

Impacts of International Trade on Female Labor: Insights from global studies and Implications for Vietnam

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As international trade expands, its effects on labor markets, particularly women, have been widely debated. This study explores the impact of international trade on female labor, drawing insights from global research to formulate implications for Vietnam. The paper reviews existing literature on the relationship between trade liberalization and gender dynamics, examining how global economic integration influences female employment, wages, and working conditions. The findings suggest that while international trade can create new opportunities for women, it also presents challenges, such as job displacement and increased income inequality. The study highlights the importance of gender-sensitive policies that promote equitable participation in the labor market. In the context of Vietnam, where trade plays a pivotal role in economic growth, this research provides policy recommendations to enhance women's economic empowerment and mitigate potential negative impacts. These include improving access to education and skills training, enforcing labor rights, and ensuring equal opportunities in high-growth sectors.

Keywords: International trade, female labor, gender equality, Vietnam, labor market, trade liberalization.

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1. Introduction

The Vietnamese economy have witnessed positive results in the female labor force due to the fast-growing economy and increasing export volume. There is an incremental growth in female labor force participation (female labor force participation rate in 2023 was 62.9%, up by 0.4 percentage points from the previous year). The employed female worker and the average monthly income of female worker are also increased through out the years.

However, gender inequality remains an unresolved social issue in Vietnam. Half of the Vietnamese population is women, and 65% of Vietnamese women either work as own-account workers or for family (GSO, 2021). Thus, the majority of women do not have stable employment and rights protected by laws and labour regulations. There remain problems of unqualified women workforce (19.3% of female workers receive formal training) and gender pay gap (13.7% for formal workers, with women earning 29.5% less overall, higher in rural areas (35.2%)).

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2. Global Studies

As international trade expands, its effects on labor markets, particularly women, have been widely debated. Several studies consider globalisation a driver for improvement in female employment in developing countries.

Villarreal and Yu (2007) argue that, in Mexico, foreign-invested firms and exporting firms employ a higher share of women than domestic firms and non-exporting firms at any level of occupation.

Juhn et al. (2013) point out that employers' preference for male employees mostly exists in Mexico's production jobs because of the heavy work nature. For non-production jobs in Mexico, like managerial positions, there is no gender preference. Reduced export tariff encourages new firms' entrance into the market. With new competition, firms upgrade their technology, which, in turn, lowers the demand for labour-intensive skills and lessens the gender discrimination.

Chen et al. (2013) argue that, under the competition pressure from globalisation, firms with gender bias are likely to incur higher costs. Their empirical analysis suggests that female employees' share in foreign firms and exporting firms is higher than that in non-exporting domestic firms in China.

Mohammad A. 2023, using firm-level survey data for 29,962 manufacturing firms in 141 developing and emerging countries, concluded that in moving from a firm that does not export to one that does all its sales abroad is associated with a 6.6 percentage point increase in the share of female workers.

This positive relationship is much stronger when competition in the domestic markets is low, social attitudes and mobility laws are more favorable to women's work outside the home, and the law-and-order situation is better.

The complex and multi-faced relationship between trade and women could be explained through several channels as follows:

First, greater competition in international markets raises the employer's cost of discriminating against female workers, thereby increasing their employment (Becker (1957)). Reallocation of resources from non-exporting to exporting firms can affect female employment depending on how intensively the two types of firms employ female workers. Access to foreign technology and greater mechanization linked to trade can shift job requirements from less “brawn” to more “brains,” favoring females more than males. Black and Brainerd (2004) find that US industries which were subject to more competition through trade liberalization experienced greater reductions in the gender wage gap. A recent paper by Ederington et al. (2010) finds similar results for employment in Colombia, where plants operating in industries subject to greater tariff reductions increased the hiring of female blue-collar workers relative to male blue-collar workers.

Second, some studies find that females enjoy a comparative advantage in cognitive versus physical skills (Do et al., 2011; Galor & Weil, 1996; Juhn et al., 2014). The study by Juhn et al. (2014) indicates that by lowering the cost of entering foreign markets, trade liberalization causes some firms to start exporting and to adopt modern technologies. The use of modern technology, such as computers, reduces the need for routine physical tasks, improving females' labor market outcomes. One caveat here is that technological upgrading may lead to higher capital and skill intensity in production, adversely affecting female employment (see, for example, Berik, 2000, and Joecks, 1995).

