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**HOW DOES CULTURE IMPACT ON WOMEN'S  
LEADERSHIP IN HIGHER EDUCATION?  
A CASE STUDY IN VIETNAM.**

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Whilst the subject of women and educational leadership is well documented internationally, research in this field is rare in Vietnam. This scarcity consolidates the commonly held belief that equity has been achieved in this country which masks the persistence of gender discrimination and social injustice. Drawing on the experiences of six women leaders, this study explored how culture shaped the way women led as well as their beliefs and perceptions about leadership in higher education in Vietnam. This qualitative research was conducted within a phenomenological theoretical framework which is concerned with people's lived experience. Five out of six women leaders were Heads of Departments or Divisions at a technical university. They were personally interviewed in depth and the data gathered was analyzed using a thematic approach.

The findings indicated that both the indigenous and organisational culture substantially influenced the female participants' exercising of leadership and consequently contributed to the poor representation of women in senior positions. The women encountered more challenges in filling their roles when they were younger. Age appeared to be a very important factor in the practice of leadership in Vietnam. The women in this study were overwhelmed with huge workloads and domestic duties. The merit awards they strove for assigned them more responsibilities and made it harder for them to balance their work and other areas of life. In spite of these difficulties, the women could be proud of their leadership because of the democratic and transformational leadership styles they embraced. Traditional gender roles and socio-cultural norms together with the selection process and stereotypical tasks lowered the women's self-confidence and career aspirations. This study indicates that to promote women's progress and their representation in leadership positions, cultural change is necessary. This process will require the efforts and cooperation of many authorities, organisations and policy makers.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Women and educational leadership study: What inspired me?**

I was born and grew up in Nghe An, a province in the middle of Vietnam and the proud homeland of President Ho Chi Minh. My parents were workers and they retired a long time ago. I am the oldest daughter. My brother is a journalist and my sister is a librarian. I have been working as a foreign language teacher for 11 years at a technical university in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. My husband works in the army and my son is in the third grade.

Before getting married I did not pay attention to women and gender equality. My parents both retired early because their low salary could not support our family. They became shoe retailers at a big market. My mother did most of the transactions as my father was not good at this job. Therefore, he did all the housework and the cooking for our family. Since my mother had to make money and my father did what was supposed to be done by a woman, he was not regarded as the head of the household and was looked down upon. In Vietnamese traditional culture, men are responsible for raising the family and women should follow and support their husbands. A woman is considered lucky and happy if she is married to a man who is successful and can financially support the family. I could not avoid being affected by this perception but I have been trying to lead an independent life. As a female class monitor for two years at school and four years at university I was in leadership roles. Just before my graduation, I and a male student in our faculty were nominated to remain in the university as a teacher. However, I was not selected. One female vice-dean of faculty explained to me that they prioritized males. That was my first experience of sex discrimination but I just took it for granted.

After I got married and gave birth to my first child, I started to think about women's status. As well as childbearing, women have to go to work, care for the family and do all the housework. Why can a husband play sports, go for a drink after work and get home very late at night but a wife cannot? Public media has reported many problems concerning women such as domestic violence, women trafficking and unequal employment. Many women have suffered from their



husbands' brutality for many years without asking for help from local authorities because they want to maintain family harmony. Many Vietnamese girls have been trafficked to China. They have to marry Chinese men and become slaves in their own house or they are forced to be prostitutes. Other girls want to have a better life and marry foreign men, such as Korean or Taiwanese, through matchmakers. However, most of them must suffer unhappy endings. I realized that women are disadvantaged and gender inequality is persistent.

I have continuously built on my knowledge and skills to prove that a woman can do what a man can. I am fortunate in being supported by my husband, who has always encouraged me to do what I want to. However, when I gained a scholarship to study in New Zealand without my family, I had to make a very difficult decision. Some people told me that a woman did not need too much education. Others asked me if my husband allowed me to go. I had to fight against myself and other obstacles, and won. My family circumstances, my experience of sex discrimination, my current job at a technical university where males are predominant, and my empathy with other women initiated and inspired me to carry out this research. I strongly believe that Vietnamese women are capable but that socio-cultural constraints and barriers inhibit their progress. This study will help make these unseen forces explicit and explain some ways to break them down and thus widen the path for women's advancement.

The next section briefly overviews the situation of women and leadership in Vietnam.

## **Introduction**

Women, who make up half of society, suffer from discrimination and inequality in all societies, especially in the developing world. They are disadvantaged, marginalised and invisible in many aspects of life; and their poor representation in leadership positions is one form of such discrimination. The gap in gender equality in Vietnam has been substantively reduced thanks to the great attention paid to it by the government. Women's participation in decision-making positions at all levels and sectors is encouraged and promoted by specific strategies and quotas, especially in politics. Nonetheless, men still dominate in leadership positions, including in the education sector, despite female teachers outnumbering

male teachers. Among the causes, Vietnamese culture is a significant contributor to the persistence of gender discrimination (Tran, 2001; United Nations, 2007). The vestiges of feudal ideology and Confucianism still impinge on a considerable proportion of the population. Prevailing prejudice doubts women's competence and female leaders are judged unfairly.

Women all over the world are fighting for their rights and trying to have their capabilities recognised. They are networking and uniting to empower themselves. In this respect, research on women also contributes to the elimination of discrimination against women. However, there is little documentation of Vietnamese women in educational leadership and the reason for this lack of information is not clear. My awareness of the necessity to raise women educational leaders' voices has encouraged me to carry out this research. Focusing on the leadership experiences of female leaders in higher education, this study will shed some light on their lives and work. I will also uncover the impact of culture, the "unseen forces" (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998), on shaping the women's beliefs and perceptions about leadership and their behaviours.

This chapter begins with a brief account of Vietnam and the current situation with regard to women's leadership, particularly in education. The section that follows describes the university where this research was conducted. Next, the rationale and the significance of the study are discussed.

### **The context of the study**

Vietnam is a small (in land area) developing country in South-East Asia with a huge population of 86 million, of which women account for 50.48% (Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2009). Vietnamese culture is diverse, with 54 ethnic minorities. For a thousand years, the country was dominated by Chinese feudalism which as a result has profoundly influenced the indigenous culture.

Nowadays, Vietnam is a socialist republic led by the Communist Party. The National Assembly, the most powerful organ of the state, "is the main body in the exercise of democracy" (The Communist Party of Vietnam, 1997, as cited in Tran, 2001, p. 5). Its members are people's representatives who elect the President and the Prime Minister. The National Assembly functions as a legislative organ,

establishing laws and supervising the implementation of the laws it passes. It makes decisions on important issues related to national policies and people's livelihood, mainly in planning and budget (*ibid*, p. 5). The Government is led by the Prime Minister who recommends ministers for the National Assembly's approval.

The education sector in Vietnam is controlled by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which supervises the Departments of Education and Training (DOET) in the provinces and cities. College and university rectors are appointed by the Minister of MOET whereas school principals are approved by the managers of DOET. The rectors and principals are responsible for recruiting and appointing personnel for their own institutions or schools. The education system is divided into three stages, consisting of five years of primary education, four years of secondary schooling and three years of high school completed by a national exam. Only students who pass this exam are eligible for higher education entrance exams.

Vietnam has recently achieved remarkable progress in gender equality and women's advancement. These are partially illustrated in the ratio of female to male students in school and the proportion of women in leadership, especially in politics. In the school year 2003-2004 the percentage of female students at mixed secondary schools was approximately equal to that of males at 45.2% and 45.7% respectively (Tran, 2005). This ratio has been constantly increasing in favour of girls. The disparity in the relative number of boys and girls going to high school has been reduced. The statistics also show that fewer girls than boys quit school at all levels (Tran, 2005).

Vietnam first elected a woman to parliament in 1976 (Tran, 2001). At 33.1% Vietnam ranks 1<sup>st</sup> in Asia, 2<sup>nd</sup> in Asia-Pacific (after New Zealand) and 18<sup>th</sup> in the world for the representation of women in the National Assembly (Nguyen, 2007). In addition, 20% of women are entrepreneurs and of these, 25% own a private enterprise (Nguyen, 2007). In the education and training sector, the proportion of female principals in preschools is 100%, 34.31% in primary schools, 21.08% in secondary schools, and 7.92% at the tertiary level (United Nations, 2006). However, although these figures reflect improvement in the ratio of women in

educational leadership, with female staff at 74.86% in the education sector (Hong Hanh, 2010) they are still under-represented in positions of leadership.

The Vietnamese university<sup>1</sup> where this study was conducted is a technical institution with campuses in both Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, and in Hochiminh city. These are the two biggest cities in North and South Vietnam respectively. The staff number was 1030, of which 36% were women. This percentage is proportionate to the median 35% of university staff throughout the country (Vietnam Embassy, 2001). Many female academics had good educational backgrounds. Three were associate professors; thirteen held doctoral degrees and 115 had master's degrees (Vu, personal communication, 15 May, 2010). However, women were under-represented in both academic and administrative leadership positions, and made up less than 5% of all the staff (Vu, personal communication, 15 May, 2010). The highest position that a woman occupied was Faculty Vice Dean. Most of the female leaders were heads of departments and divisions. All five members of the Rector Board were men. The situation was the same in the South where all four members of the Director Board were male. Examples of the specialised subjects taught at this university are hydrology, hydraulic structures, construction materials. In Vietnam, technical institutions are traditionally considered to be male preserves.

### **Statement of the study**

The number of Vietnamese women assuming leadership positions in many sectors indicates that they do not lack the necessary skills and qualities. Neither are they hampered by government policy because the right of women to participate in leadership and decision-making positions is prescribed in official documents (Tran, 2001). The Vietnamese government has endorsed a number of legal documents aimed at eliminating discrimination against women. One such document is the *Law on Gender Equality* which was put into effect in July, 2007 (United Nations, 2007). In 2003, the government approved the *National Plan of Action on Education for All*, which aims at achieving gender equity in education by 2015 (Do, n. d.). The *National Strategy for the Advancement of Women in*

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<sup>1</sup> No name is given in order to protect the identity of the university.

*Vietnam by 2010* was adopted in 2002 (Vietnamese Government, 2002). The overall goal of the Strategy is to:

Improve women's quality of material and spiritual life, as well as establishing the conditions necessary for women to enjoy their fundamental rights, and fully and equally participate in and benefit from all aspects of politics, economy, culture and social areas. (Vietnamese Government, 2002, p. 1)

One of the specific objectives of the Strategy is the government's commitment to increase the number of women in leadership positions at all levels and in all sectors. Specifically, indicator five states that "all agencies providing educational, medical, cultural and social services and enterprises with women staff members accounting for at least 30 per cent will have women leaders by 2005" (Vietnamese Government, 2002, p. 3). In addition, the Vietnam Women's Union and the National Committee for the Advancement of Women (NCFAW) are two specialised institutions which represent women's rights and interests in all strata. They have extended their network throughout the country for implementing various programs to support women's advancement (Schuler et al., 2006). It appears, at least in theory, that Vietnamese women have reached the point where they have the same opportunity to reach the top echelons of the administration as men.

Not only are gender and culture intertwined (Strachan, Akao, Kilavanwa & Warsal, 2010); they are said to be influential factors in excluding women from leadership positions (Shah, 2009). In their *Concluding Comments on the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Vietnam*, the United Nations (2007) expressed "its concern about the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes, including the preference for male offspring, regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men within the family and society at large" (p. 3). Gender prejudice still exists in Vietnam. Lack of trust in and unfair evaluation of women's ability are prevalent. Appointment criteria for women are stricter than for men, even in selecting women for leadership training and mentoring courses (Nghe An Domestic Affairs, 2010). Women themselves hold to gender stereotypes, making them feel inferior and, as a result, restricting

their participation in social activities (Nguyen, 2007). Obviously, the ideological barriers characterising the culture have particular impact on the gender situation in Vietnam and limit women in accessing and fulfilling their leadership roles. Oplatka and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2006, as cited in Shah, 2009) point out, moreover, that:

Any discussion of women in educational leadership or unique leadership styles of women that ignores important factors such as cultural differences, economic and social-political divisions...would not only be unrealistic but may present a distorted picture. (p. 130)

In Vietnam's particular situation with regard to women's leadership, it is necessary to take culture into consideration. Specifically, this research will explore how culture shapes the way women lead in higher education as well as their beliefs about and perceptions of leadership. The effect all these influences have on women's career advancement will also be investigated. In order to unveil these issues, the following research questions will be addressed:

- What are the leadership experiences of women leaders in higher education in Vietnam?
- How does culture shape their beliefs and perceptions about leadership as well as the way they lead?
- How do culture and the experiences of these Vietnamese women leaders affect their access to leadership roles and career advancement in higher education?

### **Significance of the study**

First, the research findings will be useful for institutional authorities in understanding the obstacles that female staff encounters. These are "often invisible from above" because of the "glass ceiling," the barrier blocking promotion for women (King, 1997, p. 94). An understanding of this situation is very important in deciding on appointments and guaranteeing equal employment opportunities (EEO) for women. Moreover, the findings will be beneficial in

establishing the university's internal regulations, which should take women's conflicting roles into account.

Secondly, there is a growing need for research on women in educational leadership in developing countries "so that indigenous scholars have access to research within contexts that are more relevant" (Strachan et al., 2010, p. 66). In the case of Vietnam, this is of great importance because of the dearth of literature in this field (Scott & Truong, 2007). It is claimed that many people in Vietnam, including a considerable proportion of those in authority, do not properly recognise and implement gender equality (Nghe An Domestic Affairs, 2010). This research will contribute to raising public awareness about gender issues. It will also have implications for policy development on women and gender equality which takes cultural influences into consideration.

Lastly, the study will give prominence to successful women in higher education who can serve as role models for aspiring female leaders at university. Importantly, "silence perpetuates discrimination" (Strachan, 2009, p. 107).

The next chapter gives an overview of the extensive literature on women in educational leadership.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

There has been a recent proliferation in the literature on women in educational leadership. Many researchers are interested in leadership styles in an effort to find out differences and similarities in the ways males and females lead (Coleman, 2004; Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Hall, 1996; Morris, Low & Coleman, 1999; Pounder & Coleman, 2002). The findings of these studies are remarkably contradictory and at the centre of the controversy is the relationship between gender and leadership. For other researchers, female leaders' career paths and experiences have attracted their attention (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Coleman, 2002; Cooper & Strachan, 2006; Court, 1997; Davis & Johansson, 2005; Lyman, Athanasoula-Reppa & Lazaridou, 2009; Marshall, 1995; Neville, 1988; Strachan et al., 2010). This theme is important to show gender differences in leadership experiences since men and women's childhood, family and professional lives influence individuals differently (Oplatka, 2006).

