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Editorial

One of the global trends over the past few decades has been a sharp increase in the number of women making up the workforce, more and more of whom are breaking ground in what were once male-dominated fields (financial services, engineering, IT) and wielding their power in the boardroom.

In a 2010 McKinsey survey, 72% of respondents said they believe there is a **direct connection between a company's gender diversity and its financial success**. Moreover, the study showed that “companies that had the highest levels of gender diversity also had higher returns on equity, operating results and growth in market valuation than the averages in their respective sectors.”

On other fronts, **the flattening of organizational structures that is happening in the business world at large is placing increasing importance on soft skills... which are typically associated with women**: “command & control” management is out of favour. The ability to influence, listen and empathize is definitely in.

Of course, women’s involvement in business is nothing new. They have been doing so for centuries, albeit often in a backstage role as the trusted advisors of powerful men.

It’s time for me to hand over to Phuong-Mai Nguyen for you to read what she has to say about women in business in her native Việt Nam.



Róisín Saunier, Associate Partner

Women in business – Việt Nam and her dragon ladies

by Phuong-Mai Nguyen, Senior Consultant

It was three months after Mr Nobu Akio had arrived in Việt Nam to take up his post as an executive manager in a Việt Nam-Japan joint venture. Things were not really going well and his initial enthusiasm was fading fast. Mrs Hoa Pham, the floor manager, thought Mr Nobu Akio was too demanding and discrete. One day, she sent Mr Akio an email suggesting that they sit down together and evaluate the progress they had made so far. In response to this, Mr Akio insisted on including the Vietnamese chief representative in the meeting.

Roots in matriarchy

Of all the possible mismatches between the two countries’ values, one prominent gap which shows up in this incident is how each party perceives the role of women in business as well as in social life. While Mrs Hoa Pham actively exercised her power, Mr Akio did not seem to see her as an equal partner and therefore insisted on the presence of a higher-ranking manager.

Rooted in ancient matriarchy, Vietnamese culture emphasizes the role of mothers and associates important, positive attributes with women to an extent that can strongly challenge the typical stereotype of a passive Asian woman. Việt Nam had her first ruling Queens in A.D. 40, a unique situation in male-dominated Asia and vivid proof of a traditionally matriarchal country. The queens in question were two dauntless young sisters (known locally as Hai Bà Trưng) from an elite family who forced the Chinese oppressors to flee back to China. When defeated in the final battle, they are said to have committed suicide. They became immortalized in song and story and today are still held up as exemplars of traditional Vietnamese values.

During the war against American involvement, Vietnamese women played a crucial role that is rarely to be seen. Not only did they form a remarkable part of the army, they also devoted tremendous emotional commitment. Many of them, upon the news that their son had died on the front, kept sending one son after another to replace those who had died. The title “The heroic Vietnamese mother” is to honor these women.

Imposed value from patriarchy

It is also true, however, that Vietnamese women have a lower social status than men. Despite the matriarchal tradition, Confucianist values from China during its periodic invasions have had a profound impact on how the Vietnamese perception of women’s role shifted from female dominance to a situation that is best described as a unique dual system of compromise

Việt Nam and her dragon ladies (continued)

At face value, men dominate, but in reality, women control. As is often said by mothers, *“Your dad may be the head of the family, but I am the neck!”*

Misguided by face value

Newly arrived expats who have not had sufficient time to understand local culture, easily come to the conclusion that their Vietnamese colleagues are not much different from other Asian female staff. They mostly appear to be shy, reserved, extremely concerned about family and may not be too enthusiastic about opportunities for promotion. Pleasant and unpleasant surprises often follow when the women aggressively push their agenda or frankly oppose the opinions of top bosses in a meeting. To a less obvious extent, many female employees actually run the core of a company’s business in subtle ways that are often underestimated by others. Want to get to the male chief negotiator? Learn to get on well with his seemingly silent shadow: The secretary.

Women’s role in the economy

Việt Nam is shaped like a narrow “S”. The Vietnamese would say their country looks like a carrying bamboo pole that holds loads of goods at each end and is carried on a woman’s shoulders on her way to the market. This metaphor illustrates three Vietnamese traits: hardworking, a trading mindset, and the active role of women.



As one of very few Asian countries—if not the only one—where women are traditionally allowed to own property, Vietnamese women are very active in doing business. Statistics show that 83% of women are employed compared to other Asian countries where that figure fluctuates at around 60-70%. The percentage of female in top positions is 23% in 2011, the second highest in Asia after Thailand, leaving Japan, Korea and China far behind with less than 10%. Women account for 40% of the wealthiest on the stock market.

Negative perception: Over-expectation

Over-expectation often comes from both the Vietnamese and foreigners, the former with emphasis on domestic tasks (Okay, you are the boss at work, but you are still a woman, don’t forget your family!), the latter with emphasis on business competency. Vietnamese females, especially those with a good education, live in a dilemma of wanting to fulfill both roles, which in a sense is technically impossible due to tremendous social pressure.

Mini bio: **Phuong-Mai Nguyen**

Phuong-Mai started her career as a journalist in Việt Nam and has lived, worked in and travelled to more than 60 countries. She obtained her PhD in intercultural communication from Utrecht University, The Netherlands and currently teaches Cross-culture negotiation and management at Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Her training activities include delivering company consultancy and authoring many training tools.



Cultural Tips

- 1 – Promote female middle management. This relatively neutral position promises the best benefit with competent women in functional positions thereby leaving top management to deal more with social confrontation.
- 2 – Promote females in a negotiation team. Vietnamese women are well-known for playing the role of an intermediary.
- 3 – Remember: women are the hidden engine.