

Empowering Local Governance for Gender Parity: Enacting Vietnam's Commitment to SDG 5 and Beyond

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This study emphasizes the vital role of local governments in Vietnam in advancing gender equality, particularly in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5. It argues that local governance is crucial for translating national gender equality commitments into practical outcomes while simultaneously driving sustainable development. This article examines Vietnam's legal frameworks, policies, and local governance practices to assess their effectiveness in promoting gender-responsive governance under the UN SDG framework. The author explores the relationship between local governance and gender equality, emphasizing the transformative impact of integrating gender perspectives at the local level. The findings demonstrate a strong link between effective local governance and progress toward SDG 5. She advocates for empowering local governments to implement gender-inclusive policies, which are essential for achieving gender equality and sustainable development in Vietnam. Furthermore, it provides strategic recommendations to strengthen gender responsiveness in local governance, contributing to the broader discourse on sustainable and inclusive development.

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Keywords

Local Governance, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals, Vietnam, Local Governance, SDG 5, Feminist Legal Approach

1. Introduction

The interplay between gender equality and local governance in Vietnam presents a complex landscape, where the potential of women's leadership in public sectors is pivotal yet underutilized.¹ Despite the constitutional assertion of equal rights for women in all life spheres, including political, economic, and social arenas, the representation of women in Vietnam's local governance remains notably limited.² Their presence in decision-making roles continues to be disproportionately low, especially in sectors critical for policy impact such as industry, agriculture, and security.³ This underrepresentation is more acute at the local level, where the participation of women in political activities, particularly in leadership positions, is minimal.⁴

This disparity highlights a significant gap between Vietnam's constitutional commitments to gender equality and the actual state of women's involvement in governance. Such an examination gains critical importance when considered against the backdrop of Vietnam's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5, which targets the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.⁵ The integral relationship between SDG 5 with the other SDGs underscores the pivotal role of gender equality as a cornerstone in the overarching framework of sustainable development. This situation raises a question of how Vietnam's policy and legal frameworks can be effectively aligned with these international standards to foster a governance landscape where gender equality is not only aspired to but practically realized. Such inquiry highlights a pressing need

¹ Ramla Khalidi, *The Path Toward Gender Parity in Politics in Viet Nam*, UNDP (Oct. 20, 2022), <https://www.undp.org/vietnam/blog/path-toward-gender-parity-politics-viet-nam>.

² The Government of Vietnam, *The Brief Report on the Government's Implementation of national Gender Equality Objectives* [Báo cáo tóm tắt việc thực hiện mục tiêu quốc gia về bình đẳng giới] 3 (2017), <https://datafiles.chinhphu.vn/cpp/files/dlt/2017/10/455.signed.pdf>.

Kindly revert to me if there is any point which needs to be clarified.

³ Khalidi, *supra* note 1.

⁴ Nguyen Mai & Dang Hoang, *Gender Role in Mangrove Resource Management: Case Study in Trieu Phong District of Quang Tri Province, Vietnam*, 9(2) J. VIETNAMESE ENVTL 92-8 (2018).

⁵ UN DESA, *Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls*, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.

in Vietnam for a transformative approach that not only acknowledges, but actively incorporates women's roles in governance as fundamental to achieving sustainable development through true gender parity.

Despite such an urgent and indispensable question, a noticeable scarcity of research explicitly focuses on the nuanced ways through which local governance can foster gender equality within the Vietnamese context. This critical gap underscores the necessity of this study as it aims to bridge a significant gap in existing scholarship by providing a comprehensive analysis of how Vietnamese local governments can promote gender equality within the sustainable development paradigm. The study seeks to elucidate the role of local governance as a fundamental catalyst for gender equality, exploring the substantial impact that gender-inclusive policy alignment within local governance structures can have on establishing an equitable and sustainable future in Vietnam. At its core, the study rests on the critical nexus between local governance and the realization of gender equality goals. It delves into the intricate relationship between local governance practices and gender equality measures, aiming to uncover the strategies through which local authorities can bolster women's empowerment, ensuring their comprehensive participation across political, economic, and social realms.

The significance of this research is underscored by its potential to transform global gender equality commitments enshrined in SDG 5 into actionable local strategies, contributing to a deeper understanding of how Vietnam can actualize its national and international pledges. The findings are expected to inform policymaking, spur transformative changes, and optimize Vietnam's governance frameworks to facilitate gender equality, thereby aiding Vietnam in fulfilling its sustainable development ambitions and enhancing its global contribution to gender parity. Viewed through this lens, the study not only addresses an academic void but also holds practical relevance, offering insights that can shape effective and impactful local governance to foster gender equality. This paper is composed of five parts including Introduction and Conclusion. Part two will review SDG 5 and local governance. Part three will review the role of local government in advancing gender equality. Part four will discuss Vietnam's path to SDG 5.

This study adopts a normative research approach, infused with a feminist lens, to critically evaluate the interplay between local governance and gender equality in Vietnam. The feminist perspective enhances the analysis by foregrounding the power dynamics and socio-cultural contexts that shape gender relations within the governance landscape, guiding the development of nuanced, gender-responsive recommendations. This approach is designed to generate transformative insights that

align local governance mechanisms with the overarching goals of gender equality, reflective of both global feminist standards and the specific socio-cultural context of Vietnam.