In an attempt to explain why women are so poorly represented in senior educational leadership positions a growing body of research has studied the barriers women face in accessing leadership and whilst filling their roles (Brown, 1997; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Shakeshaft, 1987; Weyer, 2007; White, 2003). Whatever these barriers are termed, either horizontal/vertical (Weyer, 2007), internal/external (Brown, 1997; Sperandio & Kagoda, 2008) or cultural (Norris & Inglehart, 2000; Shakeshaft, 1987), these findings reveal the obstacles and challenges women encounter. One difficulty women face in their access to leadership roles and career development is the lack of formal and informal support and encouragement. Accordingly, another issue that attracts the attention of many researchers is empowering women with such programs as networking, mentoring, and work shadowing (Collard & Reynolds, 2005; Dean, Bracken & Allen, 2009; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Eggins, 1997; Strachan, 1991; Wisker, 1996).

The themes mentioned above may not encompass all the issues on women and educational leadership, but they are those most frequently found in research in this field. This chapter begins with a discussion about the controversial relationship



between gender and leadership, arguing that the former influences the latter. Women's leadership style and the barriers to their career growth are subsequently reviewed. Although culture is identified as a major barrier to excluding women from participation in leadership (Shah, 2009; Shakeshaft, 1987), its impact on the way they lead has not been paid much attention. Hallinger (2005) claims that since 1990, "for the first time in the short history of our field, scholars have become interested in how the practice of leadership and management in schools is influenced by culture" (p. ix). This chapter reveals that whilst culture plays a significant role in the practice of women's educational leadership, research in this field is limited.

## **Gender and leadership**

Gender issues have relatively recently been seen as women's issues and included in the discussions of educational leadership (Coleman, 2002; Hall, 1996). This idea is supported by Shakeshaft (1993), who asserts that gender has been associated so closely with women that in some cases they are synonymous. She defines gender as a cultural term which:

... is socially constructed and describes the characteristics that we ascribe to people because of their sex, the ways we believe they behave or the characteristics we believe they have based upon our cultural expectations of what is male and what is female. (p. 52)

Traditionally, descriptors identified with the male are rational, assertive, analytical, confident and ambitious, while the female is thought to be sensitive, emotional, cooperative and intuitive (Pounder & Coleman, 2002). As leadership is now diverse, many researchers have been concerned with male and female leadership styles (Coleman, 2000; Mitroussi & Mitroussi, 2009; Morris et al., 1999). Research on leadership styles often looks for the convergent characteristics associated with one gender and concludes whether males and females lead differently. Ambivalent reports of findings have led to debate about whether gender and leadership are interrelated or independent.

## **Gender as a determinant of leadership styles**

Many researchers claim that gender determines leadership styles (that is, men and women lead and manage differently) (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001; Dean et al., 2009; Hall, 1996; Lyman et al., 2009; Ouston, 1993; Pounder & Coleman, 2002). According to Gold (1996), a body of research which supports this argument has been growing since the mid-1980s. Before this time, differences in the way men and women led were taken for granted probably because the scarcity of women leaders rendered them almost invisible. Evetts (1994) asserts that with regard to the way male and female leaders do their tasks and their respective leadership styles, “gender has been shown to be a differentiating variable” (p. 3). It is argued that gender decides leadership styles because of the socialisation process which develops in women the values and characteristics that lead to leadership behaviours which are different from those traditionally associated with men (Hall, 1996; Marshall, 1985; Neville, 1988; Pounder & Coleman, 2002; Shah, 2009; Shakeshaft, 1987). Moreover, women are constrained to behave in accordance with their stereotypes as dependent, compliant (Neville, 1988), emotional (Ouston, 1993) and careful and prudent (Qiang, Han & Niu, 2009). Early (1987) further argues that “expectation is a central aspect of the socialisation process” (as cited in Pounder & Coleman, 2002, p. 125). That women are expected to be caring, supportive and cooperative can account for their different approaches to leadership from men. Evidence suggests that leaders who perform contrary to the stereotypical expectations of their gender are evaluated negatively (Campbell, Bommer & Yeo, 1993; Jago & Vroom, 1982). It is concluded that gender influences human behaviour (Shakeshaft, 1993) and therefore, can influence leadership styles.

## **Leadership as gender-neutral**

In contrast to the idea that gender is a determinant of leadership styles, other researchers claim that leadership is gender-neutral (Butterfield & Powell, 1981; Campbell, Bommer, & Yeo, 1993). This argument is supported by some research showing that there is no or little difference between the way men and women lead (Coleman, 2002; Davis & Johansson, 2005; Evetts, 1994). Studies of leadership behaviour in non-educational settings find no distinction between male and female

leaders (Hall, 1993; Korac-Kakabadse, Korac-Kakabadse & Myers, 1998). Further, men and women “cannot be regarded as two coherent groups” with “two distinctly different ways” of leading and management (Coleman, 2002, p. 99) as they are constrained, at least, by leadership roles. According to Weyer (2007), leadership roles have norms that guide their task performance. Therefore, when males and females are in the same leadership positions, they tend to behave similarly to fulfill their roles. Even if gender roles have an impact on their behaviours it will be modified by leadership roles, resulting in minimal differences in leadership styles. Gillet-Karam (1994 in Dean et al., 2009) argues that leadership practice is strongly situated, not gender determined. In addition, Eddy (2003) points out in her study of college presidents that even though the presidents were described in gendered terms by their campus members as authoritative for men and generative for women, they did not actually lead in strictly gendered ways. Jablonski’s (1996) research had similar findings, indicating faculty members’ disagreement with the women presidents’ beliefs that they led more participatively and collegially. The difference between the perception of a particular leader’s performance and his or her actual performance can be explained by stereotyping, which is claimed to be central to the rejection of gender as a determinant of leadership style (Weyer, 2007).

According to Weyer (2007), the debate about gender and leadership necessitates further research if a definitive conclusion is to be reached. Lyman et al. (2009) agree with Rhode’s (2003) conclusion that the relationship between gender and leadership is likely “a matter of perception” due to insufficient supporting evidence for differences (p. 115). However, the impact of gender on leadership seems to be undeniable. The women in Hall’s (1996) study rejected gender as a strong issue in their careers (p. 198) but their performance as leaders was still influenced by the awareness of their gender:

They paid close attention to how they dressed, moved and used body language to ensure that the messages they communicated as leaders were not undermined by responses to them as women. (p. 187)

Women leaders have to work harder to “break away from their stereotypes” and “prove their worth” (Coleman, 2002, pp. 82-3). If leadership is independent of

gender, women absolutely can “learn the rules” to play in “the men’s own games” (King, 1997, p. 92). However, the number of winners is rare and as a result, women have to manage to survive by learning a new game and a new language which King (1997) calls a feminine style of leadership. Whilst this does not necessarily mean that women lead differently from men, it does indicate that leadership is not gender-neutral.

### **Women’s leadership styles**

Despite the controversy about gender and leadership, research on how women lead is growing. Leadership style is viewed as a composite of “relatively stable patterns of behaviour that are manifested by leaders” (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 781). Work on female leadership style tends to conclude that “women are better educational leaders” than men (Coleman, 2003, p. 41; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1993). This claim is justified in terms of women’s relationships, teaching and learning and community building (Shakeshaft, 1993). In a Greek study, female principals interpreted women’s leadership more positively than men’s leadership. They argued that women lead more flexibly, intuitively and holistically (Lyman et al., 2009). Some argue that women embrace superior leadership styles (Coleman, 2003).

#### **Collaborative, participative and instructional leadership**

According to some literature, women prefer teamwork, and tend to be more accessible, caring and supportive. They emphasize students’ learning achievement through instructional leadership (Coleman, 2003, 2005; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2009). Numerous studies have shown that women employ a collaborative and participative leadership style (Coleman, 2002, 2003; Franzén, 2005; Hall, 1996; Lyman et al., 2009; Morris et al., 1999; Neville, 1988; Ouston, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1993; Stelter, 2002). When adopting this style, women encourage inclusiveness (Shakeshaft, 1993) and use collaborative decision-making (Lyman et al., 2009). One way of interpreting women leaders’ effectiveness is the higher standard they have to meet in attaining their leadership positions and the perception that they “have to maintain better performance to retain these roles” (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 793). However, few researchers explain why these styles are more likely to be embraced by women. It could be argued that the positive

women's stereotype as "nurturing, caring and people orientated" might account for it (Noddings, 1984 as cited in Coleman, 2003, p. 40). Coleman (2003) seems to believe that it is due to being in the field of education, which is an environment that "predisposes its leaders... towards a more democratic and participative style" (p. 46). Eagly and Johannessen-Schmidt (2001) have a quite different standpoint. They argue that it may be "the attitudinal bias against female leaders that arises from the incongruity of the female gender role and many leader roles" that renders democratic and participative styles more favorable to women than men (p. 789).

According to Weyer (2007), female gender roles are identified with communal behaviours such as nurturing, supporting others and being helpful. In contrast, leadership roles have been associated with particular agentic characteristics such as "assertiveness, ambition, competing for attention, and making problem-focused suggestions" (Weyer, 2007, p. 485). Incongruity appears when women leaders act in contradiction to their gender role stereotypes or typical leader roles. Consequently, their behaviours may be evaluated negatively due to their subordinates' prejudice. Eagly and Johannessen-Schmidt (2001) further explain that in order for a woman's leadership to be accepted by subordinates, she needs to placate them by involving them in decision making. Interestingly, this is not found in leaders who behave more directly (Eagly and Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001). In addition, women's communal behaviours enable them to act in a participative manner more easily. Moreover, women leaders may obtain more self-confidence resulting from their collaborative decisions which are in accordance with their subordinates' expectations. Eagly and Johannessen-Schmidt's (2001) interpretation of women's democratic and participative styles is interesting but needs more supporting evidence from further research.

### **Transformational leadership**

The thesis that women's leadership styles are superior to men's is strongly supported by some research findings which indicate women's styles are associated with transformational leaders (Coleman, 2003; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly, & Johannessen-Schmidt and van Engen, 2003; Hackman, Furniss, Hill, & Paterson, 1992; Weyer, 2007). Transformational leadership was first proposed by Burns (1978) and then developed by Bass

(1985a) as an effective style which builds on “interpersonal relationships and the sharing of power and information” (Weyer, 2007, p. 490). The focus of this style is “individualised consideration”, which means that subordinates’ mentoring and development as well as their individual needs are paid attention by leaders (Eagly & Johannessen-Schmidt, 2001, p. 787). These characteristics make transformational leadership communal, and given women’s stereotype as nurturing, caring and people oriented, this leadership style is easier for female leaders to achieve.

### **Androgynous leadership**

The debate on leadership styles is further complicated by the concept of androgynous leadership, which combines both masculine and feminine leadership styles. Androgynous leadership has been studied by Coleman, 2000; Cubillo and Brown, 2003; Davis and Johansson, 2005; Hall, 1996; Morris et al., 1999; and Oplatka, 2006. These authors claim that good leaders have both masculine and feminine characteristics available to them and can select the most appropriate for a particular situation (Singleton, 1993 as cited in Cubillo & Brown, 2003). One of the most important findings in favor of this leadership style comes from Oplatka’s (2006) review of 14 major journals in educational administration, gender studies and comparative education in developing countries, which found evidence that female leaders in these countries seem to adopt an androgenic style. Hall (1996), too, argues “for a view of school leadership and management that draws on behaviours that are the exclusive property of neither men nor women” (p. 3). This is clearly illustrated in Morris et al.’s (1999) study which compares the findings of research into leadership style of Singaporean principals and English head teachers. In both studies in the two countries, Bem (1977) and Gray’s (1989) gender paradigms were used. The findings show that the participants chose attributes from both paradigms, which created “an image of a leader that differs from both masculine and feminine stereotypes” (Coleman, 1996, p. 166). Interestingly, the Singaporean female principals tended to choose more “masculine” attributes of leadership than their English counterparts.

Debate on female leadership style is ongoing, but the argument that women can lead at least as well as men is persuasive. With regard to androgyny, whilst it is inescapable that leadership style is influenced by gender, what forces women to

cross their gender stereotype boundaries to adopt a more masculine style? The explanation for the participants' choices in the above study is perhaps linked to cultural differences (between Singapore and England) (Morris et al., 1999), and to "a strong male-dominated culture" in developing countries (Oplatka, 2006, p. 615). The literature suggests that leadership practice is strongly influenced by culture.

## **Culture and leadership**

Culture resides at multiple levels, from civilizations, nations, organisations to groups (Shein, 1985) and it is generally defined as:

the enduring set of beliefs, values, and ideologies underpinning structures, processes, and practices that distinguishes one group of people from another. The groups of people may be at school level (organisational culture) or at national level (societal culture). (Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p. 16)

We are familiar with what are termed Western and Eastern cultures as well as American or Mexican culture (Shein, 1985). More specifically, in New Zealand, there are Maori and Pakeha cultures. At lower levels, there exist occupational and business cultures. Patriarchy (Celikten, 2005; Cooper & Strachan, 2006; Cubillo & Brown, 2003), also called androcentrism, that is, "viewing the world and shaping reality through a male lens" (Hough, 1986 as cited in Hall, 1996, p. 23), is an ideology embedded in many cultures both in the developed and developing world (Oplatka, 2006). Much research on female leadership has noted the function of patriarchal culture as a barrier to women's advancement (Acker & Fueverger, 1996; Akao, 2008; Coleman, Qiang & Li, 1998; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Eggins, 1997; Norris & Inglehart, 2000; Rutherford, 2001; Shakeshaft, 1987; White, 2003). Dana (2009) contends that "culture itself raises barriers for women's aspirations simply because of the attitudes, learned behaviors and routine practices that are practiced and reinforced" (p. 69).

The literature has also acknowledged the influences of and interactions between culture and leadership. Shein (1985) considers culture and leadership as "two sides of the same coin" (p. 2). He asserts that leaders create and manage organisational culture but cultures, in turn, create their next generation of leaders.

