

ADVANCING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN VIETNAM

The Asia Foundation supports the efforts of Vietnamese organizations to increase women's representation in governing bodies and to educate women about their legal rights, as they are stipulated in Vietnamese law. By working with committed local partners, the Foundation is able to employ sophisticated, culturally sensitive implementation methods and to contribute directly to building the capacity of organizations run by women, employing women, and dedicated to enhancing women's lives.

In 1980, Vietnam signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and Vietnam's official government policies and laws regarding women and women's rights are unusually progressive. Through its own *National Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam by the Year 2000*, Vietnam has prioritized protecting and ensuring broad understanding of women's legal rights across all social strata. However, there is a gap between actual laws and public understanding of the law. Moreover, while women currently make up a quarter of the representatives in the National Assembly—the country's highest legislative body—and 12 percent of the heads of national ministries, the proportion of women in leadership positions at lower levels of government is not as high.

To help Vietnam address these challenges, and to advance women's leadership and understanding of their rights under Vietnamese law, The Asia Foundation has partnered with the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) since 1994 and with the Center for Education Promotion and Empowerment for Women (CEPEW) since 1998.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FOUNDATION PROGRAMS

HISTORY OF THE FOUNDATION'S PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN IN VIETNAM

In 1994, The Asia Foundation invited a senior member of the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) to an Asia-Pacific regional workshop on women's leadership. The workshop brought together women from across the region to share their experiences, strategies, and lessons learned in advancing women's representation in public decisionmaking. The

official from the VWU recognized that increasing the number of women in official leadership positions is a key to pursuing the VWU's goals of gender equity and of promoting women's interests and rights. The Foundation responded to VWU's request for assistance to develop curricula and training of trainers courses to prepare women candidates running for office.

The Asia Foundation is a private, nonprofit non-governmental organization working to advance mutual interests in the United States and the Asia Pacific region. It is funded by contributions from corporations, foundations, individuals, and governmental organizations in the U.S. and Asia, and an annual appropriation from the U.S. Congress. Through its programs, the Foundation builds leadership, improves policies, and strengthens institutions to foster greater openness and shared prosperity in the Asia Pacific region.

Since then, the Foundation has supported the VWU to provide leadership training for women candidates standing for elected positions. One of the objectives is to help achieve the minimum standard set by the government—that 20 to 30 percent of all candidates at provincial, district and commune levels, from the local People's Councils all the way to the National Assembly, be women.

FOUNDATION PROGRAMS IN VIETNAM

- The Foundation supported a survey of women's legal awareness and understanding. Survey results were used to develop a training manual outlining provisions for women's rights and gender equality under Vietnamese law. The Foundation also supports the dissemination of legal information through the VWU's newspaper and through radio and television programs.

- With Foundation support, hundreds of women candidates have been trained in communication, presentation, and public speaking skills. Women's representation on People's Councils rose significantly in areas where courses were offered—from 12 percent in 1994 to 20 percent in 1999. Furthermore, the localities and provinces that are now led by women have consistently shown greater vigor in following through with national

policies focused on improving women's lives.

- In preparation for the 1999 People's Council elections, Foundation efforts focused on local areas where women's representation fell short of the national average. Relationships were established and measurable progress achieved to assist with the VWU's efforts to develop longer-term approaches to improving women's lives.

- Subsequent to elections, the Foundation supported training courses on negotiation, policy formulation, and public administration to enhance women's effective performance in office.

- The Foundation supported the Center for Education Promotion and Empowerment for Women (CEPEW) to create a concise, practical trainer's manual for equipping women with management and leadership skills. CEPEW has held courses based on the manual for approximately 150 women from local People's Councils and People's Committees, and local branches of the Women's Union, Youth Union, and Farmer's Association. The Foundation is supporting a cooperative effort between CEPEW and the Women's Union to maximize the new manual's reach.

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