Third, since developing countries are abundant in semi-skilled and unskilled labor relative to skilled labor, demand for semi-skilled and unskilled labor should increase with exporting activity (Heckscher–Ohlin model). In as much as females gravitate toward low-skilled jobs and

males cluster toward high-skilled jobs, trade expands job opportunities for females (see Joekes, 1995; Ozler, 2000; United Nations, 2011; Wood, 1991).

Fourth, females may constitute a cheaper source of labor than males, which is particularly attractive for exporters (see Black & Brainerd, 2004; Fussell, 2000; Ozler, 2000; Standing, 1989). One caveat here is that exporting firms may demand more flexible workers. The burden of care, mobility restrictions, working hour restrictions, and other problems that females face when working outside the home, may reduce their flexibility. As a result, females may be less favorably affected by trade (Bøler et al., 2018).

The task trade theory of Grossman and Rossi-Hansberg (2012) explains the pattern of specialisation of tasks in the production process. Unlike standard trade models that emphasise the role of internal economies of scale, the task trade theory focuses on external economies of scale. A firm is more efficient in performing a task in a location given the growth in the scale of performance of that task by other firms in that same location. Local knowledge and specialised expertise are the sources of the spillover effects on the firm's advantage. External economies of scale provide an incentive for firms to be selective in performing a particular set of tasks and offshoring other tasks.

The theory is relevant in explaining the movement of routine and manual tasks of global value chains from developed countries to developing countries. While developed countries perform non-routine and cognitive tasks, the majority of routine and manual tasks are undertaken by developing countries. In the case of Vietnam, those tasks are mostly assembly and require the dexterity or ‘nimble fingers’ of the workers. It is acknowledged that women have an advantage over men in dexterity. In some sectors like textiles, apparels, or electronics, the share of female employment outweighs that of male employment.

Frederick S. (2022) conducted a research in seven countries where the apparel industry plays an important role in its export basket – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Egypt, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Vietnam. His key finding is that countries should take advantage of the apparel industry as a launching platform to overcome the fixed costs of introducing more women into the labor market. However, for this approach to work, there needs to be complementary policies that tackle the barriers that hinder women in their pursuit of long-term participation in the labor force and better-paid occupations.

In contrast, studies showing no effect, a negative effect, or contradictory effects include Wamboye and Seguinto (2015), Cooray et al. (2012), Gray et al. (2006), Meyer (2006), and Joekes (1995).

3. Current situation in Viet Nam

In 2023, Vietnam's labor market showed positive trends, with rising employment rates and incomes, alongside reduced unemployment and underemployment. However, challenges remain, particularly in informal employment and labor quality. Examining women's employment reveals both progress and ongoing issues that need addressing.

3.1. *Favorable characteristics in Vietnamese women labor development*

- **Incremental growth in female labor force participation**

Although the female labor force participation rate is lower than that of males, it is growing at a faster pace, promising a positive trend in the future. The workforce aged 15 and above reached 52.4 million people in 2023, increased by 666.5 thousand individuals compared to the previous year (GSO of Viet Nam, 2024). 2023 also marked a resurgence in the workforce after a decline due to the impact of Covid-19.