Moreover, some studies indicate that culture affects leadership styles (Morris et al., 1999; Oplatka, 2006; Pounder and Coleman, 2002). Schein (1985) points out that notions of what are the most important characteristics of effective leadership may vary in cultures. Therefore, in some cultures, a leader might need to be strongly decisive, whereas in other cultures a prerequisite is a collaborative and democratic style. He further argues that these different conceptions will influence the evaluation and perceptions of leaders' behaviours and characteristics in different cultures. For example, a culture that favours an authoritarian style is likely to interpret a leader's sensitivity as weak, whereas the same sensitivity is considered essential in cultures adopting a more nurturing style. In New Zealand, a woman Samoan principal was faced with tension caused by her culture, which particularly emphasised respect, which meant that the motives and decisions of those who are older and in authority cannot be questioned (Strachan, 1999). In their justification for the prominence of the masculine attributes selected by female Singaporean principals, Morris et al. (1999) explain that this is the reflection of the educational culture of Singapore where achievement, order, and respect are of great importance. In the Solomon Islands, women can have difficulty leading in the way they prefer. Culture greatly restricts "the efficiency and role satisfaction of women's leadership" (Akao, 2008, p. 130). Hallinger (2005) is correct in saying that how "schools are organized and managed is fundamentally related to cultural values of a society" (p. ix). In other words, leaders' thinking and behaviours are impacted by cultural values (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996). Leadership is "a cultural phenomenon" (Gerstner & O'Day, 1994, p. 123), but research on educational leadership undertaken from a cultural perspective is relatively scarce (Hallinger, 2005). As Hallinger and Leithwood (1996) explained:

Few scholars in educational administration subsequently have explored culture as a contextual determinant in understanding the exercise of educational leadership both in terms of conceptual development and empirical research. (p. 132)

As mentioned above, the pervasive and long lasting influences of patriarchal culture have been acknowledged as major obstacles to women's access to



leadership roles and their career progress. These barriers will be elaborated on separately in terms of indigenous and organisational cultures.

### **Cultural barriers and constraints to women's leadership**

Culture, the shared “symbols, beliefs and patterns of behaviour” (Rutherford, 2001, p. 373), is taken for granted and operates almost imperceptibly in a society. It does not reveal itself easily and can be invisible to insiders (Shein, 1985). Rutherford (2001) maintains that even though it is hard to identify cultural barriers, that is not a reason to keep them unrevealed or un-researched. Findings in her two case studies of an airline and an investment bank in England reveal that organisational culture, through its different constituents, consistently marginalises and excludes women.

Research on women's leadership has also found that women face barriers on their way to the top jobs, and while in those positions they may experience unequal employment opportunities and role conflict as well as patriarchal attitudes towards women (Coleman, 2009; Shah, 2009; Shakeshaft, 1987; Sperandio, 2009). These factors stem from culture, whether Western or third world, and create a “glass ceiling” (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; King, 1997; Weyer, 2007) for women who want to access leadership positions. Shakeshaft (1987) asserts that “the major barrier to women has been a culture characterized by male dominance because all of the specific barriers identified can be traced back to a society that supports and enforces a male-dominant system” (p. 79). She believes that gender inequity, and such internal barriers as lack of confidence, low aspiration and low motivation, are caused by patriarchy. This ideology results in an androcentric society, which explains why senior leadership roles are occupied by men rather than women.

The next section foregrounds the broader picture of indigenous culture, which is commonly charged with creating “the paradox for women who aspire to being professionally educated and to leading in an educational profession” (Dana, 2009, p. 67).

## **Indigenous culture**

The barriers caused by indigenous culture that women are faced with include socialisation and stereotyping, balancing work and family life, and male attitudes.

### **Socialisation and stereotyping**

Many researchers believe socialisation and gender stereotyping can explain the poor representation of women in leadership (Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Curry, 2000; Dunlap & Hall, 1996; Neville, 1988; Ouston, 1993; Shah, 2009). Socialisation theorists argue that “gender identity and differences are acquired through various developmental processes associated with life stages, such as schooling and work life” (Bartol, Martin, & Kromkowski, 2003, p. 9). Neville (1988) argues that socialisation “reinforces the sexual division of labour” (p. 18) and is the result of the nurturing role that most societies assign to women. Images of feminine roles are available everywhere: at school, at work, at home, on television and in literature. She maintains that these roles make women passive and obedient. A successful Ugandan woman, for instance, used to be portrayed as “one who got married, raised a family and submitted to her husband” (Sperandio, 2009, p. 53). According to some scholars, since a male-dominated culture underpinning the socialisation process makes women subordinates (Curry, 2000), men do not like to be led by women (Coleman, 2002; Powney, 1997; Shah, 2009; Shakeshaft, 1987). This is also a consequence of the socialisation of men, as “they are brought up to believe women cannot lead them” (Sperandio, 2009, p. 53). This may explain why in Vietnam “the majority of female officials fill vice positions” (Nghe An Domestic Affairs, 2010; Nguyen, 2007; Nguyen & Nguyen, n.d.).

Gender stereotyping, the “consensual beliefs about character traits that describe men and women” (Weyer, 2007, p. 486), also causes barriers to women’s career progress (Coleman, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Mitroussi & Mitroussi, 2009; Truong, 2008). To comply with their stereotypes, women are expected to be “caring, tolerant, intuitive, and gentle” (Coleman, 2005, p. 12). Traditionally, women are thought to belong in the home to fulfill their domestic roles. The belief that women are “too emotional, too sensitive to others’ criticisms” (Hart, 1995, p. 116; Neville, 1988; Qiang et al., 2009) and therefore unsuitable for leadership, is persistent (Gouws, 2008; Hall, 1996; Strachan, 2009). Therefore, women

appointed to a position have to “prove their worth” as a leader by working harder and better to break away from the stereotypes associated with them in management and particularly to overcome their “domestic role stereotyping” (Coleman, 2002, pp. 82-3). Coleman (2002) also argues that stereotypes of women can be traced to the deep-rooted, patriarchal prejudices of society.

As mentioned earlier, expectation is central in the socialisation process. Both women and men are expected to behave consistently within their gender stereotypes. However, as leadership is mostly identified with men, women leaders “are often caught in the double bind of trying to meet the male norms while also meeting the expectation of their gender” (Eddy, 2009, p. 12). As discussed above, female leaders who behave differently from their gender stereotypes (i.e. their gender expectations are not met) are likely to be judged poorly. As a result, many female leaders experience loneliness and isolation once they are in the posts they sought (Cooper & Strachan, 2006; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Eggins, 1997; Sachs & Blackmore, 1998). Sometimes they are not supported by their female staff, as these prefer a male in authority (Powney, 1997). Bassett (2009) points out that not only men but also women “frequently hold negative stereotypes about women” which may affect the appointment of a woman to a top-level and stressful position (p. 9). Heilman (2001) argues that this bias is a primary cause for women’s scarcity in leadership positions. Wood and Eagly (2002 as cited in Weyer, 2007) claim that “it is societal expectations that produce and maintain inequality between genders” (p. 483). Their argument is supported by Sperandio (2009) who asserts that “role expectations and cultural norms are shown clearly in the reality of the existing inequity” (p. 150). It is evident that socialisation and gender stereotyping hinder women’s access to and exercise of leadership.

### **Balancing work and family life**

Another barrier that hampers women accessing and practising leadership is their multiple roles (Court, 2004; Davis & Johansson, 2005; Dean et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2007; Qiang et al., 2009; Truong, 2008). They have to look after their family, especially any children, do housework, make a living and take part in community activities. Balancing their work and family makes the burden very heavy. As a result, many American women administrators stay single, or are divorced or

widowed (Shakeshaft, 1987). Shakeshaft (1987) regards home and family responsibilities as barriers for female administrators in two ways. On the one hand, a woman leader must effectively fulfill all her tasks. On the other, she must contend with the male school authority board's erroneous beliefs that she will neither succeed in managing the balancing act nor is such an attempt appropriate for her. In New Zealand, balancing excessive workloads and responsibilities was found to negatively affect a school principal's life, entertainment and personal development and result in stress and bad health (Brooking, Collins, Court & O'Neill, 2003, cited in Court, 2004). Coleman's (2002) study of nearly 1000 men and women head teachers in England and Wales showed that the proportion of men and women who have a child or children is 94% and just over 50%, respectively. Valentine (1995) asserts that "childbearing, childrearing and household management play major roles in women's lives and pose dilemmas in trying to fulfill career goals and to maintain family harmony" (p. 350). Even some in American society still criticise "women who seek a family life and a successful career" as their professional ambitions are not considered fully feminine (Dean et al., 2009, p. 241). As a result, academic women with a family:

...quickly learn to build a wall separating their personal and professional lives to minimize cultural penalties for holding multiple roles, yet thereby also diminishing the potential for achieving any real integration or balance of the two. (Dean et al., 2009, p. 242)

Research on women in the UK and Greece shows that some women choose not to seek leadership positions because of the perceived stress caused by a conflict of roles (Mitroussi & Mitroussi, 2009). The women were worried about balancing the demands of their job against those of their family. In Vietnam, women are held to a very high standard of behaviour by the socio-cultural norms (Schuler, Hoang, Vu, Tran, Bui, & Pham, 2006). They are expected to be academically qualified, to work hard and to put their families' interests above their own (Schuler et al., 2006). It is traditionally believed that what they need is a qualification to have a stable job and more importantly, a happy family. In the Chinese context, many women sacrifice their career advancement for their husband's success and by so doing "they realize their own value" (Qiang, et al., 2009, p. 97). There are commonalities in Vietnamese and Chinese women's

perceptions of their roles and duties as these two countries are both influenced by Confucianism. Obviously, indigenous culture has a great impact on women, and the traditional roles allocated to them influence their work lives.

### **Male attitudes**

According to Shakeshaft (1987), androcentrism (i.e a world view which is male centred) privileges men and honours “men and the male principle above women and the female” (p. 94). This creates a belief that male is superior and female is inferior, meaning that female qualities are undervalued. This masculine value system, together with the socialization process results in sex discrimination, which is often associated with negative attitudes towards women. One of the manifestations of such discrimination is their rejection of women as leaders, mentioned above. A great number of studies claim that men’s antipathy to hiring women is a major obstacle to female entrance and advancement in educational leadership (Phendla, 2009; Schmuck, 1995; Shakeshaft, 1993). This attitude manifests as overtly discriminatory actions shown in the selection process (Shakeshaft, 1993), and which will be discussed shortly. In addition, the perception of male privilege resulting from a patriarchal culture and the socialisation process creates “internal barriers” for women such as lack of confidence (Akao, 2008; Brown, 1997; Vali, 2010) and lack of motivation or aspiration (Mitroussi & Mitroussi, 2009; Phendla, 2009). There is no doubt that male prejudice towards women perpetuates sex discrimination and impedes women’s progress. It is important to bear in mind that patriarchy exists not only in the indigenous culture but is present at the organisational level as well.

### **Organisational culture**

The relationship between leadership and organisational culture has been well-documented (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Shaw, 2003; Shein, 1985; Walker & Dimmock, 2002). Shaw (2003) notes that “while the organisational culture itself is determined by what people do, it, in turn, provides the guidelines for how people will respond to any given set of circumstances that arise” (p. 32). Much research has unveiled the existence of cultural obstructions to women’s access to leadership and promotion in organisations (Rutherford, 2001; White, 2003). Rutherford (2001) calls organisational culture “a means of

patriarchal closure” to women (p. 372). In her view, this exclusion is embedded in the cultural constituents of an organisation which include, but are not limited to, its background, physical artifacts, gender awareness, management styles, communication and language, work ideology, informal socialising, time management, and sexuality. This section considers the selection process and stereotypical tasks which are seen as obstacles to women’s career growth.

### **Selection process**

Women can be undervalued and deprived of employment opportunities because of “unfair selection or promotion procedures” (Brown, 1997, p. 124). In Schein’s (1985) view, one of the most potent ways in which culture embeds and perpetuates itself in an organisation is how its members recruit, select and promote new members. Studies suggest that organisations tend to hire or promote those candidates who resemble themselves (Coleman, 2009; Schein, 1985, Shakeshaft, 1987; White, 2003). Where positions of authority are male dominated, women are under-represented in leadership.

The selection process that often favours men has been well studied (Coleman, 1996, 2002, 2009; Dunlap & Schmuck, 1995; Eggins, 1997; Neville, 1988; Shakeshaft, 1987; Sperandio, 2009). This unfairness can come from the hirer’s concerns about possible economic losses for selecting women because they may require maternity leave and time for child-rearing (Coleman et al., 1998). Even in Western society, women experience the discriminatory attitude that “the job was too much for a woman with children..., although [this is] generally implied rather than stated overtly” (Coleman, 2009, p. 14). Coleman (2009) suggests that selectors are influenced by the female stereotype which associates women with home and family, and that this link is difficult to break. According to Brown (1997), “women are judged informally and subjectively on the basis of their perceived suitability for a post or for promotion” by criteria such as age, relevance of experience, and ability to “fit in” (p. 114). The situation is similar for female academics in Australia where high quality work and commitment are not “recognised and rewarded” (Bagilhole, 2000a, p. 8 in White, 2003). As a result, Australian women academics are “ignored, excluded and regarded as ‘light weight’ and [receive] unequal treatment” (White, 2003, p. 49). The selection

process also disadvantages women through the assumption that their work efficiency can be limited by their fatigue and/or shortage of energy. All these prejudices and biases restrict women's opportunities to access and advance their career, which in turn discourages and demotivates them because they are afraid that a desire for something they believe they "can never have may lead to bitterness and unhappiness" (Shakeshaft, 1987, p. 91). An unfair retirement policy in China also limits women's promotion opportunities and shortens their career life (Qiang, Han and Niu, 2009). In both Vietnam and China, women retire at 55, five years earlier than men. It is apparent that "deeply-embedded features of organisational culture are likely to be major contributors to discrimination" (Brown, 1997, p. 113) and affect women's access to leadership positions as well as their career progression.

### **Stereotypical tasks**

As previously mentioned, the literature suggests that stereotyping hampers women's career progress with a taken-for-granted belief that there exists a "natural order": male leaders and female followers (Coleman, 2002, p. 79). Thus, gendered labour is divided by the gender stereotypes which are formed and perpetuated by the social culture. Traditionally, women are associated with the private and domestic domain of the home whereas the public sphere of work is administered by men (Coleman, 2003; Court, 1997; Qing et al., 2009). This division leads to social injustice where the number of male domain jobs is larger than those available in female domain professions (Dana, 2009). Additionally, the most desirable jobs with high salary, significant benefits, and better promotion opportunities are still held mainly by men in many cultures (Dana, 2009). This gendered labour divide also devalues women and locks them "into low-power, low-visibility, dead-end jobs" (Hansot & Tyack, 1981 as cited in Shakeshaft, 1987, p. 82). In general, most women's work is regarded as inferior to most men's work (Court, 1997). Women tend to be assigned responsibility for "pastoral affairs" (Coleman, 2009, p. 15) or "caring professions" (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996, para.3). Teaching, for example, is thought to be appropriate to women's assigned roles as supporting and nurturing and therefore is seen as women's work. However, school management and administration are viewed as requiring strength, toughness and aggressiveness and thus more suited to men. This could

account for the fact that women are numerically dominant in the education sector but more men are seen in the positions of authority.