2. SDG 5 and Implementation in the Dimension of Local Government

A. Gender Equality and Sustainable Development from Feminist Perspectives

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of a prosperous, sustainable society. It is grounded in the principle that all individuals, regardless of gender, should have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities.⁶ Feminist theories, which form the backbone of gender equality discourse, advocate for the dismantling of patriarchal structures and emphasize the need for systemic changes to achieve true gender parity.⁷ In gender studies, feminist discussions offer critical insights into the socio-political and cultural underpinnings of inequality, advocating for social justice and structural change.⁸ They emphasize intersectionality, ensuring a comprehensive analysis that considers overlapping forms of discrimination.⁹ By guiding methodological approaches and emphasizing the empowerment of marginalized voices, feminist perspectives not only elucidate the complexities of gender issues but also advance onward-thinking strategies to dismantle entrenched inequalities and foster an equitable society.

Experts consistently argue that gender inequalities are deeply embedded in societal structures and that addressing these disparities is crucial for both the advancement of women and the overall development of societies toward sustainable growth.¹⁰ Accordingly, sustainable development may be defined as social innovation that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations

⁶ World Bank, *Gender Equality, Poverty Reduction, and Inclusive Growth* (Feb. 17, 2021), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/207481489888852225/gender-equality-poverty-reduction-and-inclusive-growth-2016-2023-gender-strategy-2017-update-to-the-board>.

⁷ JUDITH BUTLER, *GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY* 142-9 (1990); SYLVIA WALBY, *THEORISING PATRIARCHY* 72-6 (1990); SYLVIA WALBY, *THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM* 147-9 (2011).

⁸ MICHAEL FREEMAN, *FEMINIST JURISPRUDENCE* 1079-91 (2014).

⁹ Kimberle Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43(6) *STAN. L. REV.* 1241-99 (1991).

¹⁰ LOURDES BENERIA ET AL., *GENDER, DEVELOPMENT AND GLOBALIZATION: ECONOMICS AS IF ALL PEOPLE MATTERED* 145-78 (2015); AMARTYA SEN, *DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM* 18-20 (2001).

to meet their own needs.¹¹ The interlinkages between sustainable development and gender equality are well-established, because both are recognized as a goal in its own right and a critical factor for achieving all other SDGs.¹² Recent studies emphasize that gender equality is intrinsically linked to sustainable development, positing that empowering women and girls catalyzes benefits across all dimensions of sustainable growth, including economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and social well-being.¹³

Research conducted post-2020 provides compelling evidence that advancements in gender equality directly contribute to more resilient and inclusive economies; enhance the effectiveness of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies; and promote greater societal equity and justice.¹⁴ Insights from these studies reveal that achieving gender parity is pivotal for reinforcing the foundational structures necessary for sustainable development, as it ensures equitable access to resources, inclusive decision-making processes, and equal opportunities for all, which are essential for fostering a sustainable and equitable future.¹⁵ The literature also critically examines the setbacks and challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting how the crisis has magnified existing gender disparities and underscoring the imperative to integrate gender-responsive approaches in recovery efforts to uphold the gains made towards SDG 5 and its pivotal role in the broader sustainable development agenda.¹⁶

Since the significance of the feminist theories to gender studies is well-established, adopting feminist theories in sustainable development research is viable due to their transformative potential, as they centralize gender equality within the sustainability

- 11 UN DESA, *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (1987), at pt. 3 [Sustainable Development], <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>.
- 12 UN DESA, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>.
- 13 UN WOMEN, *GENDER EQUALITY AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH: ECONOMIC POLICIES TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT* 28 (Diane Elson & Anuradha Seth eds., 2019); Walter Filho et al., *Promoting Gender Equality Across the Sustainable Development Goals*, 25(12) ENVTL DEV. & SUSTAINABILITY 14177-98 (2023).
- 14 Filho et al., *supra* note 13; Naila Kabeer, *Gender Equality, Inclusive Growth, and Labour Markets*, in *WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: INSIGHTS FROM AFRICA AND SOUTH ASIA* 13-48 (Kate Grantham et al. eds., 2021); Mathilde Rainard et al., *Gender Equality and Climate Change Mitigation: Are Women a Secret Weapon?*, 5(1) FRONTIERS CLIMATE 946712 (2020).
- 15 Ananya Chakraborty & Sreerupa Sengupta, *Equitable Pathways for a Sustainable Future: The Case for Mainstreaming Gender Across Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, in *GENDER INEQUALITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON EDUCATION AND HEALTH* 191-201 (Chandrima Chakraborty & Dipyaman Pal eds., 2023).
- 16 Naila Kabeer, *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal 1*, 13(1) GENDER & DEV. 13-24 (2005); Ellen Kossek et al., *Boundaryless Work: The Impact of COVID-19 on Work-Life Boundary Management, Integration, and Gendered Divisions of Labor for Academic Women* 16 (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020); Jeffrey Sachs, *From Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals*, 379(9832) LANCET 2206-11 (2012).

discourse, positing it as essential for comprehensive progress.¹⁷ This integration is laudable but warrants a critical examination of its practicality and depth of impact. While feminist theories celebrate intersectionality and position women and marginalized groups as pivotal change-makers, one must scrutinize the extent to which these theoretical frameworks translate into tangible policy actions and measurable outcomes in the real world.¹⁸ The call for resource redistribution, inclusive policymaking, and societal norm reevaluation, as advocated by feminist theories, is progressive, yet challenges persist in their actualization.¹⁹ The effectiveness of such an approach hinges on overcoming existing systemic barriers and resistance to change, raising questions about the adaptability of institutions and the readiness of societies to embrace these radical shifts.²⁰ Therefore, while this method champions gender equity and promises a reinforced foundation for a sustainable future, it necessitates a critical evaluation of its implementation fidelity, scalability of impact, and the sustainability of its outcomes, ensuring that the lofty ideals of social justice, inclusivity, and environmental stewardship are not only aspired to but also achieved.