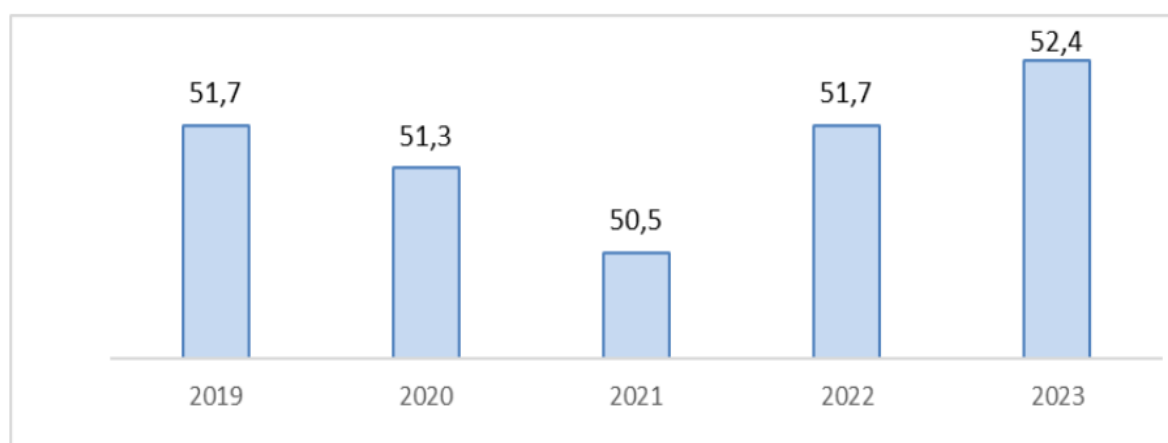


Figure 3.1. Female labor force participation in Vietnam

Source: GSO, 2024

The female labor force accounted for 46.7% of the total, with 24.5 million people, while the male labor force reached 27.9 million people, accounting for 53.3%.

The labor force participation rate in 2023 was 68.9%, an increase of 0.3 percentage points compared to 2022. The male labor force participation rate was **75.2%**, up by **0.2** percentage points from the same period last year, whereas the female labor force participation rate was **62.9%**, up by **0.4** percentage points from the previous year (GSO of Viet Nam, 2024)

- **Increase in employed female workers**

In 2023, Vietnam's employed labor force reached 51.3 million, an increase of 683,000 (1.35%) from 2022. Female employment rose by 1.3%, while male employment increased by 1.4%, totaling 27.3 million men. Urban employment reached 19 million (up 1.8%), and rural employment was 32.3 million (up 1.1%). By sector, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries had 13.8 million workers (down 0.9%), industrial and construction employed 17.2 million (up 1.5%), and the service sector grew to 20.3 million (up 2.8%), the highest among the sectors.

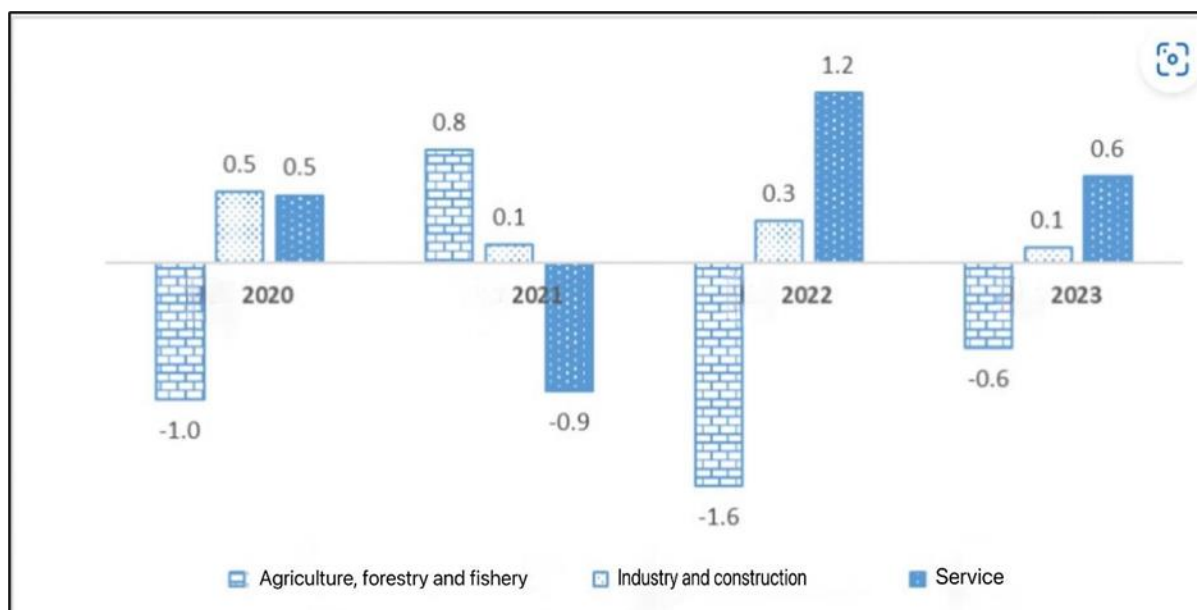


Figure 2.2. Change in the proportion of employed labor force in various economic sectors, during the 2020-2023 period (Percentage points)

Source: GSO, 2024

- **Rise in the percentage of educated female workforce with degrees and certifications**

By Q4 2023, the proportion of trained labor with degrees and certificates in Vietnam increased from 20.6% in 2016 to 27.6%, with 14.1 million trained laborers making up 27.0% of the workforce. Women's educational credentials improved, with 19.3% of female workers obtaining formal qualifications in 2016, slightly below the national average, and 12.6% holding associate degrees or higher, exceeding the average for all workers. Overall, there is a positive trend in skilled labor and female employment quality despite ongoing challenges in training.