Brown (1997) asserts that in an organisation, “the segregation of the labour force into ‘women’s work’ and ‘men’s work’...applies to the top and bottom...as well as to particular occupational areas” (p. 114). As a result, wishing to enter or advance in areas that are traditionally male requires women to break the “glass ceiling” of stereotypical expectations and conventions. Her idea is supported by Rutherford (2001), who states, “the separation of home (private) and work (public) may pervade an organisational culture thus affect men and women differently (p. 377). She argues that this private/public division can be seen as a contributor to women’s difficulty in accessing management positions since it perpetuates their dual burden and reinforces the assumption that senior organisational positions belong to men. So, gendered stereotyping of tasks excludes women from leadership positions.

### **Leadership and women in higher education in Vietnam**

Women and leadership in higher education in Vietnam is under-researched (Scott & Truong, 2007). In their review of the articles from 1996 to 2005 in *Women’s Studies*, a Vietnamese-language journal produced by the Institute for Family and Gender Studies at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Scott and Truong (2007) could find only one author of women in leadership and decision-making. The reasons are not explicit, but there is a pervasive belief that gender equality has been achieved in Vietnam (Scott & Truong, 2007, p. 244). Currently, there are 21,000 female teachers working in 149 universities in Vietnam. This number accounts for 48.5% of all tertiary level teachers. The percentage of female teachers who are post-graduates is 39.05%. There are 18 professors, 211 associate professors who are female and approximately 1400 women have doctorates, and 16 female teachers became associate professors when they were under forty. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to access the figures about women leaders in education at all levels in Vietnam. The most recent statistics available on the proportion of female rectors at tertiary level are from 2005, at 7.92%, a very modest percentage given the 74.86% of female teachers in the education sector (Hong Hanh, 2010).



In Vietnam, the higher the level of education, the less represented women are. Vietnamese women are influenced by both indigenous and organisational culture (Tran, 2001; Truong, 2008; Vietnam Embassy, 2001). Balancing work and family is an obstacle to their entrance and advancing leadership positions (Nguyen, 2007; Tran, 2001; Truong, 2008). According to the 2004 statistics, Vietnamese women spent 2.5 times and 2.3 times as much on housework as men in urban and rural areas respectively (Tran, 2005). Apart from teaching, research is another major responsibility for university teachers and it plays a crucial part in obtaining professorial titles. However, their multiple roles restrict women's research productivity and limit their promotion opportunities to senior posts, although in Vietnamese higher education, research is not necessarily a criterion to promotion as it is, for example, in Australia (White, 2003). Apart from women's ascribed roles, the traditional gender norms which regard the man as the household head impacts women's self-beliefs about leadership and lowers their career aspirations (Schuler et al., 2006).

The education system in Vietnam is highly centralised so leadership position vacancies at universities are not advertised, especially in the public sector; therefore, women lose job opportunities because they do not know about them. As mentioned earlier, the retirement age, too, is a disadvantage for Vietnamese women. The chairperson of Vietnam National Committee for the Advancement of Women explains that life conditions have improved so women prefer to retire earlier than men. This policy seems to be beneficial to women but actually, it is discriminatory treatment (Nguyen & Nguyen, n.d.; Truong, 2008). Truong (2008) argues that the retirement age exacerbates sex discrimination as employers prefer hiring men for their longer working life. Further, many women aged over 55 still need to make a living so retirement at this age deprives them of the opportunity to work. Although information about Vietnamese women in educational leadership is limited, it is possible to conclude that women are under-represented in leadership positions in higher education in Vietnam. It is important that more research on women in educational leadership be conducted as this can help to raise public awareness about gender inequity, as many Vietnamese citizens hold the misguided belief that it has been erased. In addition, if the potential of female academics is not maximised, the institutions are "at a loss" as "a gender-balanced

leadership will provide a broader and deeper base of experience for creativity and problem solving, essential for building learning organisations” (Bandiho, 2009, p. 45)

## **Summary**

The debates on the relationship between gender and leadership and whether women are better leaders than men are part of increasing scholarly attention being given to the topic of women and educational leadership. Even though many findings show minor differences or make no distinction between male and female leadership styles, other evidence suggests that leadership is not gender-neutral and that, as Coleman (2003) argues, “leadership is a very gendered concept” (p. 37) as it is typically identified with men across cultures. In addition, socialisation, gender stereotypes, social expectations all contribute to the prevailing culture and are shown to exert influences and constraints on women even when they achieve leadership positions. Leadership roles can help to modify gender roles, but only to the extent that there are a few differences between the way women and men lead and manage. Women’s leadership styles of collaboration and participation are claimed to be “highly effective in today’s turbulent, culturally diverse environment” (Stelter, 2002, p. 44). Further, given their socially assigned roles of nurturing and caring, along with a democratic and participative way of working, women are more aligned with the transformational and instructional leadership models which are considered effective ways of leading. Androgynous leadership that combines both masculine and feminine styles is also employed by women. This may blur the relationship between gender and leadership and it also indicates a shift in female leadership style which is likely to be more “relevant to managing modern organisations with “multigender, multinational and multisocial environments” (Pounder & Coleman, 2002, p. 128). These findings support the claim that women can be better educational leaders than men. However, as Pounder and Coleman (2002) caution, it “all depends” (p. 129) on such different factors as national culture, socialisation, and organisational culture.

Culture and leadership are interrelated. Culture plays a significant role in shaping leadership styles because it can affect and justify the way individuals and groups behave at different levels (Dimmock, 2005). Leaders, in turn, perpetuate

organisational culture through the way they select new members. Women's access to leadership positions and fulfillment of their roles are hampered by cultural barriers. Socialisation and stereotyping, balancing work and family, and androcentric attitudes are indigenous cultural obstacles whilst selection processes and gender-stereotyping of tasks are considered to be barriers caused by organisational culture.

Literature on women in leadership in Vietnam is scanty but indicates their under-representation in higher education. Although culture is significant in the practice of educational administration, it remains "a missing variable in leadership theory" (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996, p. 4). This review has shown that research on women in educational leadership from a cultural perspective needs to be more deeply explored. Therefore, this research will investigate:

- the leadership experiences of women leaders in higher education in Vietnam;
- how culture shapes their beliefs and perceptions about leadership as well as the way they lead;
- how culture and the experiences of these Vietnamese women leaders affect their access to leadership roles and career advancement in higher education.

The research methodology for this study is explained in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Methodology**

The first section of this chapter describes and justifies the approach as well as the research methods I used in this research. Since the study explores the impact of culture on Vietnamese women's leadership through their experiences, qualitative research within a phenomenological theoretical framework was appropriate. Semi-structured interviewing was employed as it is an effective research method for discovering the innermost aspects of people's lives. In order to achieve high quality research, validity, trustworthiness and ethics are thoroughly considered. Finally, thematic data analysis is discussed and the research process described.

### **Qualitative research**

According to Mutch (2005), qualitative research aims at exploring "the unique lived experiences of the participants to enhance understanding of particular phenomena" (p. 19). This kind of research enables the investigator to capture participants' interpretation of their complex world and to understand the phenomena from their viewpoint (Burns, 2000) by standing "in the shoes of those being studied" (Davidson & Tolich, p. 103). In addition, qualitative research allows rich data to be gathered through a variety of methods such as observation, in-depth interviews or documentation. Data are descriptive and often thematically analysed, and from this analysis categorisation or theory emerges. Therefore, qualitative research is inductive and interpretive.

In a qualitative study, the investigator is also "the research instrument" as he or she will do both the data collection and the analysis simultaneously (Tolich & Davidson, 2003, p. 98). It is important to bear in mind that generalisation is not the ultimate aim of qualitative research, rather elucidating "the experience or understanding for others" is (Mutch, 2005, p. 43). These characteristics of qualitative research show that it was the best approach for this study which aimed to uncover the Vietnamese women's experiences together with their beliefs and perceptions about leadership. Burns (2000) further suggests that qualitative researchers tend to base their investigation on understanding and recognising the

value of the participants' actual experiences and therefore, phenomenology is fundamental to this approach.

### **Phenomenology**

“Phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value; and one which sees behaviours as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality” (English & English, 1958, as cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007, p. 22). In brief, phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience of a single person (Giorgi, 1997), that is, “the consciousness that emerges from personal participation in events” (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 39). It focuses on the personal meanings “derived from the context of direct experiencing” and reality is perceived and interpreted in correlation to the meaning of these structures (Burns, 2000, p. 11). According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), in a phenomenological study the researcher must interpret the subject's experiences from his/her own perspective and to attain this, he or she must be able to enter their inner world. Since the aim of this research was to understand how the women experienced their leadership by unveiling the impact of culture on their behaviours, beliefs and perceptions, a phenomenological theoretical framework was considered the best approach.

Within phenomenology, a researcher seeks to describe the participants' experience and actions so the data should be “as faithful as possible to what happened as experienced” by them (Giorgi, 1997, para. 27). This kind of data is often obtained by using semi-structured interviews.

### **Semi-structured interviewing**

Interviewing, defined as “an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale, 1996, p. 2), has been used as a central data generation method in educational research for more than a century (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Interviews permit people to express their perspectives on a wide range of issues (Walford, 2001). The data collected are a rich resource since interviewing “can reach the parts which other methods cannot reach” (Wellington, 2000, p. 73). In addition, interviewing is regarded as “a flexible tool”

because it can collect the data through “multi-sensory channels...: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 349). There are various types of interviews. However, as the purpose of this study was to explore the women leaders’ experiences and their beliefs and perceptions about leadership, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed to generate the data.

In a semi-structured interview, a key set of questions is followed in an open-ended manner (Mutch, 2005), and this provides the participant with “a sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint extensively” (Giorgi, 1997). Therefore, an interview guide is prepared but the wording and the order of questions are not fixed. The content of the interview aims to focus on significant issues for the study. This flexibility enables the researcher to “improvise follow-up questions” and probe for meaningful clarification as well as to deepen “areas of interest that emerge” (Arskey & Knight, 1999, p. 7).

Although interviewing is a powerful instrument, some researchers use it with caution because of its shortcomings. First of all, bias is likely to appear as a result of “the researcher’s perceptions and interpretations” of the data (Wellington, 2000, p. 73). Moreover, there can be a power imbalance in the relation between the interviewer and the interviewee where the researcher is usually in a more powerful position that “defines and controls the situation” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3). This can cause bias as the interviewer may influence the interviewee’s responses, especially when respondents are children.

Another weakness of the interview is the difficulty it poses regarding securing the anonymity of the subjects (Cohen et al., 2007). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) argue that since interviewing is not anonymous, this could discourage honesty in the responses of the participants. Additionally, the researcher may have trouble finding participants because some people are not willing to talk to a stranger about their life in a face-to-face interview. Interviewing is also time-consuming and requires not only time for the interview itself but for travel and the transcription of the interview. Although “interviewing people of any age can be one of the most enjoyable and interesting activities in a research study” (Wellington, 2000, p. 73), it is not simple. The interviewer has to establish trust and a good rapport with the interviewee (Johnson, 2002) and that requires certain

skills and qualities which take considerable practice to develop (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Despite its weaknesses, many qualitative researchers still consider interviewing as such an important instrument that “many qualitative methods rely heavily or solely on them as the primary mechanism for data collection” (Knox and Burkard, 2009, p. 571). Since semi-structured interviewing is very powerful in situations where the researcher wants to search for the participant’s opinions, feelings or perspectives about a particular problem, it was therefore considered the best data generation method for my study.

### **Validity and trustworthiness**

The quality of an interview research project is determined by its validity and trustworthiness. Validity refers to the extent to which what we investigate reflects what it is supposed to investigate (Wellington, 2000). Trustworthiness means the research decisions, research design, data collection and analysis strategies have been clearly documented and the study ethically conducted (Mutch, 2005). To ensure quality, validity and trustworthiness must be carefully considered throughout all stages of the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

At the stage of thematising, the theoretical presuppositions of the study must be sound and the research questions logically derived (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). After reviewing the literature, the research questions might be redesigned so that they are more focused. In the next stage, the research design and the methods employed must fit the purpose of the investigation. As discussed above, the qualitative approach and semi-structured interviewing were considered to best fit this research. The quality of interview research is also achieved by choosing participants who are “experienced and knowledgeable” about the research problem because “an appropriate choice of interviewee helps make your argument credible” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 64-70). For this study, purposeful sampling was the most appropriate strategy as it allowed me as the researcher to intentionally select the prospective participants in order to understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2002).

During interviewing, validity rests on the trustworthiness of the respondents and the quality of the interview itself (Kvale, 1996). Walford (2001) argues that the respondents may lie or withhold information because they “have little to gain from telling an interviewer their innermost secrets” (p. 90). Therefore, it is essential that a good relationship be built up and maintained between the interviewer and the interviewee, to create a relaxed environment for collection of thoughtful and rich data. Apart from the researcher’s good communication skills, a successful interview requires careful planning and preparation (Johnson, 2002) and depends much on the researcher’s ability in applying interviewing techniques. For example, leading questions or change of wording can be employed “to check repeatedly the reliability of the interviewee’s answers, as well as to verify the interviewer’s interpretations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 172). Another useful interview technique is asking probing, follow-up questions to clarify and deepen responses. It is important that the questions are simple and brief but open in order to get the fullest answers. They should also be readily modifiable to fit different respondents while keeping the same meaning. Good interviews secure rich data which, in turn, help to achieve quality research.

It is beneficial for the researcher to do his/her own transcribing. Wengraf (2001) argues that:

The only point of doing the slow work of transcription is to force the delivery to your conscious mind of as many thoughts and memories as you can...while your mind has time to think fast and widely about the material and the event in which the material was gathered. (p. 209)

It is often not necessary to record everything in the transcript of the audiotape but the transcriber must avoid losing important data. After finishing transcribing, the transcripts should be returned to the participants for checking and making any amendments. In the data analysis stage, the researcher has to ensure that his/her interpretations are sound and fair by treating the data with considerable skepticism (Walford, 2001).