B. Local Governance and SDG 5

Local governance refers to the manner in which public authorities, communities, and individuals organize themselves to manage their affairs at a local level.²¹ Effective local governance is crucial for the implementation of gender-sensitive policies and the promotion of gender equality, serving as a bridge between national policies and local realities.²² Studies highlight the importance of inclusive, participatory, and accountable local governance systems that can respond to the gender-specific needs and contribute to the empowerment of women within local communities.²³ This integrated analysis reveals that gender equality, local governance, and sustainable development are interdependent, each reinforcing the others. Thus, advancing

¹⁷ Valeria Esquivel, *Power and the Sustainable Development Goals: A Feminist Analysis*, 24(1) GENDER & DEV. 9-23 (2016).

¹⁸ Crenshaw, *supra* note 9.

¹⁹ Linda Berger et al., *Using Feminist Theory to Advance Equal Justice Under Law*, 17 NEV. L. J. 539-48 (2017).

²⁰ Karin Jonnergård & Anna Stafssudd, *Performance Evaluations as Gender Barriers in Professional Organizations: A Study of Auditing Firms*, 17(6) GENDER WORK & ORG. 721-47 (2010).

²¹ Sylke Nissen, *Local Governance: From City Government to Good Urban Governance*, in PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 518-27 (Walter Filho et al. eds., 2021).

²² Merilee Grindle, *Good Enough Governance Revisited*, 25(5) DEV. POL'Y REV. 533-74 (2007); ELINOR OSTROM, GOVERNING THE COMMONS: THE EVOLUTION OF INSTITUTIONS FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION 25-32 (1990).

²³ John Gaventa, *Mapping the Outcomes of Citizen Engagement*, 40(12) WORLD DEV. 2399-2410 (2012); GHAZALA MANSURI & VIJAYENDRA RAO, LOCALIZING DEVELOPMENT: DOES PARTICIPATION WORK? 95 (2013), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/7ec97d6d-602c-5525-858a-0bfc6caff7f>.

gender equality through local governance mechanisms is essential for achieving sustainable development outcomes, as it ensures that development strategies are inclusive, equitable, and capable of producing lasting benefits.²⁴

On these matters, studies by Meinzen-Dick et al.²⁵ and Agarwal²⁶ demonstrate that gender-balanced decision-making leads to more sustainable and effective resource management, which is essential for environmental conservation and economic development. Meinzen-Dick et al. highlight how women's land rights contribute to agricultural productivity and food security, reinforcing the economic dimensions of sustainability.²⁷ In contrast, Agarwal's findings suggest that incorporating women's perspectives in environmental policies fosters greater sustainability, showcasing the environmental aspect of sustainable development. Moreover, research by Alsop et al. illustrates how local governance structures can be instrumental in advancing gender equality.²⁸ It focuses on the impact of participatory governance, showing that when women are engaged in local decision-making, policies are more likely to address gender disparities effectively, promoting greater social justice and equity.²⁹

On the other hand, gender equality is fundamental to both local governance and sustainable development. It underscores not only the importance of establishing policies that benefit women but also the critical role of women's participation in political, economic, and public life. Accordingly, local and regional governments are at the forefront of operationalizing gender equality, as outlined in SDG 5, with their responsibilities - ranging from community governance to initiatives implementation and service provision - are inherently tied to the goal's core principles. Their strategic position enables them to transform international commitments into concrete local actions, effectively bridging global ambitions with community-level progress.³⁰ The local implementation of SDG 5 provides these administrations with a platform to highlight their crucial role in promoting global gender equality, showcasing how

24 UN CTCN, *Climate Change and Disaster Mitigation: Gender Makes the Difference* (2004), <https://www.ctc-n.org/resources/climate-change-and-disaster-mitigation-gender-makes-difference>; Andrea Cornwall & Althea-Maria Rivas, *From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development*, 36(2) *THIRD WORLD Q.* 396-415 (2015).

25 Ruth Meinzen-Dick et al., *Gender and Sustainability*, 39(1) *ANN. REV. ENV'T & RES.* 29-55 (2014).

26 Bina Agarwal, *Gender Equality, Food Security and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 34(1) *CURRENT OPINION ENV'T SUSTAINABILITY* 26-32 (2018).

27 Meinzen-Dick et al., *supra* note 25.

28 RUTH ALSOP ET AL., *EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE: FROM ANALYSIS TO IMPLEMENTATION* 174 (2006).