- **Increase in the average monthly income of female worker in labor force**

In 2023, the average monthly income of workers in Vietnam was 7.1 million VND, a 6.9% increase from 2022, with female workers earning an average of 6 million VND (1:1,36 ratio compared to males at 8.1 million VND). Notable income growth by sector included: mining (10.3 million VND, +11.2%), accommodation and food services (6.8 million VND, +8.6%), transportation and warehousing (9.8 million VND, +8.3%), wholesale and retail trade (8.3 million VND, +7.8%), and agriculture, forestry, and fisheries (4.1 million VND, +6.6%).

- **Enhancement in the employment prospects and reduction of underemployment among women**

The labor and employment report for Q4 and all of 2023 shows that coordinated measures for economic recovery and development, along with improvements to the business environment and national competitiveness, have significantly reduced unemployment among workers (Phuc

Minh, 2024). Looking back to 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic, women consistently had low unemployment rates, with minimal gender disparities. While women's unemployment rates were higher in some years and lower in others compared to men's, the differences were not significant (International Labor Organization, 2021).

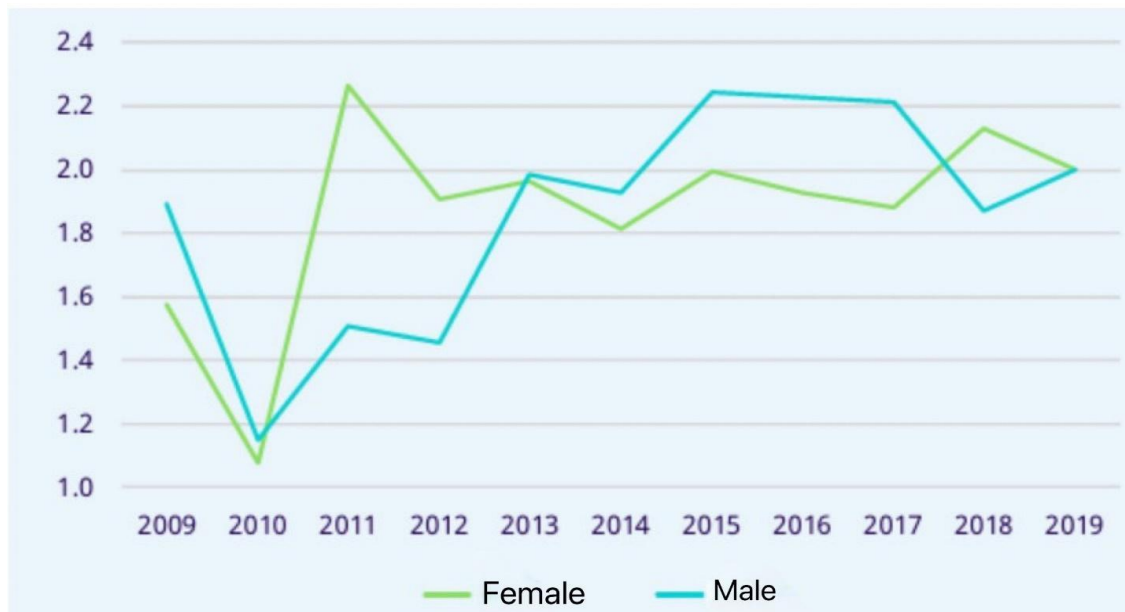


Figure 3.3. Unemployment rate in Vietnam from 2009 to 2019

Source: ITO, 2021

In 2023, the nation's unemployment decreased to approximately 1.07 million working-age individuals, resulting in an unemployment rate of 2.28%, a drop of 0.06 percentage points from the previous year. This improvement highlights the success of Government Resolution No. 01/NQ-CP, which targeted socio-economic development, budget management, and enhancing the business environment and national competitiveness (GSO of Viet Nam, 2024).