Lastly, validity involves a report written as “a valid account of the main findings of a study” (Kvale, 1996, p. 237). The report must not distort the findings. Although the qualitative findings may not be capable of generalisation, they



should accurately reflect what the participants said or did. In that way, trustworthiness is achieved.

Williams and Morrow (2009) emphasise three aspects of trustworthiness that good qualitative research must obtain. They are integrity of the data, balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation and clear communication of findings. Integrity of the data refers to clear description of research methods and analytic strategies; adequate quality and quantity of data collection; and sound interpretations of the data. Balance between participant meaning and researcher interpretation requires the researchers to manage the bias that results from their subjectivity. In order to do so, the researcher must remain self-reflexive in interpreting what the participants say. The researchers can know if this balance between subjectivity and reflexivity has been achieved using bracketing process, wherein the researcher becomes “aware of one’s own implicit assumptions and predispositions and [sets] them aside to avoid having them unduly influence the research” (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest member checking, that is, asking for participants’ feedback in the research process. The last component of trustworthiness of a study is clear communication of the findings. The researcher must clearly present what has been found and why it is significant. The outcomes of the study must answer the research questions and be discussed in relation to the existing literature (Williams and Morrow, 2009). Nevertheless, an interview research project still cannot be considered valid and trustworthy if it is not ethical. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **Ethical considerations**

This research complies with the *Ethical Conduct in Human Research and Related Activities Regulations* of the University of Waikato (2008) and my ethics application was approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee. As women in leadership is a sensitive topic in Vietnam and since interviews involve interpersonal interaction, the ethical issues of informed consent, confidentiality and harm had to be very carefully considered.

### *Informed consent*

The first ethical principle that shows the researcher's respect for participants is asking for their permission before the research can be started. This is frequently referred to as their informed consent, that is, the prospective participants' agreement to take part in a research project after being provided with all the relevant information that influences their decision to participate (University of Waikato, 2009). The participants are normally informed of the purpose of the research, its procedures, risks, benefits, confidentiality and the right to withdraw (Burns, 2000; Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Informed consent requires that participation be voluntary, so may not be obtained by either "explicit or implicit coercion" (University of Waikato, 2009, p. 4). In other words, participants must be volunteers and they who "feel free to choose whether to take part, know all the details about what their involvement will mean and give their consent" (De Luca & Cooper, 2009, p. 2). The researcher must seek permission from gatekeepers prior to approaching the prospective participants for their informed consent. I did not have to obtain access permission from the university. Requirements in Vietnam are not the same as in New Zealand.

### *Confidentiality*

Another important ethical issue is confidentiality, meaning that the identity of the participants and the information they provide is in no way disclosed unless the participants give their permission. This is significant because there are circumstances where data are publicised without participants' permission and this may cause them harm. In addition, researchers must pay great attention to preventing "unauthorised use, access, modification, or disclosure of personal information" (University of Waikato, 2009). Confidentiality is essential in research on sensitive topics because of the potential risk of harm to participants who will refuse to cooperate if confidentiality is not clearly guaranteed (Kimmel, 1988 as cited in Cohen et al., 2007). Privacy is a human right that must be protected, and guaranteeing a participant's confidentiality avoids violating their privacy (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, I did not tell anyone who was involved in my research. Their names were changed and their departments were not

mentioned. The findings were discussed and presented in such a way that their identities could not be deduced. Also, the university remained anonymous. Only my supervisor and I had access to the data collected. The transcripts of the recordings and a copy of the paper were kept in a locked filing cabinet and stored in my personal computer with a secure password. After a period of five years from the completion of the research, notes will be destroyed and recordings erased.

### *Protecting participants from harm*

Non-maleficence (do no harm) is regarded as “a guiding precept” in research (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 58). “Harm” is defined as “pain, stress, emotional distress, fatigue, embarrassment, and exploitation” (Waikato University, 2009, p. 8). Respect for participants means their safety must be guaranteed. Therefore, researchers are responsible for identifying possible harm as well as establishing procedures to minimise the risk to potential participants before asking them to take part. Also, it is necessary that a researcher discuss with participants any risk of harm or concerns that they themselves may point out (University of Waikato, 2009). As interviews intrude into private and personal spheres, emotional harm may occur (Arksey & Knight, 1999). A lengthy interview can cause fatigue and too much probing may result in stress and embarrassment. The researcher must be sensitive and vigilant to avoid harming the participants. Ethics are closely related to culture. Behaviour that is ethically acceptable in one culture may be unacceptable in another. Fortunately, I share the same language and culture as the participants so I understand the cultural protocols.

As I am a friend and work colleague of the women participants, we already had a relationship of trust. I suggested to them that if they were uncomfortable with any aspect of the research or if they had concerns with regard to how it might affect their employment and family life then I would be happy to discuss this with them and/or they could withdraw from the research. I also reassured them that they would not be identifiable in the report, nor would the university. One participant criticised and made negative comments about the authorities. I checked with her whether she wanted to share this sensitive information as part of the research; she agreed to do so. The next section elaborates the strategy for analysing the data.

## **Data analysis strategy**

Data analysis needs to be considered at an early stage of research design. According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), “data analysis is the process of moving from raw interviews to evidence-based interpretations that are the foundation for published reports” (p. 201). Since this was qualitative research, a thematic approach was employed to analyse the descriptive data.

Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This strategy is similar to the content analysis suggested by Cohen et al. (2007). Ezzy (2002), however, points out that content analysis begins with predetermined categories whereas in thematic analysis, “categories are ‘induced’ from the data” (p. 88). According to Mutch (2005), thematic analysis most commonly used with qualitative data. It is also called “grounded theory” because it develops the theory inductively (p. 177). Ezzy (2002) is in agreement with Mutch (2005) that these two strategies utilise similar techniques to analyse data. However, grounded theory employs “theoretical sampling in which emerging analysis guides the collection of further data” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 87). Ezzy (2002) suggests using thematic analysis either at an early stage of grounded theory analysis or when data collection is completed.

Literature on thematic analysis shows that researchers employ various strategies which utilise different techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007; Ezzy, 2002). Boyatzis (1998), for example, proposes a three-stage-analysis which involves deciding on samples and design issues, theme and code development and code use and validation. Braun and Clarke (2006) elaborate a six-step-process which includes data familiarisation, initial codes generation, themes searching, themes review, themes naming and finally, reporting. However, the authors note that none of these stages should be considered “unique to thematic analysis” since some of its phases resemble the phases of other kinds of qualitative research (p. 86).

Data familiarisation is the initial step the researcher takes when he/she starts to engage in the analysis process. As interviews provide verbal data, they need to be transcribed. Transcribing is the first task in the analysis and interpretation of the interview materials (Wengraf, 2001). Although transcribing can be time-

consuming and frustrating, it “can be an excellent way to start familiarizing yourself with the data” (Riessman, 1993 as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

The next stage concerns the coding of data (transcripts, notes, memos), which is defined by Kerlinger (1970) “as the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories” (cited in Cohen et al., 2007, p. 369). It should be noted that categories, themes and concepts can be predetermined by consulting the literature of the field or, during the process of data analysis, by looking at the initial transcripts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These categories, themes and concepts are then modified and checked against new data in the subsequent interviews. Once the data have been coded, the next stage is retrieving or searching for themes. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest systematically examining themes and concepts, grouping and comparing them, and seeking patterns and their linkages. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend using tables, mind-maps or theme-piles to organise the coded data into themes.

The next phase involves reviewing and refining the themes which might need to be integrated or separated (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher re-reads the entire set of data to ensure the themes can answer the research questions and no data have been missed. Otherwise, further recoding is needed until a satisfactory thematic map is attained. In the following phase, the themes are defined and named. Each theme should tell a story which fits into the overall story that the researcher is telling about the data, and the theme must be connected with the research questions. It is important that the themes not overlap too much and that they be named concisely, in a punchy way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final stage involves writing up a report which conveys the story that the data tell in a manner that “convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). Essentially, the report must do more than describe the data and should make an argument related to the research question(s). Researchers may approach data analysis differently, but the ultimate aim is to achieve quality for their study.

## **Research Process**

In this section, the research process is presented. In the case of this study access permission was not required by the university. This is a normal practice in

Vietnam. Therefore, only the procedures related to the selection of participants, the interviews and data analysis are described.

### **Selecting the participants**

Choosing appropriate participants is important in assuring the credibility of an argument in research (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Being aware of this, I was very careful with my selection. Since my research aimed to explore women leaders' experiences, I chose participants who had held their positions for a minimum of three years. In other words, the leaders were experienced so that the data gathered could be rich and thoughtful.

In addition, I selected participants I knew, including some I had a close relationship with. Vietnamese people are not very open with a stranger about sensitive matters such as leadership, which is closely related to politics. I identified four potential participants on the Hochiminh City campus, including myself. Although I did not hold a formal position, I could be regarded as a leader with respect to my responsibilities as both a lecturer and a student advisor. The other two women were from the Hanoi campus. This was a disadvantage as I had to fly a long way to the capital and interview people I had met only a few times. However, it was of great benefit to have access to women from the head campus where staff numbers are much greater than at the southern branch and I expected that their leadership experiences would bring different nuances to this study.

My procedure for inviting the participants was to phone them and ask for their permission, explaining briefly to them the purposes of my research. To those who agreed I emailed the information sheet (Appendix 1) which provided them with the purposes of the research, the procedures in which they would be involved, their rights and the use that would be made of their information. After a few days, I phoned them back to arrange the date, time and place for the interview. I was pleased that five women were departmental and division heads who held either an administrative or academic position or both. This allowed me to collect a wider range of data on the different roles these women filled. Fortunately, I arrived home for the summer holidays when the participants were not very busy so all our interview arrangements were made quickly in my first contact with them. It came

as a surprise to me that the response to my selection of participants was easier than I had expected.

### **Conducting the interviews**

The interviews were conducted in the most convenient places for the participants. I went to one woman's home as a friend visiting after a long time far away. We were very happy to see each other. We chatted for some minutes before moving to the main purpose of the meeting. Another woman was interviewed in the university's guesthouse after lunch. She lives far from the campus so often stays in the guesthouse for noon break and waits for her afternoon classes. The other three women were interviewed in their offices. A friend interviewed me. Before each interview, I gave each participant two written consent forms (Appendix 3) and asked for their signatures. At first, most of them were astonished because this procedure is not common in Vietnam, where we need give only verbal consent. Signing a written form prior to the interview seemed to make them worried about the seriousness of the research and their role in it. I had to explain that this form showed that their participation was voluntary, that they knew their rights and what they had to do in the research. I assured them that they could decline to answer any interview questions. Finally, after some hesitation, all of them agreed to sign the form and each of us kept one signed copy. I also asked for their permission to record the interview and they were all happy with that. Each participant was individually interviewed in Vietnamese for approximately an hour, except for a quite short one which finished after 35 minutes. The interview questions (Appendix 4) were derived from my research questions, as follows:

- What are the leadership experiences of women leaders in higher education in Vietnam?
- How does culture shape their beliefs and perceptions about leadership as well as the way they lead?
- How do culture and the experiences of these Vietnamese women leaders affect their access to leadership roles and career advancement in higher education?

To make the conversation flow smoothly and coherently, the order of questions varied among participants. I also added probing follow-up questions to clarify ambiguous responses and to elicit more information about interesting points. I always took notes during the interviews in case the audio file was lost, damaged or technical problems occurred. This did in fact happen once during my first interview, when I forgot to check the battery and it ran down in the middle of our conversation. I did not notice until I got home and replayed the recording. Since I had notes, I decided not to interview the woman again, but I was more careful with the equipment after that.

Almost all the interviews were conducted informally like normal conversations, with laughter. This was natural as we were both friends and colleagues. Additionally, the issues touched upon were familiar to us both and we had much in common. One woman, however, was reluctant to answer some questions which she considered sensitive. This was the one that I had talked to a few times. Possibly our relationship was not close enough for her to really trust me as her refusal indicated that she was worried about the disclosure of information which might harm her. All the interviews were completed after three weeks.

### **Preparing the transcripts**

Transcribing is the first task in the analysis and interpretation of the interview materials (Wengraf, 2001). Although transcribing can be boring and time-consuming (Walford, 2001), it is “a crucial step in interviewing” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 365). I agreed fully with Walford’s (2001) comments on transcribing and sometimes grew frustrated as the sound quality was not good and I had to listen again and again. It took me about three hours to transcribe an interview. While listening to the tape and typing, I tried to think back about the interview and took notes whenever I found something new and interesting that needed more clarification. I then emailed the participants my questions and they all replied quickly and clearly. I did the transcription right after each interview when the event was still fresh in my mind. This helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the information and gave me the opportunity to reflect on my work. When each transcription was finished a complete copy of the transcript was returned to the participant for checking and she was asked to get it back to me by a designated



date with any concerns. No one requested any amendments. The transcripts were in Vietnamese and were afterward translated into English for the purpose of using the participants' own words in the research. Being aware that wrong translation would distort the data, I was very careful in selecting words and phrases and tried to convey the meanings of the responses as accurately as I could.

### **Data analysis**

I made multiple copies of the transcripts to facilitate the analysis process. The data were analysed using the thematic approach. As the aim of the analytical process in this study was to uncover the influence of culture on the women's exercise of leadership, the analysis was conducted in several stages to achieve valid and trustworthy results. I employed the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First of all, I read the transcripts many times to familiarise myself with the data and to refine the wording of my translation.

Secondly, I searched and coded the information systematically according to the themes mentioned in the literature review, using different coloured pens. This helped speed up my work later when I matched the coded data with the themes. I found many supportive data but some information did not fit in with any themes. Next, I re-read the transcripts carefully, took notes and highlighted interesting ideas. This helped me to look for new themes as well as to avoid missing any important information. At the next stage, I reviewed all the themes that emerged to see how they were related to the research questions and decided on the main themes and sub-themes before making a thematic map. After the themes were labelled, I was ready to start to report the findings and begin discussion of the data analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the findings of this study. The ultimate aim of the research was to investigate the impact of culture on the way women lead in higher education in Vietnam. Two crucial factors that were explored were indigenous and organisational culture. The research questions were:

- What are the leadership experiences of the women leaders in higher education in Vietnam?
- How does culture impact on their beliefs and perceptions about leadership as well as the way they lead?
- How do these Vietnamese women leaders' experiences and culture impact their access to leadership roles and career advancement in higher education?

