspirations. However, most of the women interviewed by Vu (2018) were confident, assertive, determined, and self-motivated. This suggests a determination to overcome challenges is crucial to women's career success in Vietnam HE (as elsewhere). Lam (2018) suggests that women's' self-confidence has two main aspects: general and specific. General self-confidence is developed in early childhood whereas specific self-confidence is associated with individuals' experience in the workplace. Both types of self-confidence are essential strategies for gaining leadership roles and successful leadership.

The issue of retirement

Many studies drew attention to the fact that that the national and institutional policies around retirement age in Vietnam were a barrier to women's leadership in higher education (Lam, 2018; Soryaly and Khon, 2017; Dang, 2012). These studies found that women's career advancement and attainment of leadership positions was limited due to the lower retirement age of 55 compared to 60 for men, meaning that women are rarely considered for promotion (Dao, 2011). Kelly (2011) suggested that the lower retirement age means that women must be able to study post-graduate degrees at home or overseas and then 20 years in public service, suggesting that planning and starting early is required.

Career plan / path or luck/serendipity

There was evidence across several studies that Vietnamese women tended to wait for employment to be offered to them, rather than ambitiously searching for it. Dang (2012) called the women in their study 'unintentional rectors' as none had aimed at the rector position during their early careers and were mostly invited due to their expertise, higher degrees, leadership talents, interpersonal skills, long-term service, personal traits and conduct which aligned to university needs and goals. However, often this meant that they took positions when they became available, without a formal career plan. Nguyen, Thi Lan Huong (2013) agrees that organizational contexts are important in deciding who can become a Dean. Indeed, their study showed that most of the female Deans in their study took up management positions because no men were qualified or available. Luck or serendipity was also perceived to be an important factor in female professional advancement. Vu (2018) discussed the importance of timing

around women being promoted; as several women were only one who applied for a job, or just happened to be in place when or several (male) managers retired. Dao's (2011) established women Rectors suggested that they did not make an intentional play for higher positions, rather they relied on luck. This self- depreciation, described as luck, suggests that women in HE were beset with low career aspirations which manifested itself in lack of planning and the avoidance of overt displays of ambition.

In Phuong's (2022) study younger female participants women described how their promotions were always unexpected. They described themselves as' immature' or 'unexperienced', being 'pushed' or 'moved' into leaderships positions which they called the 'glass cliff'. Vu (2018) agrees that despite their competence and high performance, many women academics did not seem to have clear career aims, apart from being hard working and being good at their roles. Women, in their study did not aim for leadership roles, and some were reluctant to accept higher positions as several viewed leadership as a burden rather than a privilege, due to the administrative tasks. There were also concerns about disrupting family harmony, taking time away from caring for children and domestic tasks, which could trigger relationship conflicts. Vu (2018) therefore argues that a lack of career aspiration should not be interpreted as a psychological difference between men and women, but rather a cultural issue with women's upbringing and education indicating the priority of the family and motherhood over career advancement.

Happy where I am'/Not everyone complained.

In many of the studies reviewed women stated they were content to remain a

lecturer or stay in lower-ranked jobs to fit in with the cultural expectations and the anticipation of double workloads their present role and were not, therefore interested in leadership roles (Maheshwari and Nayak, 2020). Soryaly and Khon (2017) agree that Vietnamese women in HE generally did not aspire to leadership roles because they were responsible for balancing caring for children, domestic duties and workloads which made it difficult to attain higher positions. They argued however, that it was therefore important to change women's' mindsets around support from partners and sharing responsibilities to balance time at work and at home, although as already outlined this is not necessarily easy. Lam's (2018) work, furthermore, explored how because women often remained in the same position for many years, this served to diminish their ambition and willingness to advance their careers. Hong (2018) emphasizes the importance of the women's choices and desires rather than their family burden. The women had desires to advance beyond their current position, but despite this the women faculty still have more alternative priorities such as family, undertaking research and teaching.