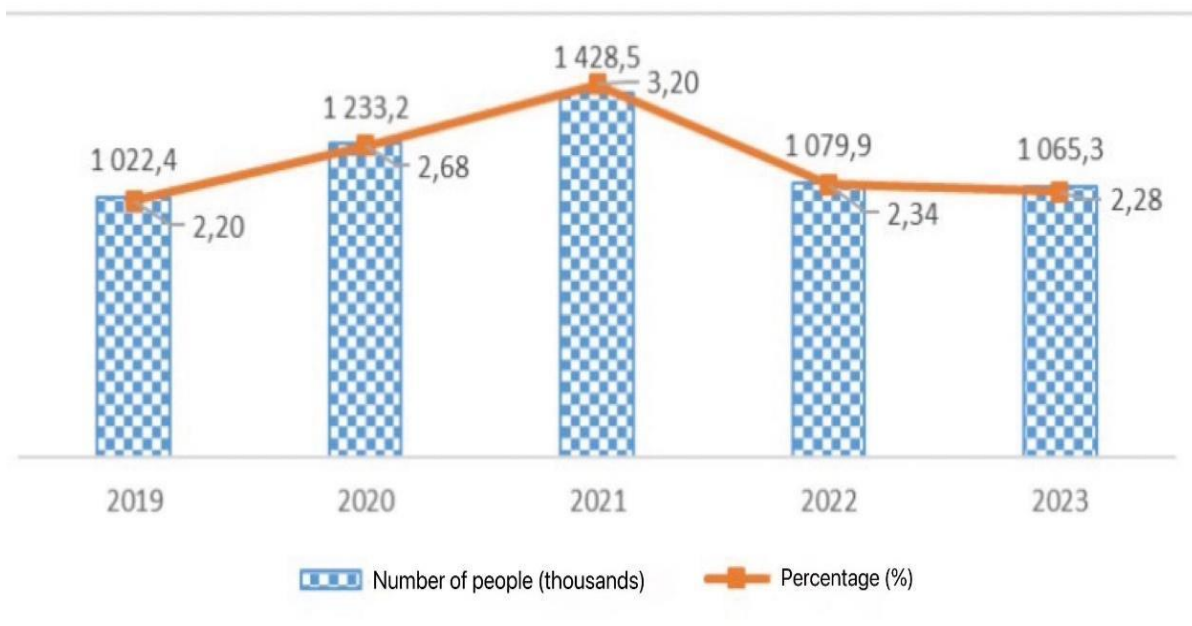


Figure 3.4. The number of unemployed individuals and the unemployment rate among the working-age population, from 2019 to 2022

Source: GSO, 2024

In 2023, the number of underemployed individuals in the working-age population fell to 918.5 thousand, a decrease of 79.8 thousand from the previous year. The underemployment rate was recorded at 2.01%, down by 0.20 percentage points. This trend indicates positive economic recovery and social developments following effective COVID-19 management, allowing the labor market to regain pre-pandemic momentum and improve employment prospects for workers (GSO of Viet Nam, 2024).