I begin this section with some background information about the female participants. Then the results of the study are revealed with regard to indigenous and organisational culture. The former is addressed by giving the leaders' ages, their accounts of how they balanced work and family, their beliefs and perceptions about leadership and descriptions of their own leadership styles. The latter includes their experiences of the selection process and of stereotypical tasks. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the women's identities.

### **The women leaders**

The six women involved in the research all come from the north of Vietnam but now live in the two biggest cities in two different regions of the country. Their ages ranged from early 30s to mid-50s. They have been working in the university from nine to 15 years. The participants' length of tenure varied from three to six years. One woman had a Bachelors degree, three held Masters degrees and two had Doctoral degrees. They came from different disciplines but now held leadership positions at the same university. Three participants were Departmental Heads and two were Heads of Division who managed all the teachers and

academic tasks related to a particular subject in a faculty or department. The sixth one had leadership responsibilities but did not hold a formal position. Hoai was the only woman who did not teach. The others were responsible for both administrative and academic tasks, including teaching, personnel management, syllabus development and research. Apart from these responsibilities, two participants took part in the university's Trade Union's activities. All six women were married with children. It is noteworthy that four participants had young children and all six women's husbands went to work where some of them also held leadership positions. In general, these women were all knowledgeable intellectuals living in the most modern and wealthy cities in Vietnam, where the indigenous culture is likely to have less impact than in more remote areas of the country. In the following section, the themes that emerged under the umbrella of indigenous culture are presented.

## **Indigenous culture**

### **Leaders' ages**

The two youngest participants shared the difficulties they experienced in fulfilling their roles. It came to the fore that the leaders' ages had a substantial influence on their leadership practices regardless of their gender. In Vietnamese culture, the younger person must respect the older person. There are several elderly colleagues in Thu's Department. She regarded age as the factor that most affected her exercise of leadership. She explained:

I'm only as old as their children so I have problems assigning them tasks with my particular requirements. They have their own working style and if I want them to change it so that they can do the work more quickly and more effectively, they feel annoyed and think that I'm impudent and arrogant. (Thu)

According to Thu, old people are like leaders in Vietnamese culture. Therefore, age is as important as the position. She did not feel comfortable working with older colleagues:

Although they are my staff members, under my management I have to be very careful when communicating with them. They sometimes don't do their tasks well but it's very hard for me to talk to them. I can't criticise them frankly but have to find ways to talk with them. This causes me stress since I can't act as a leader should. Obviously, I assign you a task and if you don't complete it, I have the right to criticise you so that you can do it better next time. However, it's hard to criticise an older person. I have to find ways to mitigate the problem before talking to her so that she finds it acceptable and understands my good will. I used to criticise an elderly colleague frankly in the hope that she would be more responsible for her work but she was displeased. She complained with other colleagues that I was too rude to be accepted, just because I'm younger than her. (Thu)

Hoai was another young leader but she was the oldest in her Department so she did not encounter the same problem with her staff members as Thu. However, Hoai acknowledged that her age was a hindrance that silenced her voice:

As I often work with older people, I must be very careful in speaking about my opinions. The length of tenure and lived experiences affects our voice in the meetings. There's a Vietnamese saying that "The older the ginger, the more pungent it is" which means that the older you are, the more experienced and knowledgeable you become. In contrast, youth is associated with the conception that "A colt likes kicking" if he or she talks too much or often gives opinions. (Hoai)

Hoai had to think twice before giving her opinions because in Vietnamese culture the elder's ideas are expected to be listened to first and respected. Therefore, if the younger person has a different point of view about a particular problem, he or she would feel uncomfortable speaking out. Hoai commented:

Working in a public institution with old traditions and deep-rooted influences makes young people's new ideas very difficult to be accepted. Therefore, length of employment and accumulated experiences as well as [career] achievements are necessary for someone to raise their voice easily. (Hoai)

Obviously, the custom of respecting the older person had an adverse impact on the women's leadership, especially if they were young. However, in contrast, the older participants found their age an advantage in their leadership practice. Tam was the oldest participant, in her fifties. She found that:

I don't have any disadvantages regarding my leadership roles. My opinions were often respected and it's easier for my requests to be accepted. Of course, they must be reasonable but I feel that my work is more favourable when I deal with younger colleagues. (Tam)

Aside from the leader's age, the women's duties for family management strongly influenced their work.

### **Balancing work and family**

The findings revealed that balancing work and family was the biggest difficulty for most of the participants although their husbands were all supportive. Even Tam, whose children were adults, complained that:

As a woman leader, the biggest disadvantage is family. Traditionally, women have to manage nearly everything in the home. Doing the housework, bringing up the children and making money for the family are my responsibilities whilst I also have to do my job well. Obviously, it's very hard work for me. In general, it's essential for a woman to be supported by her husband. (Tam)

Phuong was in a different circumstance from Tam, but she was in agreement with her colleague:

Balancing work and family is the biggest problem for me and I'm still trying to sort it out... I haven't been able to resolve this problem as my children are school age and I have to do everything for them. (Phuong)

The majority of women in this study shared the housework with their husbands. Hoai was proud of her husband who held a high position in his own institution but still helped her with the housework. She stated:

At weekends, he often does the shopping with me. At home, he does the washing and plays with the children while I'm cooking or cleaning. He allows me to take part in Youth and Trade Union activities. He did not complain when I arrived home late or I had a meeting at the weekend. I can go out to meet with my colleagues. What's more, whenever I have problems in my work, I share with him and he often advises me how to deal with it. (Hoai)

Mai's husband was very supportive, too. She usually went away to teach at other branches of the university located in different provinces but he did not complain. On the contrary, he took the children to school and did the housework while she was away. Thu was happy as her husband was very sympathetic to his busy wife and always tried his best to support her. He collected the children after school and when she went on business, he took over her duties. Lan's story was somewhat different. Her husband usually did the cooking and looking after their child when she had to work late. However, he did those things unhappily, thinking that they were not his duties. Lan said:

My husband often compares himself with an Osin" [which means a housekeeper who is hired to do the housework] because he has to do women's sort of work. I felt upset when I heard him saying so. Apparently, I work very hard to earn more for our family, but he seems not to appreciate it. (Lan)

Only one woman was supported in theory only. Her husband did not share the housework because he was also very busy with his work. In general, these women all felt that they were very lucky with such support. Undoubtedly, it was taken for granted by the women that looking after family, including child-rearing and doing housework, were their duties. Mai felt sorry as she had only a little time for her family because she was so engaged in her work. Apart from her, the other women were aware that balancing work and family would restrict their work involvement and career development, but they accepted it. Thu said:

After work I have to take care of my family and the children so I hardly have any time for research work. (Thu)

Hoai shared the same view:

Women have to look after their family so they don't have as much time for work as men. A woman who holds a position is limited in fulfilling her roles. She can't go away on business or participate in long training programmes, for example. (Hoai)

Apart from domestic duties, the heavy workload also made balancing work and family really hard. It was remarkable that Phuong could undertake so many tasks in her job:

I am responsible for personnel management, examination, monitoring and observing young teachers' classes. In addition, I teach and do scientific research. Every academic year, the standard amount of teaching periods is 280 and another 80 periods for doing research. In recent years, I do more than 500 teaching hours a year, irrespective of teaching in-service classes in different campuses far from the university. (Phuong)

Phuong was a woman with a strong personality but she acknowledged her difficulty with regard to managing her domestic duties. The reason was that:

My teaching has been very stressful for three years. I teach all week including Saturdays, extra evenings, summer term, etc. Therefore, I virtually have no time for family. (Phuong)

At first glance, one may not agree with her explanation because if she reduced her teaching workload, the problem could be solved. In actuality, it was not that simple. The university has been implementing its innovation strategy shifting from a stage-based to a credit-based system. There were too many classes and her Division did not have enough teachers. She had no choice but to teach a lot. Phuong had a Doctorate degree and she was aware of the importance of doing research to her career advancement, but so many obstacles impeded her. She said:

Before 2006, when I didn't have to do much teaching, I used to do research and write articles for some magazines. However, to be honest, I have neither done any research nor written an article since 2007. Of

course, it is partly because I can't manage my time sensibly, and I have some personal problems which I can't tell you now. (Phuong)

When asked about her future plan in terms of her career advancement, she could not give an answer because:

...it also depends on my husband and children. I feel that our relationship has been rather intense now so I have to adjust it before I can think of my career advancement. These are my honest words. (Phuong)

Similarly, Mai was submerged in her many responsibilities. Apart from such responsibilities of a Head of Division as personnel management, teaching programme and materials development and doing research, she taught about 400 periods/year on average. In addition, she managed to develop her capacity by taking different courses in management and teaching skills. She supported the teachers in terms of enhancing their specialisation and improving their teaching methods. She also found opportunities to cooperate with other organisations inside or outside the university for the development of her Division. Mai was a very active woman who studied abroad for thirteen years and had worked for many international organisations in rural training and development.

The Rector recently assigned Thu to be a member of the Development Strategy Committee. She was a young woman who currently held two positions at the same time but further study in the near future was her plan. She would try to earn a Doctoral degree because in her opinion:

A head of a division must be the best at her specialisation. Only if the staff members admire her specialised competence, will they support her. (Thu)

The women in this study had huge workloads, and balancing work with their families was very difficult, and their efforts were extraordinary. Even with supportive husbands who helped share the housework, they acknowledged that they still had the main responsibilities in looking after their families.

Unfortunately, that was not all that they had to strive for. Collectivism is a feature of Vietnamese culture. Accordingly, individuals do not live for themselves but for their community as well. Therefore, the women had to live, work and contribute



so well that they could be awarded various titles of merits such as “Advanced Labourer”, “Excellent Teacher”, “Emulative Soldier”, and “Good at school tasks and household tasks Woman”. The word “soldier” seemed unsuitable to address the administrative staff but it has been in use since the Vietnam War. Specifically, in order to become a teacher of excellence, Mai had two of her lectures observed by some senior academic leaders and teachers. They would then meet to evaluate it and each member gave his/her own final assessment. Good results solely would be insufficient for the teacher to gain the award. She would need to successfully present her own research project. Good relationships with colleagues were also necessary for the candidates to be voted as an excellent teacher. Hoai failed to be granted the “Emulative Soldier” title just because she got fewer than the required number of votes, which was reliant on the number of the Council members. These merit titles were of great importance to these women for without them the Departments or Divisions they led would not be entitled to “Excellent Collective”. More importantly, this title was related to the amount of money the Department would be rewarded at the end of the fiscal year. Whether the Department or the Division was an excellent collective or not was related to its staff members’ individual interests. Therefore, the leader was under pressure to strive for the titles and/or encouraged her staff to achieve them. The women were working hard for both themselves and for their staff.

Regarding the “Good at school tasks and household tasks Woman” merit, Tam said:

In Asian culture, men were always leaders and women were followers as they were weaker. Women were not valued properly. Now when their value is recognised, they are put at a disadvantage of meeting two requirements at the same time: good at public and private work. It’s so hard to be good at everything! (Tam)

There were other disadvantages the women faced in their careers. All of them took maternity leave, and the impact was considerable. When Hoai delivered her twins, she left for five months and nobody took over her responsibilities so the work did not run smoothly. The internal regulations of the university stipulated that any staff member on maternity leave would be cut off from all the merit titles

because they were considered as not having completed their standard workload. Lan found this stipulation unsatisfactory. She recalled:

I didn't work for four months but my working hours in the rest of the year still exceeded the standard workload. However, I was not granted 'Advanced Labourer' title. It was not important to me but I thought that the regulation was unfair. (Lan)

The findings also indicated that the women put great effort into balancing work and family life. Thu employed a housekeeper but she did all the shopping, collected the children and cooked by herself and spent most of the night-time for her family. In her opinion:

The most important thing is to arrange work sensibly. I try to finish all my work during the time I'm at school. In case of urgency I have to work after my children go to bed. (Thu)

Hoai was assisted by her mother-in-law in looking after her three very young children. According to her, a woman should sacrifice for both work and family to get them balanced, but in general, "in order to fulfill their roles, women always try harder than men" (Hoai).

Tam's two children were grown-up and they were virtually brought up by her. She was very proud of them as they were both excellent university students. Since most of the time Tam worked very far from home, and travelling by motorbike was too tiring and dangerous for her, she often stayed in the guest-house for a few days a week. She revealed:

I had to find ways to teach my children how to study and live independently so that I can concentrate on my work. (Tam)

It was apparent that too much work was put on these women's shoulders and they had to try much harder than men to fill all their roles. There is a Vietnamese saying that "Men build the house and women manage the home". This means whether a family is happy or not depends on the woman. The indigenous culture with its prevailing deep-rooted values and beliefs restricts women's freedom and

their advancement. This culture, together with the socialisation process, influences male attitudes towards women. Phuong pointed out:

Vietnamese women's access to leadership is limited because of some people's outdated viewpoints. For example, a husband may not accept to do the cooking after work, bathe the children or teach them to study at home while his wife was receiving company clients till late at night. Traditionally, housework is thought to belong to women. Many women I know divorced after earning their Doctoral degrees. That's a woman's disadvantage. (Phuong)

The indigenous culture and the socialisation process also impacted the participants' self-beliefs and perceptions about women's leadership and consequently on their behaviours.

### **Women as leaders**

The participants held similar perceptions of women and leadership. They all believed that women could be good leaders if they have leadership abilities. The fact that nowadays, many women hold important positions such as Vice State President and as Ministers illustrated Hoai's viewpoint: "Gender is not an important factor in leadership but the leader's qualities are" (Hoai).

It appeared to the women that leadership traits were essential for an individual to become a leader whatever gender that person was. However, the majority of the women thought that men possessed qualities that made them better leaders than women. Mai said: "Men are more assertive and their vision is further" (Mai).

Tam also believed that: "Female leaders are intelligent although their IQ is lower but they don't lead as well as males" (Tam).

According to the women, woman leaders were more emotionally affected in their work, and that was not very good for leadership. Phuong stated: "Normally, men are rational whereas women are prone to their feelings when tackling work. Sometimes, it's not good" (Phuong).

Male attributes such as assertiveness and daringness were appreciated in leadership practice. In Lan's opinion, women were careful and vigilant so they often hesitated at decision-making. She explained: "A leader must be assertive and take the opportunities quickly because usually, opportunities come once only" (Lan).

Nonetheless, most of the women found their stereotypical characteristics beneficial to their work. Softness, consideration, care and sentiments for instance, were considered important in their leadership. It was apparent that caring and sharing were considered female attributes and were exhibited in the women's beliefs and perceptions about leadership. Tam said:

A good leader has to master the features of the institution, know what advantages and disadvantages each staff member has to share with them. Sharing here is not necessarily financial but it might be spiritual. (Tam)

Hoai shared the same point of view: "I think a good leader has to live for other people, think of others ahead of himself or herself. .... Good leaders have to care for everybody's interests" (Hoai).