Length of employment or service

Soryaly and Khon (2017) highlight how age and the length of time employed at a university was frequently a barrier to younger women taking up promotion opportunities, despite postgraduate qualifications. Dao (2011) argues that when seniority is important for advancement, then lecturers need to prove themselves as teachers and faculty members first before advancing to more senior positions. Kelly (2011) reveals that Communist Party regulations do require first-time applicants to hold their employment position for at least two successive

terms, which excludes more women than men. Phuong (2022) reveals that women who had obtained overseas PhDs were not valued and did not provide opportunities for advancement unless they changed employers by moving to a different university. However, switching institutions made it difficult to build up the requisite length of service for promotion.

Recruitment processes/Promotion

There was a suggestion that the recruitment processes or access to promotion were unfair due to the influence of university ownership. Le (2010) argues that public sector jobs are rarely advertised but instead are recruited from senior management; whilst a university Rector is appointed by a Minister and then the Rector decides the other positions. They add that it is not uncommon in Vietnam for staff to be employed or promoted through being related or having a close relationship with a member of the selection board. Despite this, not all the women complained about the selection process, instead they highlight how the barriers result from women having low aspirations. Le (2010) agrees the selection process made the women passive and unmotivated to advance their career. Those women determined to apply for leadership roles the highest role they tended to acquire was heads of departments or colleges (Soryaly and Khon, 2017). This is explained by Le's (2010) study there was a general belief that only men were able to lead a technical university.

University ownership created barriers in the opportunities for promotion. Mate, McDonald and Do (2018) use the metaphors of glass and iron cages and how women's stories highlight the rigidities in the Vietnam's educational system which is called an 'iron cage'. Promotion to managerial leadership positions is

restricted but is also overt and visible. Universities lack autonomy for promotions as the responsibility is spread across two government bodies with networks based on political party connections and nepotism. The women had little autonomy as the promotion was influenced by connections to the country's governing party rather than merit. Lam (2018) agrees that university leadership selection processes, which included more men on the selection panels was a barrier to career progression. Hong (2018) suggested that upholding family orientation is the most crucial reason leading to the limitation of women's promotion. Furthermore, they found that most of the senior women leaders faced a *slippery ladder* where they exited as the lower rungs of leadership ascension as opposed to a glass ceiling which prevented their journey to the top.

Predecessors, subordinates and colleagues

The views of predecessors, subordinates or colleagues is a barrier or an enabler, for instance Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) argue that although there are shifts towards gender equality in universities, the women leaders were not respected by their subordinates. Tran and Nguyen (2020) surveyed 638 subordinates and report that whilst 68.3% were willing to work with a female leader; this does not mean women are the preferred immediate superior. Indeed 13.5% did not accept a woman as their immediate leader and whilst 21.3% wanted to work with a female leader, 33.7% did not. They conclude that women leaders appear less favoured by subordinates than male leaders indicating a lack of both institutional support and acceptance of women in leadership roles. Dang (2012) suggest that colleagues' or subordinates' collaboration and

assistance are enablers but there are barriers including colleagues' jealousy and subordinates' disrespect. Dao (2011) highlight how predecessors were important and encouraging for three women Rectors; although four Rectors had difficulties creating long-term, professional relationships with male predecessors and senior colleagues. The women felt suspicion around their handling of the role and incongruity with societal expectations. Lam (2018) noted how the female leaders wanted to innovate and create change but felt they required permission from superiors and need to adhere to the Vietnamese culture of their institutions. However, the vision of female leaders was often held back in male-dominated institutions. All the female academics in Vu (2018) cite the presence of superiors who value their competence, offered guidance, and allowed time for learning on the job before gaining promotion.