29 *Id.*

30 Mark Koelman et al., *When Tensions Become Conflicts: Wind Turbine Policy Implementation and Development in the Netherlands*, 65(3) *J. ENV'T PLAN. & MGMT.* 375-97 (2022); Mfundo Masuku & Nokukhanya Jili, *Public Service Delivery in South Africa: The Political Influence at Local Government Level*, 19(1) *J. PUB. AFF.* e1935 (2019).

gender-responsive local governance can drive extensive societal advancement.³¹ Gupta et al. discuss the critical role local governance plays in translating global commitments to gender equality, arguing that local-level actions are fundamental to achieving the SDGs.³² Meanwhile, Buechler et al. explore the nexus between gender, water governance, and sustainable development, illustrating how gender-inclusive approaches in local governance lead to more resilient and sustainable management practices.³³

By integrating gender-equitable approaches into their frameworks, local governments not only champion women's rights, but also initiate a ripple effect of positive change across society, contributing significantly to the global endeavor of advancing gender equality.³⁴ Their commitment to SDG 5 serves as a testament to their capacity to enact significant transformative changes that align local realities with global gender equality standards, thereby reinforcing their indispensable role in the sustainable development ecosystem.³⁵ Ultimately, the efficacy of local governments in embracing and implementing SDG 5 underscores their pivotal contribution to turning gender equality from a global policy aspiration into a tangible reality for communities worldwide, highlighting their essential influence in the overarching structure of sustainable development.

C. Gaps between Local Governance and Gender Equality under SDG 5

In the scholarly exploration of the nexus between local governance and gender equality, a discernible lacuna emerges, particularly within the unique socio-political milieu of Vietnam. While numerous studies have focused on strategies to enhance women's participation in public bodies, a comprehensive examination that intertwines local governance, gender equality, and SDG 5 is markedly absent.³⁶ The existing body of knowledge, while rich in its global and theoretical insights, frequently overlooks the

³¹ Valeria Esquivel & Caroline Sweetman, *Introduction: Gender and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 27(1) GENDER & DEV. 1-12 (2019).

³² Joyeeta Gupta & Courtney Vegelin, *Sustainable Development Goals and Inclusive Development*, 16(1) INT'L ENV'T AGREEMENTS: POL. L. & ECON. 433-48 (2016).

³³ Stephanie Buechler et al., *Re-Linking Governance of Energy with Livelihoods and Irrigation in Uttarakhand, India*, 8(10) WATER 437 (2016).

³⁴ Editorial, *Gender Equality: The Route to a Better World*, 621 NATURE 8 (2023), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-02745-9>.

³⁵ Sinan Küfeoğlu, *SDG-5 Gender equality*, in EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES 277-88 (Sinan Küfeoğlu ed., 2022).

³⁶ Lily - Trinh Hoang Hong Hue, *Gender Differences of Citizen Participation in Local Government: The Case of Vietnam*, 9(3) J. PUB. ADMIN. & GOVERNANCE 225-38 (2019); Dao Nguyen, *Women's Participation in Public Administration in Vietnam: A Case Study of Policy and Practice from 1986 to the Present*, 45(1) INT'L J. PUB. ADMIN. 23-36 (2022).

nuanced interplay of Vietnam's distinct local governance systems, cultural dynamics, and gender norms.³⁷ Recent official reports from government bodies and NGOs have begun to address this subject, presenting intriguing data and observations.³⁸ However, the absence of a dedicated scholarly focus adopting a feminist approach to scrutinize the interplay between local government structures and gender equality objectives has resulted in a significant research gap. The scarcity of focused empirical studies in Vietnam thus limits the understanding of how localized governance can be optimized to advance gender equality effectively within the nation's specific context, given Vietnam's dynamic socio-economic landscape, ongoing policy reforms, and the government's commitment to the SDGs.

3. The Role of Local Government in Advancing Gender Equality

A. Engaging with the Local Context

The examination of local governments' role in promoting gender equality underscores their crucial function in addressing gender disparities. Positioned at the heart of the governance hierarchy, local governments possess a unique ability to customize and implement gender equality policies that align with the specific needs and circumstances of their communities. This capacity is reflected through the following dimensions.

First, local governments in Vietnam possess an in-depth understanding of community needs and contexts, uniquely positioning them to adapt national policies, including those related to gender equality, into locally relevant actions and programs.³⁹ This proximity to the community enables a nuanced discernment of the specific needs and priorities of women and men, boys and girls, influenced by entrenched gender roles and labor divisions. By translating national objectives into local initiatives, local

³⁷ Riya Banerjee & Gopa Samanta, *Women's Empowerment Through Participation in Urban Local Governance*, in *NEGOTIATING TERRAIN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE* 53-75 (Riya Banerjee & Gopa Samanta eds., 2021); Annika Björkdahl & Lejla Somun-Krupalija, *Gender Equality and Local Governance: Global Norms and Local Practices*, in *GOVERNANCE FOR URBAN SERVICES: ACCESS, PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND TRANSPARENCY* 107-26 (Shabbir Cheema ed., 2020).

³⁸ Vietnamese Ministry of Home Affairs, Efforts to achieve gender equality in the political area [Nỗ lực thực hiện mục tiêu bình đẳng giới trong lĩnh vực chính trị] (2018), <https://moha.gov.vn/cong-tac-can-bo-phu-nu/tin-tuc/Pages/listbnv.aspx?ItemID=2476>; UN Vietnam, The General Landscape of Gender Equality in Vietnam 2021 (CGEP) [Tổng quan về bình đẳng giới ở Việt Nam 2021 (CGEP)] (Oct. 26, 2021), <https://vietnam.un.org/vi/153151-t%E1%BB%95ng-quan-v%E1%BB%81-b%C3%ACnh-%C4%91%E1%BA%B3ng-gi%E1%BB%9Bi-%E1%BB%9F-vi%E1%BB%87i-nam-n%C4%83m-2021>.