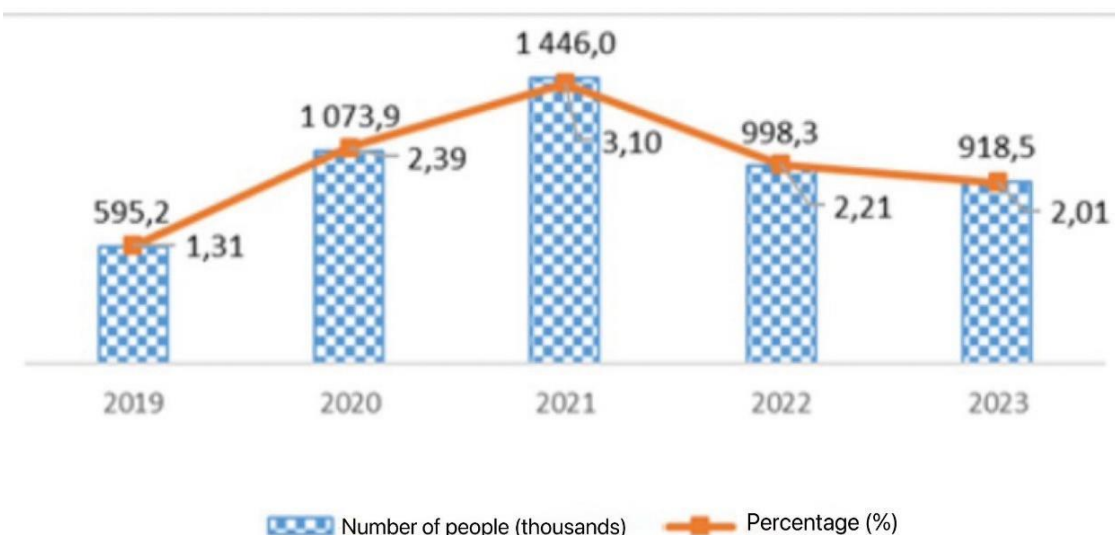


Figure 3.5. The number of underemployed individuals and the underemployment rate among the working-age population, spanning from 2019 to 2023

Source: GSO, 2024

3.2. *Challenges in Vietnamese women labor development*

- **Unqualified women workforce**

The labor supply in Vietnam lacks quality, with about 38 million untrained workers. Female workers face health challenges, with 12.4% needing treatment for occupational diseases. Women also have lower literacy and education levels compared to men. Only 19.3% of female workers receive formal training, and 62.4% are unpaid family workers. Many work in low-paying agricultural jobs with limited advancement opportunities.

- **Female migrant worker becoming a new problem**

Migrant workers are individuals moving to another country for work. In Vietnam, economic shifts from agriculture to industry and services have increased labor migration, especially among women due to more job opportunities. Female migrants often work in hired labor, trading, or simple jobs, with 83.7% untrained and earning low wages (nearly 3.1 million VND/month). They face challenges such as low income, lack of social security, discrimination, and exploitation, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- **Gender pay gap**

The gender pay gap in Vietnam is **13.7%** for formal workers, with women earning **29.5%** less overall, higher in rural areas (35.2%). Despite similar working hours and education levels, women are concentrated in lower-paid sectors and part-time jobs, reflecting occupational segregation and structural discrimination. Social norms and unpaid care responsibilities further limit women's career opportunities, leading to reduced work hours and lower lifetime earnings. Ethnic minority women face a 17% income gap compared to men.

3.3. *Current situation of trade openness in Viet Nam*

- **Sustained export growth and domestic enterprises' resilience showcase the dynamic participation in global trade**

Vietnam has had high export growth for over 30 years, averaging 17.96% annually from 1992 to 2022. It rose from 50th in global exports in 2007 to 27th by 2017. Despite challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam maintained positive growth. In 2023, export value reached 355.5 billion USD (down 4.4%), and import value was 327.5 billion USD (down 8.9%). Domestic enterprises performed better, with a lower export decline rate (5.7%) compared to foreign firms (9.1%), showing a positive trend in the domestic sector's growth.

- **Digital technology encourages more opportunities**

Vietnam's digital economy is projected to reach \$57 billion by 2025, growing at 29% annually. Many businesses are adopting digital solutions in various areas, enhancing efficiency. Digital transformation has also boosted the import-export sector, contributing to trade surpluses. The

Vietnam-EU Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) aligns with digital advancements, helping Vietnamese businesses access the EU market more effectively.

- **Vietnamese enterprises actively expand the market**

From 2011-2018, Vietnam expanded to over 200 markets, with high export growth in the US, EU, and Asia, especially China and Korea. By 2021, Vietnam signed 15 FTAs, including CPTPP, EVFTA, and RCEP, boosting integration and global value chain participation. In 2020, import-export turnover surpassed \$545 billion, and in early 2021, 5 export items exceeded \$10 billion. With FTAs, digital adoption, and proactive enterprises, Vietnam is set to further grow its export markets.

- **Viet Nam in comparison and relation with ASEAN countries**

Vietnam's trade with ASEAN grew rapidly, from \$3.5 billion in 1995 to \$57.5 billion in 2019. Despite COVID-19, 2020 trade turnover reached \$53.6 billion. Key exports shifted from crude oil and rice to industrial products like steel and electronics. In 2022, Vietnam's total trade turnover hit \$732.5 billion, ranking second in ASEAN-6 for exports: Singapore led, followed by Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

3.4. Assessment of Gender Inclusivity in Vietnam's Trade Policies

Vietnam's trade policies prioritize gender inclusivity, aiming to boost women's participation in economic leadership through the National Strategy on Gender Equality (2021-2030). While progress has been made, challenges like societal norms, the gender wage gap, and limited leadership access persist. Policy reforms and trade agreements are helping address these barriers.