Networking Outside Work

There was an indication that some women were uncomfortable or felt unable to participate in social networking and drinking after work, due to socio-cultural norms and beliefs. Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) report how the women in their study reveal that they were extremely uncomfortable going to these social networking events. Mate, McDonald and Do (2018) report that the recognition and relationships with key colleagues in their organisation is important to form networks, as the access to social networks beyond work is restricted due to expectation of being at home and the inappropriateness of women taking part in the informal drinking nights or 'nhau'. Kelly (2011) suggests that there is an expectation that women will go home after work to perform caring duties, whilst men are able to go out and network. Phuong (2022) highlight that most women

recognise they were missing high-quality information, as they could not join

these drinks after working hours which could be detrimental to their role.

Instead, the women had to use connections to different networks to keep

themselves afloat or moving forwards, using a river metaphor when describing

women leaders' perceptions of ascension within HE. One women leader was

able to encourage experts from three different countries to collaborate on a

project through utilising resources and networks, which had not been achieved

before. So, whilst this was a barrier the women found a way around this

challenge, which took effort.

Mentor/role model/sponsor/line manager

The availability of a mentor, role model, sponsor or supportive line manager

was lacking for some women and seen as a barrier. Dang (2012) outlines the

lack of structured mentoring programmes and role models to provide

encouragement, advice and orientation for women. Dao (2011) reveals how

none of the Rectors had official mentors whilst Nguyen (2000) highlighted

women faculty who lacked mentors and role models in comparison to men.

Soryaly and Khon (2017) suggest that the women were not familiar with

mentoring and argue that roles models and mentors are important for sharing

experiences and political knowledge. Similarly, Lazarian-Chehab (2017) report

that the women from Vietnam did not understand mentoring and they mistook a

role model (e.g., father or sister) for a mentor which links to cultural traditions

and deprives women of a mentor's guidance. Lam (2018) agrees that mentoring

rarely occurs in Vietnam as where women believed they had received

mentoring it was more informal of advising, supervising and leadership

relationships. Where the women believed they were mentoring others, they were in fact being role models.

There are studies Mate, McDonald and Do (2018) where women were receiving elements of mentoring (e.g., career and psychosocial support to assist with promotion) from a patron or a sponsor would help women to overcome the structural barriers of the public education system. They propose that it is valuable to have multiple mentors and taking place in formal workplace mentoring to develop trust and compatibility. Maheshwari and Nayak (2020) suggest that 60% of the 21 participants noted the importance of mentor support, without which they would not have considered leadership roles. Therefore, there is value to mentors or sponsors, but also an awareness issue around the mentor role, as discussed above.

Community roles and Memberships

There was a suggestion that participating in community roles or memberships beyond the university was an enabler to women's leadership. Dao (2011) reveals how the women Rectors were board members, officers, project directors or paid consultants. Participating in these community activities enabled the women to meet powerful people from specialist fields who could be useful to the university and students. Community Party Membership is important and an enabler of women's progression to leadership roles. Nguyen, Thi Lan Huong (2013) argues that there is a lack of specific university policies which promote women in leadership and management and that Vietnamese universities conduct gender equity activities as outlined by the Communist Party's leadership and the government's laws and policies. Soryaly and Khon (2017)

emphasise that the leaders in the university and all governmental organizations should be Communist Party members. All the women who participated agreed that women faculty who possessed an advanced degree and were already a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party would have a chance to become leaders at the university.

Opportunities, networking and skills development

The opportunities for networking and skills development in a university are important to women leaders and seen as enablers, but these opportunities are not always available or gender specific. Soryaly and Khon (2017) report how the university provides opportunities for women to become leaders and use their voices such as Vietnamese Women's Day, International Women's Day, and during an Annual Conference. Women are given opportunities to present, display leadership capacity and develop communication skills, but also sharing ideas and experiences. All participants suggest these are critical opportunities that motivate women faculty in attaining leaderships positions. Kelly (2011) discusses the opportunities for development and suggests that men and women are only eligible to be sent on training and refresher courses after at least 3-5 years of uninterrupted employment. Women are less likely to participate in work rotation opportunities and refresher courses. Lam (2018) found that institutions do provide leadership programmes inside and outside the institution and that the Vietnamese women were taking these opportunities. However, the ideas of lifelong learning and continuing education are still a new concept in Vietnam.