³⁹ Masuku & Jili, *supra* note 30.

governments can address these differences effectively, ensuring that policies align more closely with their constituents' lived experiences.⁴⁰

Second, local governments in Vietnam are strategically positioned to address gender inequalities directly. Their daily interactions with citizens provide them with critical insights necessary to identify and mitigate persistent gender disparities, enabling for the allocation of resources to gender-specific programs that aim to eradicate these disparities.⁴¹ The routine governance activities thereby become a conduit for transformative change, ensuring that interventions are acutely attuned to the nuances of gender inequality within the community.

Third, local governments in Vietnam wield substantial influence over the nature, funding, and accessibility of these services. This authority enables them to prioritize gender equality actively, directing resources toward services that equitably address the needs of both women and men. When service delivery policies incorporate the diverse requirements and circumstances of all community members, especially women and girls, they establish a foundation for more effective and efficient public service provision.⁴² For example, recognizing women's labor patterns can lead to targeted interventions that significantly reduce the unpaid labor burden on women, thereby enhancing their participation in the broader economic sphere.

Fourth, local governments in Vietnam play a vital role in driving socio-economic development, which can be substantially enhanced by prioritizing gender equality. By integrating gender considerations into local economic strategies, local governments can unlock the full potential of their communities, ensuring that development initiatives are inclusive and harness the talents and skills of all citizens.⁴³

While local governments in Vietnam are strategically positioned within the governance hierarchy, allowing them to adapt gender equality policies to community-specific needs, this positioning also exposes them to localized pressures and constraints that can impede policy implementation. The assumption that proximity to the community inherently results in more effective policy adaptation deserves scrutiny. Such an assumption may overlook challenges such as local resistance to gender-progressive policies, entrenched patriarchal norms, and the limited capacity of

⁴⁰ Koelman et al., *supra* note 30.

⁴¹ Rolf Aaberge et al., *Local Governments, In-Kind Transfers, and Economic Inequality*, 180(c) J. PUB. ECON. 103966 (2019).

⁴² Pedro-José Martínez-Córdoba et al., *Women's Management in Local Government: The Effects of Substantive Representation on Welfare Service Efficiency*, 57(3) SOC. POL'Y & ADMIN. 272-86 (2023).

⁴³ Adriana Alberti & Mariastefania Senese, *Developing Capacities for Inclusive and Innovative Urban Governance*, in GOVERNANCE FOR URBAN SERVICES: ACCESS, PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND TRANSPARENCY 127-52 (Shabbir Cheema ed., 2020).

local governments to enforce these policies effectively. Furthermore, the effectiveness of local governments in advancing gender equality often depends on the broader political, social, and economic environment. Their efforts may be undermined by insufficient support from higher governmental levels, inadequate resources, or conflicting national policies. Therefore, while local governments are essential actors in the gender equality ecosystem, their capacity to effect change is contingent upon a supportive infrastructure that extends beyond the local level.

A rigorous examination must also consider the variability in the effectiveness of local governments. While some may excel in advancing gender equality, others may falter due to such factors as leadership commitment, institutional capacity, and community support. Thus, generalized assertions about their pivotal role can be misleading, as they overlook the nuanced realities on the ground. In essence, while local governments have the potential to be instrumental in promoting gender equality, their efficacy is not guaranteed and is influenced by a myriad of factors. A critical analysis must move beyond acknowledging their central role to interrogating the conditions under which they can successfully contribute to gender equality, the barriers they face, and the broader systemic reforms needed to enhance their effectiveness in this crucial area.

B. Actualizing Global Commitment

The analysis of the local governments' role in advancing gender equality underscores their essential contribution in the global quest to achieve SDG 5. Their strategic position, comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics, and capability for holistic policy integration are the key to actualizing SDG 5's objectives. Their close community ties and involvement in citizens' daily lives uniquely position them to translate SDG 5's aspirations into concrete realities. Local governments operationalize global norms through their legislative and executive powers, adapting global standards to local contexts.⁴⁴ This approach advocates for embedding gender sensitivity throughout the governance ecosystem, influencing policy development, urban planning, service delivery, and community engagement.⁴⁵ The formulation of local policies and programs, informed by gender dynamics, is critical in converting the theoretical principles of gender equality into practical outcomes of empowerment and equity. The commitment of local governments to gender-responsive governance

⁴⁴ Francesca Pepe et al., *Sustainability Standard Setting as Local Government Matter: An Italian Experience*, in SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC MANAGEMENT 181-205 (Neil Boyd & Eric Martin eds., 2021)

⁴⁵ Filho et al., *supra* note 13.

not only catalyzes reforms at broader levels, but also contributes significantly to the momentum towards global gender equality. By integrating gender considerations that address specific community needs, they ensure that gender equality is a cross-cutting objective within all local government actions, enhancing both the impact and sustainability of these efforts.⁴⁶ Furthermore, this localized adaptation is pivotal for the successful actualization of SDG 5, emphasizing the necessity of tailoring global objectives to local realities.

It should be noted that the claim that local governments, influenced by gender dynamics, effectively translate gender equality from theory into practice warrants critical scrutiny. The assumption that local adaptations seamlessly contribute to significant national and international advancements invites investigation into the reality of their implementation and the potential obstacles these governments face. Important questions would emerge regarding how these gender-informed local approaches interact with wider policy ecosystems and whether they genuinely advance SDG 5.⁴⁷ While the impact on national and international policy reforms suggests an upward influence, practical realities may reveal a complex interplay of adoption, adaptation, and potential resistance. This critical perspective encourages an assessment of the real-world effectiveness of local policies, highlighting the potential gap between their intended outcomes and actual impacts, shaped by factors such as political will, resource constraints, and cultural norms. Therefore, although local adaptations are heralded as vital for achieving SDG 5, their practical contribution to gender equality necessitates rigorous evaluation to ascertain their significance and durability in addressing global gender challenges.