It appeared that these women perceived males to be superior in terms of top leadership positions, for example, the members of the Rector Board. They thought that leading a big organisation was too much for a woman but leading a Department, for example, was not a problem. Mai commented on her colleagues: "I think that the woman leaders in this university are competent and they are appointed appropriately. Almost all of them work well and enthusiastically" (Mai).

Although the participants believed males led better than females and women were limited by many disadvantages, they expected more women to become leaders. Mai explained that:

Their proportion [of female leaders] should be increased as the number of female students is going up. Further, gender balance can make work more effective because males and females view a problem from different perspectives and their viewpoints can be complementary. (Mai)

Hoai's opinion echoed Mai's: "It's beneficial to have female leaders in an institution as they bring a new gust of wind. Women can make only men's simple story more interesting" (Hoai).

The women's beliefs and perceptions about leadership were evidently reflected in their behaviours and significantly influenced by the Vietnamese culture.

### **The women's leadership style**

As discussed earlier, the women in this study believed that female characteristics such as softness and caring were their strengths and should be made use of in their leadership. As a result, these self-beliefs and perceptions influenced their behaviours. They all said they employed a democratic and participative leadership style. According to Tam:

...women are soft so they can lead more easily than men. In my Department, the teachers are all knowledgeable so in my leadership, I always treat them fairly, get on and share with them their difficulties.  
(Tam)

Tam's comment was rather confusing since she had earlier said women were not as good as men and not as intelligent, yet here she emphasised that softness is an advantage of women leaders.

These women were really considerate to their staff members, and they thought this was the decisive factor in their success. Tam thought it important to know the personal situation of every teacher in her Department and their difficulties, for instance, health problems or that they had very young children, so that she could share with them. In Vietnamese culture, this is not privacy intrusion but care. Mai said:

Most of the academics [in her department] are female so I must pay attention to work distribution (as they are married with small children) and their family circumstances. (Mai)

Thu usually consulted her staff members before making a decision. Most of her subordinates were female so she was very careful with her decisions, especially when they were related to their interests. She explained:

Women are very meticulous. They always want the fairest for all of their interests such as the class schedule, the number of working hours and the teaching location. These are peculiar to the teaching of a paper. Some people are not co-operative as their interests are not met. It's because they ask for more than they should get. Interests should be equal for everybody.  
(Thu)

The teachers in Thu's Division always wanted their own requirements for their teaching met. For example, a teacher would like to have her classes scheduled from 7am to 12am. She would not accept a class which finished late at 6.30pm. It was too difficult for a leader to satisfy all her staff's requirements. Although Thu tried as hard as possible to be fair, she would sometimes get tired and bored as some teachers were unhappy and non-cooperative with her. As a leader, Thu managed to help her staff earn more by organising extra classes for them in the evening or at the weekends. Tam talked about fighting for the interests of the teachers in her department. The previous year the teachers had worked very hard in summer schools but the internal regulations meant they were paid at a very low rate at 30,000 – 40,000VND<sup>2</sup>/period. She had to fight for their interests. First, she proposed higher pay for a teaching period in a leaders' meeting. As it was not accepted, she talked to the director trying to convince him. Finally, her attempt was successful. He decided to pay 45,000 - 50,000VND<sup>3</sup> for a period of 50 minutes. She explained that the conflicts between the teachers' interests and the university's leaders "emanate from their lack of consideration for the teachers. They are not close enough to understand the teachers' wants, expectations and their actual life" (Tam).

It appeared that Mai and Thu demonstrated a transformational leadership style. They strongly encouraged innovation and paid great attention to mentoring and coaching their staff members. Mai said:

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<sup>2</sup> 2 – 2.7 NZD

<sup>3</sup> 3 - 3.7 NZD

I'm training some teachers to help me with my management tasks. I'm going to develop the skill subjects which are associated with the professional training of this university. Further, I want to find more opportunities for co-operation with other institutions or agencies to develop internal training programmes for the young lecturers. Their teaching skills need improving to meet higher working requirements so that they can integrate into the regional and international training trend which puts more emphasis on skills than knowledge. (Mais)

Thu was pleased by the teachers who put efforts to improve their specialization and teaching skills. In addition to encouraging them to upgrade their study, she offered them opportunities to teach advanced classes which were not only better paid but also a form of training. Thu and Mai both exhibited some typical characteristics of transformational leadership, which emphasises inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration.

The women in this study were influenced by their gender roles. Evidence of stereotyping and social expectations was obvious in their descriptions of their leadership behaviour. Females were expected to be soft, tender and caring, and all these leaders demonstrated a leadership style that was in accordance with their stereotypical attributes. Hoai asserted that:

There are problems that can't be dealt with straightforwardly but tactfully and sensitively. This is my experience drawn after a long time holding this position. I've gradually found out that if a problem is tackled straightforwardly, it'll become more difficult. I used to criticise frankly a staff member who didn't complete her tasks in a meeting. But it didn't result in her working better but discouraged her. Instead, I should have talked to her privately and more politely. (Hoai)

Not only Hoai but Thu and Tam also chose to meet with their staff members privately when they were not satisfied with these subordinates' work. It could be said that if a female leader acted contrary to her socially expected image, the reaction from her followers would be negative. Thu was the only participant who experienced non-cooperative attitudes from a few teachers, but it did not matter to

her. In general, all the women received support from their family, colleagues and the senior leaders.

The section that follows will present the findings with respect to organisational culture, including selection process and stereotypical tasks.

## **Organisational culture**

### **Selection process**

Vietnam has a highly centralised educational system. Positions in the public sector are rarely advertised but assigned from senior management. Consequently, the Rector of the university is appointed by a Minister and all other positions are decided by the Rector. All these women's appointments or promotion followed that procedure. They were asked first by a leader whether they would like to take the role. Then there was a meeting of the staff members of the potential new leader, chaired by a senior university leader. Normally, opinions about the candidate would be elicited in the meeting followed by voting for him/her. Tam was frank when she talked about the selection process at the university:

The nomination of candidates for promotion at our university is not very democratic. In most cases it is imposed and then legitimised. Actually, the candidate has already been chosen and then given out for public approval. These promotions or appointments are often relationship-based. They are not as pure as my case. (Tam)

Tam meant that she was appointed because of her ability, not because of a relationship. It is not uncommon in Vietnam that some people are employed, promoted or get a position just because they are relatives of a powerful person or have a close relationship with somebody on the selection board. Lan revealed a similar case at her university. A newcomer was appointed deputy head of a department because she was the vice director's sister-in-law.

Lan talked about her departmental meeting to nominate a candidate to replace the incumbent who was going to retire soon:



It looked very democratic as we had a meeting and each of us could nominate anyone in our department that we thought appropriate for the post. That was an opportunity for me because I have been working there the longest, for eleven years. However, I knew that the oldest man had been chosen and I thought that I wouldn't be able to do the work as well as him. I was busy with my family and it would be time-consuming and tiring to travel back and forth for meetings and teaching (we have two campuses in two different locations) if I held that position. I was the first one to nominate the man and he finally got promoted. (Lan)

These women did not plan their career development as their promotions were unexpected. This was clearly shown in Phuong's circumstance:

I was appointed Head of Division as the incumbent retired. At that time I was the Deputy Head and all the other teachers in our division were very young and had only graduated a few years ago. Therefore, I made up my mind to accept the suggestion quickly. (Phuong)

Tam had a similar experience:

It was the Director who asked for my opinion (about the position) and persuaded me that I would become a good leader as I held an MSc Degree and I was a good lecturer and additionally, I had a lot of life experience. (Tam)

Tam also revealed that at that time she was chosen because she was the oldest and most qualified teacher in the department. The choice was likely to be made based on the subjective evaluation of the employers and the specific situation of the department. There is no doubt that among other selection criteria that were not publicised age was a very important factor in considering the potential candidate for the position. Thu's circumstance was quite unusual as she was promoted because her leader had died of a traffic accident. However, she had worked really hard and had been given a trial before she got promoted:

I didn't plan to get my current positions [she was both Vice Head of Department and Head of Division]. I always think that I should do all the assigned tasks well. I was appointed as my ability and efforts were

recognised and when there was a vacant position, I was chosen. Of course, before I was appointed, I was challenged with a lot of tasks which were related to my current roles. (Thu)

Except for Tam and Lan, other women in this study did not complain about the selection process as they thought it was unproblematic. Phuong was the only one who found the proportion of women leaders at this university low whereas the other participants considered it reasonable, even quite high. According to them, the Rector Board was supportive and considerate to the young female cohort. Thu asserted:

As a female leader, I have more advantages in my work. This university has more male leaders so women are often prioritised. Our proposals or requests are often approved more quickly and easily. (Thu)

Thu was not being contradictory when she said that the proportion of women leaders at this university was appropriate while acknowledged that they were tokens. Simply, she took that fact for granted.

Hoai did not think that the promotion or appointment was discriminatory. She added:

I've been working here with three different directors in quite a short time. Even though each has his own working principles they all create good working conditions for us. (Hoai)

Phuong, however, expressed her disappointment: "I don't have any advantages as a female leader. In contrast, I face a lot of constraints and barriers (though the social culture has changed a lot)" (Phuong).

Domestic duties were only one of the barriers but Phuong refused to talk about other causes. She said:

Women leaders are restricted by many other things and that's more important than family problems. I think you can also feel it, but I don't know how to explain. It's also a sensitive question. (Phuong)

Mai had attained her doctoral degree abroad and she recognised the social prejudice which privileges male leadership and therefore, facilitates the selection or promotion process for men. Nonetheless, she took it for granted as “women are restricted by their multiple roles”. It is interesting that some of the female participants also had prejudiced attitudes towards women. Mai and Thu were in charge of their Division’s personnel employment and they both preferred employing men to women teachers. Thu had to take into consideration how to assign work appropriately for the staff members who were childrearing. Moreover, family care limited female academics’ undertaking their delegated tasks. She asserted:

If two candidates are equally good, the man will certainly be chosen. It is thought that the man will have more advantages to do the job whereas the woman’s contributions will be restricted by many things. This thought is deeply rooted in everybody’s mind and I’m not an exception. Our division has too few men and the female teachers are too busy with their family so they are unable to do much work. (Thu)

Mai’s Division was in the same situation, but she commented from a different perspective:

Our division currently has too many female teachers, approximately 90% whereas we have many teaching locations that are very far from the university. It’s very difficult to allocate these classes for woman teachers. They have to look after their family. Further, men appear to be more effective in work discussions since they view things from a different perspective which can be complementary to women’s. Additionally, since our [in-service] students can be experienced leaders and officers of the enterprises, gender balance [to have both male and female teachers] will be better than woman teachers only. (Mai)

Every year, the university advertises its need for teachers and the selection criteria are available through the public media. However, the appointment criteria for junior and senior positions were not widely publicised. Mai revealed the criteria that were applied for candidates of a Faculty Dean or a Head of a Professional Studies Department and higher positions:

First, the candidate must hold a Doctoral degree. Second, his/her specialisation is suitable for the roles. Third, this person must have skills and experiences in management. Last, the candidate must have good relationships with his leaders and colleagues. (Mai)

“At this university, the number of female Doctors is not more than two hands’ fingers”, Thu counted. They all held a certain position but the highest role was Vice Dean of Faculty. When the research data were collected, the first woman Dean of Faculty was appointed (Ngoc Linh, 2010). The under-representation of female senior leaders was attributed to women’s multiple roles and a male-dominated occupation. Thu explained:

For a technical university, that proportion of female leaders is appropriate. We have a lot of women administrative managers though female Heads of Divisions are scarce. One of the reasons is that women must spend a lot of time on childbearing and rearing, looking after the family, so they don’t have much time for work, especially doing research. A Head of a Division must be the best at her specialised subject but as she can’t invest much time and energy in it, her career advancement will be restricted. (Thu)

Phuong thought of women’s low aspiration:

The number of women who strive for high academic degrees is low. Of course, women face a lot of barriers but I find that many of them don’t really want to advance their study. (Phuong)

Mai elaborated: “Many women don’t want to become leaders because of their multiple roles” (Mai).

The university offered time support for the female staff members who had children under 36 months old. The teachers were reduced 10% of their standard number of teaching hours. The working time for female administrative staff was more flexible. They could start work 30 minutes later and finish half an hour earlier. Although this support is important, it is insufficient. The women have to find somebody to look after their children at home or send them to kindergartens. No daycare is offered for staff at the university.

Tam gave another reason:

This university has a distinctive feature. It is a technical institution so its strength belongs to men. Female students are rare. It's the nature of work that creates more male leaders. Women only hold junior positions. I find that fact normal because of the nature of the work. (Tam)

Obviously, the selection process, including the appointment criteria and the occupational segregation, together with women's multiple roles influenced their self-beliefs about leadership and their aspirations. As such, organisational and indigenous culture overlap and one influences the other.

### **Stereotypical tasks**

These women all believed that only men could lead a technical university. This was clearly explained in Tam's comments:

The proportion of female leaders is reasonable as this is a technical university. Women can only lead the departments where no specialised subject is taught, like administration, library, foreign language centre and finance. These areas are not directly related to the professional training. (Tam)

It is important to note that the departments and divisions that the women participants led all had more females than males except for Phuong's Professional Division. Many girls do not choose to enter technical universities as they think that these fields are hard, and unsuitable for them. They are often directed by their parents to pursue a course in economics, finance or diplomacy for example, which are considered to be most appropriate for women. Gender stereotypes thus affect occupational choice. Thu thought that the senior positions required a high academic degree or title and management capacity at the macro-level, and no women could meet those requirements to be appointed. She said:

A female Dean of Department has to sacrifice so much time for her family. A higher position (than a Dean) is too much for a woman with a family and there are few women who can spend so much time on their work. (Thu)

The socialisation process and the tradition that a technical institution must be led by a man lowered the women's self-confidence. The fact that all the members in the Board of Rector were males was thought normal. Hoai stated:

This is a technical university so there are more specialised male lecturers. They have more potential to be promoted than women since leaders at this university must be specialised in a professional subject. There is no such outstanding woman here [on Hochiminh City campus] who is able to hold a position in the Director Board. (Hoai)

Phuong agreed:

Until now, no woman in this university is able to fill the roles in the Board of Rector. (Phuong)

However, she refused to talk about the causes, for "this is a sensitive question". Thu revealed important information with respect to the organisational structure of the university:

In the list of planned cadres for the positions of Rector and Vice Rector, there were some women but the shortlisted were all men. A woman was wanted with regard to gender balance but it was impossible. It was the University Council who decided the shortlist and the members were all male. (Thu)

Thu knew this since all leaders from Departmental and Division level were eligible to be consulted about the potential candidates. Lan was the only one who questioned the omission of women from the Board of Rector. She believed that women could do well if they were assigned that position. She said:

Being Rector is probably too difficult for a woman, but why can't we think of a female deputy? That would be an exception but it's a necessary breakthrough. Let's give women an opportunity to prove themselves. (Lan)

These women were not motivated to advance their career since another opportunity for promotion at this university was impossible, except for Phuong, a

head of a professional division. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, Phuong had no future career plan because of her family responsibilities. Being a woman leader is by no means simple.