Regarding networking, Truong (2014) argues that one of the largest challenges reported by the female and male participants was the lack of

effective collaboration among different university departments due to the ambiguity in operational regulations and the Vietnamese culture of an individual approach to academic work and lack of exposure to teamwork approaches. They acknowledged that it could relate to the location of the campuses and acknowledge the higher number of online meetings, but that some issues were due to colleagues not wanting to collaborate which was a barrier to effective leadership. Indeed Lam (2018) suggests that internal and external networks including senior leaders, colleagues, mentors, friends, scholars, family and other relatives are useful to empower success. However, women in Vietnam would mainly network internally, so, whilst there is an issue of availability, there is also an intersection with culture.

Advancement strategies

Dang (2012) highlights that whilst the women recommend strategies to facilitate their career mobility, there was a lack of consensus in the suggestions. Kelly (2011) agrees that there is rarely a consensus amongst the men and women that were interviewed as to which were the most constraining or enabling factors. Dao (2011) reveal how each female Rector had their own set of practices influenced by their individual circumstances, but there was a lack of consensus as to overcome the barriers, although collectively they had similar leadership journeys. They suggest that the women did not dwell on the issues as they recognise that the barriers emanate from the organisations and not themselves. In their study Phuong (2022) reveals that each woman leader had a different strategy. One participant was promoted without having insider knowledge of the faculty whilst another monitored their situation to undertake

their job. One woman utilised the strength of different channels to gain momentum and brought more opportunities to succeed. The study argues that there is not one static single challenge (e.g., glass ceiling, sticky floor) or series of static challenges (e.g., labyrinth) but changeable challenges that can shape women's HE journey differently for female academic leaders. Phuong (2022) likens this to a river which offers challenges but also opportunities. Lam (2018) suggests that empowerment is important to support positive changes to leadership opportunities, rather than the end itself. It is a key variable for the women who may or may not have been seeking higher leadership positions. Empowerment is about the institutions and the support they offer, but also about the women's intrinsic factors, abilities, and efforts to take on the information, support or opportunities on offer. This again highlights the complexity and intersectionality of these issues.