4. Vietnam's Path to SDG 5

A. Framework for Women's Participation into Local Governments in Vietnam

Since ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981, Vietnam has actively incorporated the Convention's principles, particularly those outlined in Article 7 regarding the elimination of discrimination against women in political and public life, into its

⁴⁶ Gotelind Alber et al., *Gender and Urban Climate Change Policy: Tackling Cross-Cutting Issues Towards Equitable, Sustainable Cities*, in UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE THROUGH GENDER RELATIONS 64-86 (Susan Buckingham & Virginie Masson eds., 2017).

⁴⁷ Masuku & Jili, *supra* note 30.

domestic legal framework. This integration is further detailed in CEDAW Committee Recommendation No. 23 and enshrined in Vietnam's Constitution, where Article 26 unequivocally affirms equal rights for men and women in all domains. This commitment is reinforced in the Gender Equality Law of 2006, specifically Section 11. Legislative intent to enhance women's political representation is evident in the 2015 Election Law, which sets a benchmark for at least 35% of the National Assembly candidates to be female, underscoring Vietnam's dedication to women's political empowerment. To further complement such constitutional rights and demonstrate the effort of enacting international commitment, the Communist Party of Vietnam's Resolution 26-NQ/TW of 2018 ambitiously targets a 25% representation of women in Party Committees at all levels by 2030, aligning party goals with broader national objectives. Moreover, the National Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2030 outlines six key targets, with a primary focus on elevating women's participation in leadership roles to narrow the gender gap in politics. This strategy ambitiously mandates that by 2025, 60% of state agencies and local governments will have women in leadership positions and this percentage expected to rise to 75% by 2030.⁴⁸

Vietnam's integrated legal and policy frameworks exemplify a strategic commitment to gender equality, particularly in promoting political empowerment, ensuring cohesive alignment with global gender equality benchmarks. These frameworks establish a robust political and legal foundation that supports gender equality in political and public life, positioning Vietnam as a progressive model in the region. This comprehensive approach has facilitated notable strides in closing the gender gap, as evidenced by the 2023 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report. Vietnam's gender gap index score of 0.711, on a scale from 0 to 1, ranks it 72nd out of 146 countries, marking a significant improvement from its 83rd position in 2022.⁴⁹ This advancement underscores the effectiveness of Vietnam's gender equality initiatives, demonstrating the positive impact of concerted efforts to enhance women's representation and participation in the political landscape. Despite these progressive outcomes, however, data (Table 1) below indicates that the pace of achieving these targets remains slow.

⁴⁸ The Government of Vietnam, National Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2030 [Chiến lược Quốc gia về bình đẳng giới giai đoạn 2021-2030] at 1-2 (2021), <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/Uploads/2021/3/7/29/NQ-28.pdf>.

⁴⁹ WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, GLOBAL GENDER GAP REPORT 2023, 11 (2023), https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf.

Table 1: Women's Representation by 2030 for Communist Party Committees at all levels

Criteria	Term 2010- 2015			Term 2015-2020			Term 2020-2025		
	Province	District	Commune	Province	District	Commune	Province	District	Commune
Percentage of the female member of the Executive Committee	11.3	15.15	17.98	14	18.2	21.2	16	20.1	25.6

Sources: Compiled by the author⁵⁰

The data presented elucidate a positive trend in the participation of women within the committees of the Communist Party of Vietnam, with each subsequent term witnessing an increase in female representation compared to its predecessor. Specifically, grassroots-level party committees for the 2020-25 term report nearly 25.6% female participation, marking an approximate 4% increase from the prior term. However, the growth at other local levels, including provinces and districts, has been more modest, registering a 2% increase. These figures highlight the ongoing challenge of achieving the ambitious benchmarks set by Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW in 2018, which targets 25% female representation in party committees. The statistics underscore the necessity for continuous, dedicated efforts to bridge the gap and meet the established gender representation targets, suggesting that substantial progress is still necessary to align fully with the party's gender equality objectives.

Table 2: The Proportion of Female Delegates in the National Assembly and the People's Councils at all levels

Criteria	Term 2011 - 16	Term 2016 - 21	Term 2021 - 26
Number of female in National Assembly/ %	122/24.4	132/26,8	151/30.26
% of female People's Council deputies at all levels			

⁵⁰ Vietnam Women's Union, Proportion of Female Officials in the Three Levels of Communist's Party Committees for the 2020-2025 Term [Tỷ lệ cán bộ nữ trong 3 cấp ủy Đảng nhiệm kỳ 2020 – 2025], <https://phunuvietnam.vn/ty-le-can-bo-nu-trong-3-cap-uy-dang-nhiem-ky-2020-2025-20201112154535608.htm>.

