

GENDER EQUALITY IN VIETNAM'S GARMENT INDUSTRY: CURRENT SITUATION, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the current state of gender inequality in Vietnam's garment industry, where women account for over 78% of the labor force but predominantly engage in simple, low-paid jobs with limited promotion opportunities. Drawing on empirical research and reliable data, the article identifies key challenges and proposes policy orientations to foster gender equality within garment enterprises, contributing to sustainable development and social equity.

Keywords: Gender equality; Female labor; Garment industry; Policy; Vietnam

1. Problem statement

1.1. Background

The garment industry is one of Vietnam's key export sectors, significantly contributing to GDP and creating millions of jobs, with women representing approximately 85% of the workforce in this sector (General Statistics Office, 2023). Despite their majority, female workers face numerous inequalities at work, particularly regarding wages, promotion opportunities, working conditions, and participation in managerial positions.

Gender equality is not only a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) but also a crucial driver for improving the quality of human resources and labor productivity within the industry. Guaranteeing gender equality in Vietnam's garment sector thus has both social significance and enhances the industry's competitiveness in global supply chains, where labor standards and corporate social responsibility are increasingly emphasized (Nguyen Thi Xiem, 2020).

This research aims to assess the current status of gender equality in Vietnam's garment industry. It highlights persistent challenges including organizational barriers, wage discrimination, limited promotion opportunities, and access to training. Beyond identifying these difficulties, the study proposes concrete policy directions tailored to improve the situation - creating a more favorable working environment for female workers, enhancing their skills, and promoting equal participation of women in managerial and technical roles. These contributions not only protect female labor rights but also improve the sustainable development quality and efficiency of Vietnam's garment industry overall.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Basis

Gender equality in the workforce means ensuring that men and women have equal rights and opportunities in accessing employment, working conditions, promotion opportunities, and participation in decision-making at work (Hang Van Nghia & Pham Van Anh, 2023). This involves eliminating gender-based barriers in recruitment, training, promotion, and ensuring a safe, non-discriminatory work environment (UN Women, 2024).

Gender division of labor theory posits that societies typically assign different roles and jobs to men and women based on gender stereotypes. In the garment industry, women are often confined to low-skilled tasks with limited career advancement, while men tend to occupy managerial or technical positions (ILO, 2025).

Global value chain theory explains that production and distribution occur on a global scale, with women concentrated in production stages that add low value (sewing, cutting), and men controlling higher value-added stages like design, management, and marketing. This unequal allocation leads to gender inequalities in income and promotion opportunities (Better Work Vietnam, 2023).

2.2 Overview of Studies in Vietnam

The garment sector employs about 2.5 million workers, with approximately 1.95 million female workers accounting for 78% of industry employment (Better Work Vietnam, 2023). Women mainly work at production stages requiring low to medium skills such as sewing, cutting, folding, and packaging. Meanwhile, technical and supervisory roles are predominantly male-dominated, resulting in clear gender imbalances in organizational structure and promotion (ILO, 2025).

Regarding wages and benefits, female workers generally earn 10-15% less than males in similar positions (Better Work Vietnam, 2023). The average monthly income of female garment workers is about 6.5 million VND compared to 8.7 million VND for males (General Statistics Office, 2023). This wage gap largely stems from women occupying lower-skilled jobs with fewer overtime opportunities, bonuses, and welfare benefits, combined with gender bias in performance evaluation, wage policies, and lack of transparency (Better Work Vietnam, 2023).

Female workers also frequently face workplace risks such as sexual harassment, work pressure, and unsafe conditions adversely affecting their physical and mental health (UN Women, 2024).

Promotion and training opportunities for women are limited. Few women hold managerial positions, resulting in poor representation in decision-making related to labor policies and work conditions (UN Women, 2024). Access to skills training is hindered by gender stereotypes and family responsibilities, restricting women from advancing in digital, managerial, or new technology skills—diminishing their competitiveness and career development (ILO, 2025).

Female garment workers face intense production pressures, long working hours (often exceeding legal limits with 47-60 overtime hours per month), and exposure to hazardous environments including chemical agents, dust, noise, heat, and inadequate lighting that raise the risk of occupational diseases such as respiratory, musculoskeletal, and eye conditions (Better Work Vietnam, 2023).

Support policies for pregnant and nursing women remain fragmented and insufficiently prioritized by employers, resulting in risks of resignation or early leaving (UN Women, 2024). Although labor laws guarantee maternity leave (6 months) and special breaks during menstruation or childcare, enforcement is inconsistent and gender discrimination continues to exist, though often covertly (Labor Code 2019; UN Women, 2024).

Overall, despite women being the majority in Vietnam's garment workforce, they continue to face substantial inequalities in wages, working conditions, promotion, and career opportunities.

3. Policy Recommendations for Promoting Gender Equality

Research indicates significant structural and societal barriers that maintain a notable gender gap in income, advancement, and workplace environment. Gender equality in the garment sector is not only a social justice issue but also an essential factor to enhance productivity, labor quality, and sustainable development.

3.1 Proposals

Develop Transparent Gender Equality Indices: Establish clear, transparent metrics to measure and monitor gender equality in enterprises, including female participation in training, digital skills, management positions,

gender wage gaps, and job satisfaction. The state can require garment enterprises to report regularly as part of corporate social responsibility monitoring (ILO, 2021).

Enhance Skills Training for Female Workers: Design specialized training programs aimed at upskilling women in digital competencies, automated equipment operation, and production management, through cooperation among government, enterprises, and international organizations (ILO, UN Women Vietnam, 2024).

Implement Monitoring and Penalties for Gender Discrimination: Create regulations and concrete measures to enforce anti-discrimination laws in recruitment, pay, and promotion, alongside incentives such as certifications for “Women-Friendly Enterprises” or tax benefits for companies meeting gender equality standards (Better Work Vietnam, 2023).

Create Women-Friendly Work Environments: Support policies for pregnant and nursing female workers, including on-site childcare, flexible working hours, and full maternity leave. Strengthen collective bargaining power and representation of female workers through trade unions to improve working conditions and rights protection (Nguyen & Tran, 2022).

3.2 Further Recommendations

For the Government: Improve the legal framework related to gender equality at workplaces, intensify supervision of labor law enforcement for women, and develop transparent monitoring systems. Integrate female labor support policies into the national garment industry development strategy.

For enterprises: Commit to promoting gender equality by enhancing working conditions, ensuring equal promotion opportunities, investing in training, and fostering corporate cultures that respect women’s rights.

For Researchers: Conduct in-depth, quantitative assessments at the enterprise level to provide practical evidence guiding policy and organizational reforms.

Achieving gender equality is both a social responsibility and a smart investment strategy amid globalization and digital transformation. Vietnam’s garment industry can only succeed sustainably by fully harnessing the potential of all workers—especially its irreplaceable female workforce.

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