Discussion

This literature review was conducted with the aim of mapping the existing literature on Women Leaders in Higher Education in Vietnam and exploring earlier research. We analysed the features of 17 items published between 1995 to 2022 and Figure 2 below contains an overview of the findings from the literature. Below, we discuss the main themes emanating from the existing research and some implications.
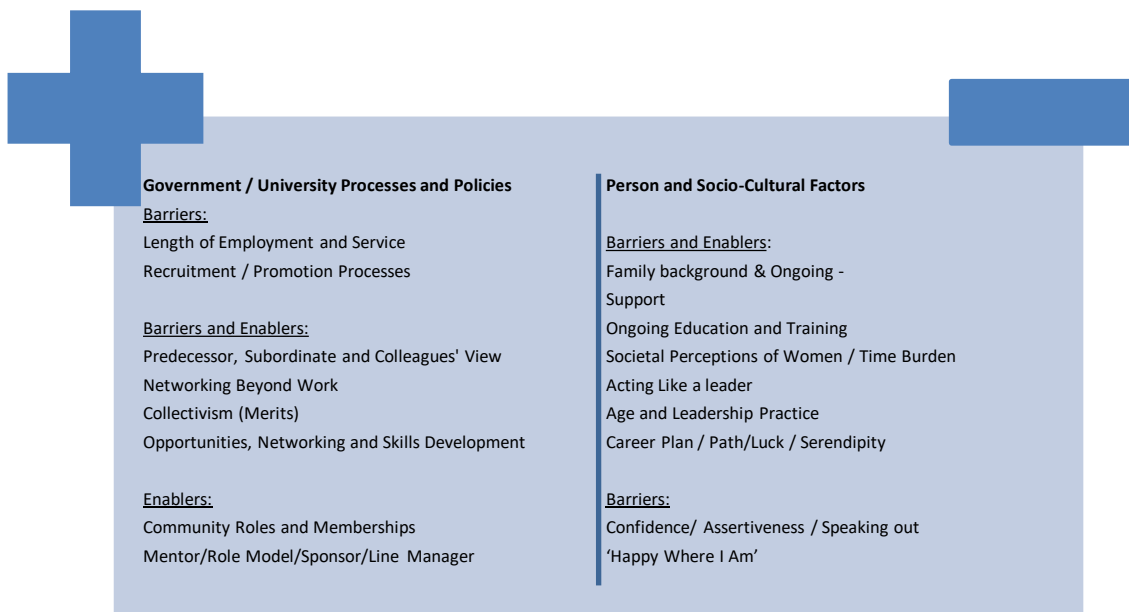
<table>
<tr><td>Government / University Processes and Policies</td><td>Person and Socio-Cultural Factors</td></tr>
<tr><td>Barriers:</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Length of Employment and Service</td><td>Barriers and Enablers:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Recruitment / Promotion Processes</td><td>Family background & Ongoing -</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Support</td></tr>
<tr><td>Barriers and Enablers:</td><td>Ongoing Education and Training</td></tr>
<tr><td>Predecessor, Subordinate and Colleagues' View</td><td>Societal Perceptions of Women / Time Burden</td></tr>
<tr><td>Networking Beyond Work</td><td>Acting Like a leader</td></tr>
<tr><td>Collectivism (Merits)</td><td>Age and Leadership Practice</td></tr>
<tr><td>Opportunities, Networking and Skills Development</td><td>Career Plan / Path/Luck / Serendipity</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Enablers:</td><td>Barriers:</td></tr>
<tr><td>Community Roles and Memberships</td><td>Confidence/ Assertiveness / Speaking out</td></tr>
<tr><td>Mentor/Role Model/Sponsor/Line Manager</td><td>'Happy Where I Am'</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2: Barriers and enables from different system contexts.

Figure 2. highlights that the themes operate at different levels which are grouped together around government and university processes and practices but also personal and socio-cultural factors. These include aspects which the literature describes as a barrier, as an enabler or some are barriers and an enabler. These interact, intersect and these are not mutually exclusive. For instance, whilst women leaders might not want to speak out which could be described as a personal factor this is related to how women are viewed in Vietnamese society in terms of societal perceptions of women. The government and university levels also interact as whilst women might not be able to network after work, again this is related to socio-cultural aspects. These are nested contexts which are related to each other and interact in terms of barriers and enablers to women's unequal access to leadership opportunities in Higher Education in Vietnam.

These aspects emanate throughout the life course and can begin with family that a woman is born into; as an intellectual family is an enabler (Dao, 2011). Access to education is important here and particularly lifelong learning which includes postgraduate qualifications being studies overseas (Vu, 2018). However, the social expectations intersect with this; in terms of the support and encouragement to take these opportunities or even permission; as Confucian culture influences stereotypes of women's role in society as one who looks after the home and family; creating the double burden expectations for women, who may not receive support and can be expected to strive harder (Lam, 2018; Vu, 2018). This is related to personal factors including confidence, assertive and mindsets of being happy where I am. This can lead to women not having a career plan or path and gaining leadership opportunities through luck or fate what Dang (2012) describes as unintentional leaders.

A further personal factor which is tied into socio-cultural and university level is the perceptions around whether women are acting like a leader. There are discussions around the traits associated to women and those associated to men and whether women need to adopt a male leadership style or combine these with women's traits. There are positive comments around women's traits, but also these are seen as a weakness (Tran and Nguyen, 2020). The style taken by women is potentially seen as a personal factor, but this is again influenced by socio-cultural perceptions of women in the Confucian culture and may be underdeveloped due to lack of training or gender specific training within the university level. There is a suggestion by Dang (2012) that mindsets such as confidence and assertiveness can be at play here leading to shyness and women not capitalising on the potential opportunities within the equality laws.