Provincial/city level	25.7	26.72	29.08
District/ town level	24.6	27.50	28.98
Commune/ward level	27.7	26.59	28.98

Sources: Compiled by the author⁵¹

The representation of women in the People's Councils across all levels for the 2021-26 term shows a commendable increase from the preceding term. The 2021 electoral cycle marked a significant milestone, with the proportion of female National Assembly deputies rising to 30.26%, surpassing the pivotal threshold considered essential for women to meaningfully influence decision-making processes. Despite this progress, the persistently low percentage of women in leadership roles, particularly at the local levels, highlights a significant challenge in translating national ambitions into effective local realities. The incremental increase in female leadership in villages - from 12% in 2019 to just under 24% in 2022 - although positive, underscores the slow progress and the substantial hurdles that remain in achieving gender-balanced governance. Furthermore, the representation of women in prominent roles, such as the Head/Deputy Head of the National Assembly's Committees and specialized officers, continues to be markedly lower than their male counterparts. This disparity underscores the considerable journey ahead for Vietnam in fulfilling the over 35% benchmark stipulated in the 2015 Election Law as well as the ambitious objectives outlined in the National Gender Equality Strategy 2021-30.

B. Impact on SDG 5 Commitment

The data emphasize a discernible gap in Vietnam's local implementation of SDG 5, revealing a disconnect between the national policy frameworks and their tangible impact on enhancing women's representation in local governance. Despite the progressive facade of Vietnam's legal frameworks aimed at promoting women's

⁵¹ These data are compiled from various official source and report. See Phan Anh, Ensuring Female Representation in National Assembly and People's Council Elections [Đề bảo đảm tỷ lệ nữ trong bầu cử đại biểu Quốc hội, hội đồng nhân dân], Vietnam Ministry of Home Affairs (2017), <https://moha.gov.vn/cong-tac-can-bo-phu-nu/tin-tuc/Pages/listbnv.aspx?CatelD=44&ItemID=2684>; PNVN, Increasing the Quantity and Quality of Female Elected Representatives for the 2021-2026 Term [Tăng số lượng và chất lượng nữ đại biểu dân cử khóa 2021-2026] (2021), <https://hoilhpn.org.vn/tin-chi-tiet/-/chi-tiet/tang-so-luong-va-chat-luong-nu-%C4%91ai-bieu-dan-cu-khoa-2021-2026-37564-6101.html>; UN Women, Country Gender Equality Profile – Vietnam 2021, at 6, https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/@ilo-hanoi/documents/publication/wcms_825083.pdf. See also Nguyễn Thị Thu Hòa, Women's Participation in State Leadership and Governance: Perspectives from Selected Countries Worldwide [Phụ nữ tham gia lãnh đạo, quản lý nhà nước – Góc nhìn từ một số quốc gia trên thế giới] (2019), <https://www.quanlynhanuoc.vn/2019/07/05/phu-nu-tham-gia-lanh-dao-quan-ly-nha-nuoc-goc-nhin-tu-mot-so-quoc-gia-tren-the-gioi>.

participation in local governance, a feminist critique exposes deep-seated inequalities embedded within these policies.⁵² These frameworks, while formally recognizing gender equality as an institutional right, paradoxically embody this principle through laws and policies with notably low thresholds for women's political representation (35% in the 2015 Election Law, 25% in the Communist Party of Vietnam's Resolution 26-NQ/TW, and 60-75% governmental agencies have the presence of women in key positions by 2030 in the National Gender Equality Strategy).⁵³ These policies prescribe minimum quotas that, while seeking to ensure women's presence, inadvertently cap their participation, suggesting a tokenistic approach rather than a commitment to substantive equality. Such modest targets not only compromise the strength of gender equality initiatives but also demonstrate a tepid pursuit of the of SDG 5. It points to a troubling divergence between the formal endorsement of gender equality and its substantive realization, obstructing the journey toward real gender balance in local governance and casting doubts on Vietnam's dedication to both national and international gender equality mandates.

Moreover, Vietnam's implementation of policies aimed at eradicating gender discrimination within its political and public sectors demonstrates a significant shortfall. Despite some advancements, the country has not yet succeeded in fully deploying or realizing effective measures to guarantee women's unequivocal rights to public office and their proactive participation across all layers of government. The initiative to enact necessary legal reforms to amend or abolish laws and practices that discriminate against women is still ongoing, with progress needed to enhance women's career advancement and to establish supportive infrastructures, such as childcare, that facilitate women's robust participation in public service. Furthermore, the persistent underrepresentation of women in local governance can be attributed to an intricate array of factors, including deep-seated societal norms, enduring gender biases, and the absence of supportive mechanisms for women to leadership positions. These impediments are often exacerbated by prevailing cultural inclinations favoring male leadership, thereby significantly limiting women's potential to impact a diverse range of public policy areas.

The aforementioned issues underline Vietnam's shortfall in fully realizing its commitments to gender equality from the perspective of local governance. Such gender disparity not only highlights the challenges inherent in localizing SDG 5, but also reflects wider systemic obstacles in achieving sustainable development goals, necessitating a unified strategy that harmonizes national goals with local

⁵² Ann Scales, *The Emergence of Feminist Jurisprudence: An Essay*, 95(7) *YALE L. J.* 1373-403 (1986).

⁵³ Vietnam Women's Union, *supra* note 50.

administrative actions. This situation urgently necessitates strengthened strategic interventions to enhance women's involvement, crucial for the comprehensive achievement of SDG 5 commitments. Enhancing female participation in local governance is essential for harnessing feminist insights and ensuring comprehensive policymaking, directly impacting the achievement of sustainable development goals.