- **The Legal Framework: National Strategy on Gender Equality**

Vietnam's National Strategy on Gender Equality (2021-2030) aims to increase women in business leadership roles to 30% by 2030, reduce the gender wage gap, and enhance female participation in the economy. Key initiatives focus on providing training and financial resources for women entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas, through support programs and microfinance for small businesses in agriculture and handicrafts.

- **Vietnam's Trade Policies and Gender Inclusivity**

Vietnam has advanced gender equality in its trade policies by promoting female participation in key sectors like agriculture and textiles. International trade agreements, such as the CPTPP and EVFTA, include provisions for gender equality, supporting women-owned businesses in accessing global markets, benefiting from tariff reductions, and ensuring equal pay and anti-discrimination measures.

- **Women in Entrepreneurship and SMEs**

Women own 33% of businesses in Vietnam, playing a key role in the economy. The government supports female entrepreneurs with loans, training, and trade access, especially in rural areas through microfinance. However, challenges like limited access to finance remain, prompting policies for equal opportunities.

- **Women's Role in Agriculture and Informal Trade**

Vietnamese women make up about 70% of the agricultural workforce, vital for food security and exports. They also dominate informal trade but often lack social protections. The government is integrating them into formal sectors through vocational training and trade union access, aided by programs for sustainable poverty reduction.

- **Gender Mainstreaming in Vietnam's Trade Agreements**

Vietnam's trade policies prioritize gender equality through agreements like the CPTPP and EVFTA, promoting women's roles in technology and electronics. The National Gender Equality Plan integrates gender considerations into trade negotiations to address the wage gap and enhance women's access to opportunities in emerging sectors.

- **Challenges to Women's Full Economic Participation**

Despite progress, challenges to gender equality in Vietnam's trade sector persist, including societal norms, a gender wage gap, and underrepresentation in leadership. Limited access to childcare and discrimination hinder women's advancement. Continued efforts are needed to promote women's participation, especially in emerging industries, for a more inclusive economy.

3.5. Assessment of Gender Inclusivity in Vietnam's Trade Policies

Strengths are

- ***Progressive Legal Framework:*** Vietnam's National Strategy on Gender Equality (2021-2030) aims to boost women's leadership and address the gender wage gap, with trade policies in agreements like the EVFTA and CPTPP including provisions for equal pay and anti-discrimination.

- ***High Participation of Women in SMEs:*** Women represent 33% of SME owners in Vietnam, aided by government support through microloans and training, boosting their roles in textiles, agriculture, and electronics.

- ***Commitment to International Standards:*** Vietnam supports gender equality by ratifying CEDAW and engaging in gender-inclusive trade agreements, aligning its trade policies with global standards.

Weaknesses are:

- ***Persistent Gender Wage Gap:*** Vietnam's gender wage gap persists, especially in rural areas, with women earning less than men in similar roles, primarily in lower-paying sectors like agriculture.

- ***Limited Representation in Leadership:*** Women in Vietnam are underrepresented in leadership roles, limiting gender inclusivity in trade policies.

- ***Challenges in the Informal Sector:*** Many Vietnamese women in the informal economy lack social protections, and despite government efforts to formalize these sectors, progress remains slow.

- ***Societal Barriers and Gender Stereotypes:*** Cultural norms assigning women household responsibilities limit their workforce participation and entrepreneurial activities, hindering their access to economic opportunities.

4. Implications for Vietnam

Duflo E. (2012) argues that Women's empowerment and economic development are closely related: in one direction, development alone can play a major role in driving down inequality between men and women; in the other direction, empowering women may benefit development.

She concluded that the inter-relationships are probably too weak to be self-sustaining, and that continuous policy commitment to equality for its own sake may be needed to bring about equality between men and women.

Based on the reviews from other , we proposed some implications for the improvements of the positive impact of international trade on women employment in Vietnam in the future.

- Complementary policies that tackle the barriers that hinder women in their pursuit of long-term participation in the labor force and better-paid occupations: healthcare, childcare, transportation...
- More education and training to upgrade women skills, including the reskilling programs, benefit women in their long-term career outlook in the coming decades.
- Women Leadership role model programs
- Supporting programs for women-owner SMEs, MSMEs
- Improve Data Collection

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