However, the ideas of women not speaking out to save face and respect for elders is also influenced by university selection processes (Le, 2010). These are linked to government level influences, due to the way in which universities are owned, meaning that positions are not always advertised. There is research to suggest that women are prevented from reaching the top, whilst Hong (2018) suggests that women are actually slipping down the leadership ladder, rather than being stuck at a particular level or by a glass ceiling.

Age is also a barrier, as there needs to be enough time to build up the length of service and experience to be deemed as eligible for promotion; having proven themselves in lower-level roles (Dao, 2011). This itself is impacted by the lower retirement age, meaning that women have less time to gain promotion; but there is also the intersection with personal and socio-cultural factors around women's beliefs (Dang, 2012). The involvement in the community with roles and memberships is also important for women if they want to gain promotion.

Within the university women leaders can receive support from predecessors, subordinates and colleagues, but this can also be a barrier, as not all women will be accepted as an immediate supervisor (Trang and Nguyen, 2021). This intersects with socio-cultural perspective of women's role in Vietnamese culture or institutions which are male dominated (Lam, 2018). Socio-cultural factors also hinder the opportunities for women to network within and outside their institutions. The double-burden of childcare and housework and perceptions of women in society, means that participating in networking and drinking after work is seen as undesirable for women (Maheshwari and

Nayak, 2018). This leads to the missing out of information and developing connections; meaning that women had to use other strategies to overcome these barriers (Phuong, 2022). There were also cultural aspects such as individual academic working which appeared to hinder the networking within universities (Troung, 2014). Whilst some universities offered opportunities for women to gain training and experience (Soryaly and Khon, 2017) there was an indication that women are less likely to participate in development opportunities (Kelly, 2011) and access is dependent on length of employment. Women can gain support from mentors, role models and sponsors; but these opportunities are not always offered or there can be a lack of understanding around the mentor role which links to cultural traditions (Lazarian-Chehab, 2017). This indicates more intersections between the difference levels of barriers and enablers,

Taking all these potential barriers and enablers into account our review focused on advancement strategies to see what the women or men who participated in the 17 studies in this review recommended. However, there is a lack of consensus around which are the best strategies or approaches (Kelly, 2011). What is interesting from Dao (2011) and Phuong (2022) is the idea of women recognising the different levels of factors that cause this unequal access to leadership opportunities and acknowledging that some of these barriers emanate from outside of themselves. However, to overcome these challenges the women need to recognise that the enablers are at the personal level including women's mindsets. Each woman will have an individual background and as Phuong (2022) suggests will need to have their own strategy to navigate the barriers that they face. Of course, some women may have similar leadership

journeys (Dao, 2011), perhaps working at the same institutions or undertaking the same qualifications; but there will be individual factors in terms of family, upbringing, age, mindsets etc. The idea of the slippery ladder and navigating leadership through higher education through a river metaphor, suggests fluidity here which Phuong (2022) sees as changeable challenges for which women need to be empowered to start to make these positive changes, drawing on the relevant enablers for their journey. However, these factors intersect, operate at different levels which are extrinsic to women leaders but also intrinsically, which may require a muti-level response from across government, university, socio-cultural and personal levels.

Limitations

We acknowledge that our review is limited to English Language texts. Whist the team included partners from Vietnam, it was agreed that the review would be undertaken by the UK team which mean that there were 13 items that were excluded as they were in Vietnamese, but also these were difficult to locate. There were other texts that were also not available which reduced the number of items that were included in the final sample. Full information around the 71 items that were located and considered in the PRISMA were outlined in a table, which is not included due to word count restrictions.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare

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