Women's involvement brings unique perspectives and approaches that foster more inclusive, equitable, and effective governance, thereby advancing broader developmental objectives and promoting gender equality. This strategic integration not only enriches decision-making processes, but also fosters societal transformations towards more egalitarian norms, enhancing the overall sustainability and justice of governance systems. Therefore, a determined and robust strategy is required to fully actualize the interconnected goals of gender equality and sustainable development, ensuring their holistic realization across both national and local governance landscapes.

C. Recommendations

As indicated, a comprehensive policy strategy is vital. It positions gender equality as central to governance and development. This strategy should integrate a gender-focused perspective across all policy domains, aiming to dismantle systemic barriers to women's empowerment by addressing not just the symptoms but also the root causes, such as entrenched stereotypes and inequitable resource allocation. Keeping it in mind, the presented findings lead to strategic implications for enacting SDG 5 in Vietnam from a feminist perspective.

Firstly, Vietnamese local governments play a pivotal role in the implementation of state policies, directly influencing citizen welfare. They are urged to establish and commit to benchmarks that foster gender equity in employment and service provisions. This commitment not only extends beyond the mere implementation of fair employment practices, but also encompasses the integration of female experiences, voices, and aspirations to actively challenge entrenched norms and biases. Regular pay equity audits and gender-sensitive training are essential components in this process which aim to instill an organizational culture deeply rooted in gender equality values. Such initiatives ensure that public services are comprehensive and tailored to meet the varied needs of the populace, thereby harmonizing local administrative actions with the gender equality objectives encapsulated in SDG 5.⁵⁴

Secondly, addressing the multifaceted challenge of women's underrepresentation

⁵⁴ Martínez-Córdoba et al., *supra* note 42.

in leadership positions necessitates a proactive stance from Vietnamese local governments. The Vietnamese government are encouraged to establish explicit quotas or targets of women's politic participation, which are more equal in comparison with male, to ensure women's substantial presence in decision-making roles. Supplementing this directive with supportive structures, informed by feminist principles - such as mentoring programs and childcare services - is crucial for dismantling the systemic barriers impeding women's full engagement in governance. This strategy aligns with feminist calls for profound structural reforms, which tries to facilitate a transformative and impactful form of women's leadership, thereby propelling the gender equality mission forward in accordance with SDG 5.⁵⁵

Thirdly, the feminist viewpoint emphasizes the critical importance of securing women's access to land, economic resources, and legal rights, which are integral to their empowerment. Local authorities are tasked with refining and strengthening processes that enhance women's economic participation and protect their entitlements, pivotal to achieving substantial gender equality. This endeavor aligns with feminist strategies focused on eradicating economic inequalities; affirming women's rights; and contributing significantly to the comprehensive fulfillment of SDG 5.⁵⁶

Fourthly, the authentic reflection of SDG 5's principles within local governance mandates the systematic incorporation of gender impact assessments in all policymaking endeavors. This requires a thorough scrutiny of policies through a feminist perspective, placing gender considerations at the heart of policy development and execution. Engaging in such assessments facilitates the proactive detection and amendment of gender biases. It ensures that local governance is inclusive, just, and fully aligned with the ambitious objectives of gender equality and sustainable development.⁵⁷

These strategies are designed to empower local governments as central actors in promoting gender equality and enhancing Vietnam's governance framework to obtain both national and global gender equality objectives. This consolidated approach empowers women and girls, which is crucial for fully realizing SDG 5. It further promotes an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societal environment for Vietnam's commitment to transformative change. By integrating comprehensive, accountable, and evidence-based governance, Vietnam is set to embed gender equality as a foundational principle across all societal and governance dimensions. This will go beyond mere milestones to a deeply ingrained standard.

⁵⁵ Küfeoğlu, *supra* note 35.

⁵⁶ UN DESA, *supra* note 5.

⁵⁷ Chakraborty & Sengupta, *supra* note 15.

5. Conclusion

This study has accentuated the crucial role of local governments in advancing gender equality to make a fundamental avenue toward the fulfillment of SDG 5. The analysis underscores the significance of local governance in the practical implementation of gender equality measures. Despite their pivotal role, the author has identified an urgent need for profound reforms within Vietnam's policy structure and highlighted the necessity to amplify women's representation in local governance. Such enhancements are pivotal, for not merely meeting the targets of SDG 5, but also establishing standards in gender-responsive governance. She advocates for a strategic reshaping of the policy environment to empower women within the local governance and promises advancements in gender equity and broader sustainable development goals. The findings emphasize the intentional integration of gender inclusivity in local governance, essential for igniting transformative progress in Vietnam's sustainable and equitable development journey.

In sum, this article has outlined crucial domains for future scholarly exploration to augment the comprehension and effectiveness of gender equality through local governance. Subsequent studies should scrutinize the enduring impacts of gender-informed policies and evaluate their efficiency, encountered challenges, and resultant outcomes. Investigating the influence of local leaders, especially women in pivotal roles and their effect on gender-specific policies, emerges as a valuable research trajectory. Further, assessing the efficacy of public engagement mechanisms in embedding gender perspectives within local governance could yield insightful revelations regarding participatory policy formulation. Examining how intersectionality is integrated within local governance structures to gauge the compounded effects of various social identities on policy results remains imperative. Additionally, the exploration of digital governance solutions in bolstering gender equality initiatives is essential, particularly in understanding their utility for inclusive and fair local governance. These recommended avenues for future research are instrumental in crafting a detailed and holistic strategy; utilizing local governance as a vehicle for gender equality; and significantly aiding the collective global mission to actualize SDG 5.

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