## **Summary**

This chapter has reported the findings of the women's leadership experiences in a higher education institution in Vietnam. These experiences revealed that culture strongly influenced the women's behaviours, self-belief and perceptions about leadership. The patterns and themes that emerged from the data provided by the six female participants were ordered into two broad categories, namely indigenous and organisational culture.

The findings indicated that culture was a barrier to the women's leadership practice and their career advancement. Specifically, the women encountered more challenges in filling their roles when they were younger. Age appeared to be a very important factor in the exercise of leadership and also in the consideration of a potential candidate for a particular position. Old is Gold! Balancing of professional and domestic workload restricted the women's career progression. Research work was one of their main responsibilities and research productivity was significant to the enhancement of their academic title but they had virtually no time for it.

The selection process made them passive and unmotivated to advance their career since they did not know when and whether they would be promoted. The stereotypical tasks also contributed to their lack of aspiration. The women accepted it as a matter of fact that men must lead technical institutions as they considered males were superior in these fields although evidence about prejudiced male attitudes was not clear in this study. The impact of gender stereotyping on the women was clearly illustrated in their belief that a good leader should be caring and sharing. The findings also indicated that the women employed a democratic and participatory leadership style. Some of them were attempting to be transformational leaders, though they encountered a great deal of difficulty and disadvantage in enacting their roles. Apart from the huge workloads and domestic responsibilities, they were under pressure to achieve titles of merit for the sake of themselves and the collective interests of the institution. This would also help to

prove their worth. Finally, in spite of being trapped in the organisational culture and the wider indigenous culture, most of the participants in this study were satisfied with their current positions. They still appreciated women's ability and wanted more female leaders although they believed men led more effectively.



# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

## Introduction

This study investigated the impact of culture on women leadership in higher education in Vietnam. The findings indicated that both the indigenous and organisational culture substantially influenced the female participants' exercise of leadership and also contributed to the poor representation of women in senior positions. Whilst women and educational leadership is well documented internationally, research in this field is rare in Vietnam. This scarcity tacitly supports the commonly held belief that equity has been achieved in this country, which masks the persistence of gender discrimination and social injustice. This study is expected to contribute significantly to the small body of literature on women and educational leadership in Vietnam and to raise more scholarly concern in the field. Also, viewed from a cultural perspective the findings of this study have significant implications for a newly developed cross-cultural approach to educational administration and leadership. Cheng (1995) considers the inclusion of the cultural elements in the study of educational administration "not only necessary, but also essential" (as cited in Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p. 2). As culture affects leaders' thinking and behaviours (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996), it is crucial in the interpretation of "how and why leaders in different cultures do what they do" (Walker & Dimmock, 2002, p. 1).

This chapter discusses how the elements of the indigenous and organisational culture impacted on the women's perceptions and beliefs of leadership and their practices in comparison with the discourses on woman educational leaders. The former is elaborated in the section that follows.

## Indigenous culture

### Leaders' ages

Evidence from this study suggests that leaders' ages strongly influenced the women's exercise of leadership. Whilst being seen as beneficial to older leaders, age was an obstacle to the younger ones. The cultural value of respect for older people is also found in Samoa (Strachan, 1999), Thailand (Hallinger &

Leithwood, 1998) and Hongkong (Walker, 2002) and can cause dilemmas for leaders. The young leaders in this study shared similar experiences with the principals in Thailand, where “status norms of seniority remain stronger than institutional authority” (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998, p. 131). Cultural norms, for instance, would prevent a younger and less senior Thai leader from making critical comments about one of his/her older teachers. In Vietnam, the culture dictates it should be the older person who gives orders, makes requirements of and criticises the younger ones, but not vice versa. Therefore, if the women operate contrary to the culture, their behaviour may not be accepted and they may be judged negatively. Moreover, harmony in their relationships with colleagues was another cultural value that the Vietnamese women wished to achieve. Reconciling this dilemma put the leaders at odds with their colleagues and as a result, they experienced discomfort and dissatisfaction with fulfilling their responsibilities. However, in trying to resolve the tension, the women had no choice but to respect the culture. Strachan’s (1999) study made a similar finding. The Samoan principal in New Zealand, for example, had to learn to act “differently in two different worlds: her own Pacific Island world and the wider world of education (mainly European)” (p. 318). The women in this study also had to find their own ways to work with older colleagues. It was important for the leaders to get the work done whilst not violating the cultural norms.

This culture of age respect can result in consequences for leadership practice irrespective of the leader’s gender. Firstly, the young women in this study found it difficult to act as a leader should and this consequently affected their work effectiveness. Secondly, it lowered their self-confidence, as being young was a constraint that kept them silent. Thirdly, the findings of this study also revealed that age was one of the factors taken into account for a leadership position and this may limit the selection opportunities for young people, who are often considered inexperienced and whose voices are not easily accepted by older people. In reality, many young people are highly qualified and have proven themselves to be good leaders. Moreover, experience alone is insufficient for leadership (Bandiho, 2009). The perception that “Old is gold” is becoming outdated but still discourages young people who aspire to leadership (Tran, 2010). Respect for age and maintaining relationship harmony are significant cultural values that have

considerable impact on leadership. However, it is not simple to change or challenge these deep-rooted values, so young leaders need to be prepared to manage the dilemmas they are likely to face in their work. Joining a leadership network to share and learn from other leaders' experiences may help with this.

### **Balancing work and family**

The findings of this study indicated that balancing work and family obligations seriously constrained the women's fulfilling their roles and advancing their careers. This finding is unsurprising as work/home tension is a barrier to women elsewhere in the world (Akao, 2008; Court, 2004; Davis & Johansson, 2005; Dean et al., 2009; Nguyen, 2007; Qiang et al., 2009; Truong, 2008; Vali, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the women in this study were overwhelmed with huge workloads and domestic responsibilities, resulting in high levels of pressure. This can be traced back to the socio-cultural norms assigned to Vietnamese women. Obviously, these women leaders had to shoulder the dual burden of responsibilities in their workplace and at home and were under great pressure to meet the norms which forced them to place family and collective's interests ahead of their own (Schuler et al., 2006). Vietnam is affected by both Confucianism and Socialism in terms of gender roles. Historically, the former assigned women "the values of hard work, chastity and proper behavior, and focused more on women's roles as daughters, mothers and wives" (Schuler et al., 2006, p. 386). Domestic duties are associated with women whereas men are considered the head of the family. Childbirth, breast-feeding, teaching children and caring for husbands and elderly relatives are among the "heavenly mandates" assigned to women (Truong, 2008, p. 19). These feminine roles are praised and socialised through mass media, schools and families and establish "the model of ideal womanhood" (Truong, 2008, p. 19) which guides women's lives. All the participants in this study felt lucky to have their husbands' support because they knew that other women might not. The women were also grateful to their husbands when they thought of themselves as not fulfilling their roles as good wife and good mother. They believed that though housework could be shared it was always their major responsibility. Surprisingly, these were the feelings of women who were successful and independent. Undoubtedly, Vietnamese socio-cultural norms

including the traditional gender roles impinged on the women's self-perceptions about their responsibilities and consequently inhibited their participation in the public sphere. Nowadays, the model of Confucian gender roles is less influential in Vietnamese society but it is still persistent, especially in rural and remote areas.

Vietnam was ruled by feudalism for over a thousand years. Although it has been overthrown, its remnants are still lingering, especially gender prejudices (Vietnam Embassy, 2001). Women had a very low status as the feudal ideology looked down on them and only respected men. This outdated concept still exists and it is an obstacle to women's efforts to access leadership, especially in elections (Tran, 2001). In a socialist society, women's values are recognised and displayed. It is normal to see them enter the public sphere and assume important leadership positions. Nonetheless, socialism emphasises the responsibility of women for both family and nation. Therefore, such campaigns as "Three criteria women" (study actively, work creatively, and raise children well and build happy families), "Good at national tasks, good at household tasks" (Schuler et al., 2006, p. 386) and "Family of Harmony" are very popular in Vietnam. Historically, Vietnamese women were honoured with "eight gold words" by President Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnam wars: Anh hung, Bat khuat, Trung hau, Dam dang [Heroic, Indomitable, loyal, capable] (24H.COM.VN, 2008). This tradition was maintained after the liberation. In the innovation period which started in 1986 with the opening of the economy, the Vietnamese Communist Party praised women's qualities by another eight words: "Trung hau, Dam dang, Tai nang, Anh hung" [Loyal, Capable, Talented, Heroic]. Merit was not only the encouragement but also the recognition and appreciation of the significant roles that Vietnamese women had played in the long history of the nation.

In order to encourage women to develop their qualities and capacity, the emulative campaigns are deployed by branches of the Vietnam Women's Union and the Trade Union all over the country. As the women in this study worked in the education sector, the merits they strived for were "Good at school tasks, good at family tasks Woman", "Teacher of Excellence", "Emulative Soldier" and "Advanced Labourer". Interestingly, the reporting of merits has not been documented in educational leadership literature, although there are many socialist countries in the world. In Vietnam, merits motivate people to work for the

betterment of the individual, the organisation and society as a whole. However, this means women are overloaded with both domestic and professional work. As leaders should be good examples, the participants in this study were expected to achieve these merits, which placed more work pressure on them. It should be noted that with regard to merits, women are assigned responsibilities unequally as compared to men, who do not need to strive for any title. Schuler et al. (2006) point out that with the “Three Criteria” campaign the Women’s Union encourages women to improve themselves while neglecting men’s involvement. This is claimed to be “an approach solidly rooted in traditional belief systems which conceptualize male morality and men’s personal qualities as in-born, in contrast to female virtues which must be acquired through training beginning in early childhood” (Rydstrom, 1998 as cited in Schuler et al., 2006, p. 392). For gender equity to be achieved, it is crucial to include men and to address their roles.

Since the domestic sphere is closely associated with Vietnamese women, it is unsurprising that for the women in this study family was normally prioritised over their career. Similar perceptions and behaviours are adopted by the women in China (Qiang et al., 2009) where Confucianism originated. Female principals in Court’s (1997) study in New Zealand also took it for granted that “women, rather than men, should give priority to home and family responsibilities” (p. 25). All the women in this study were married with children and anyone who could not juggle their multiple roles would make sacrifices for her family. This is inconsistent with some US studies, which show women administrators stay single, divorced or widowed (Shakeshaft, 1987), and many English head teachers remain childless or have only one child (Coleman, 2002). However, whatever women prioritise, either family or career, or whether they attempt to balance both, they are disadvantaged. The role conflicts women face and their extraordinary efforts to cope with them must be widely recognised by the society. Although public awareness of gender equity in Vietnam has been promoted substantially (Vietnam Embassy, 2001), women need more support and assistance, not only from their family and colleagues but also from government organisations, especially the Vietnam Women’s Union and the Trade Union. More importantly, what should be done to ease women’s burdens when the views held towards their prescribed roles are

embedded in the culture, which is resistant to change? Coleman, in the context of her research in the UK (2007) suggests:

There is a need for cultural and structural shift that would provide support for women (and men) with family and home responsibilities, freeing up more of their time and energies to devote to their work as leaders. At the same time, changes would also be necessary in the work environment to create a culture that recognizes the validity and importance of employees' family responsibilities. (cited in Bassett, 2009, p. 9)

These suggestions are true for Vietnam as well. The process of cultural change takes time (Dimmock & Walker, 2005), and it requires the participation and cooperation of many authorities, agencies, organisations and policy makers. The Vietnam National Assembly did not endorse the draft amendment of the gender equity law which would allow men to take one-month's paternity leave. In the current law, only women can take a four-month-maternity leave. Article 32.g in the Law of Gender Equity stipulates that a male worker is "created favourable conditions for...full paid leave and allowances" when his wife gives birth (National Assembly, 2006, p. 13). The time allowed is not prescribed, so the worker and the organisation where he is working must negotiate. Normally, approval for his request for leave is made on the basis of the organisation's particular situation at the time. For example, if nobody in the company can cover the man's work, he will be able to take only a week's leave. As this article is not specific, it is implemented differently in different organisations. To avoid confusion, time must be specified in the law. Paternity leave should be encouraged and stipulated by law. In the work environment, the internal regulations of the organisation must not disadvantage women, especially when they are on maternity leave. In the university being researched in this study, the female academics were reduced 10% of their standard workload per year for childrearing until the child turned three years old. That is a considerable support for women. Nevertheless, it was unfair to the women when their merit was withdrawn however hard they tried to work in that year.

The above concern was also raised for women in Papua New Guinea (Vali, 2010). In agreement with Coleman's suggestions, Vali (2010) recommends changing

“male’s perceptions towards women’s traditional roles and place in the society” (p. 128). In fact, specific activities are being implemented in Vietnam. For example, in order to bring about changes in the strong beliefs of many Vietnamese men regarding domestic duties the national television station broadcast an educational programme which showed why and how husbands should share household chores with their wives. More programmes like that are necessary to shift both women and men’s beliefs about traditional gender roles.

Culture is changing in Vietnam as a result of the economic and educational development of the country, together with the globalisation process. Changes in beliefs about women’s ascribed roles are most noticeable in the increasing proportion of women leaders in politics and other sectors. Male attitudes are changing, too. “More and more men shared family responsibilities with women” (Vietnam Embassy, 2001, p. 5). As mentioned earlier, the man is traditionally the master and the breadwinner of the family, in Vietnam and in many other countries. However, this study did not support the findings of a Turkish study which indicated the husband’s loss of face if his wife is more successful than him (Celikten, 2005), or opposition to his wife’s taking an appointment offer leading to family violence, as in Melanesia (Akao, 2008). Neither was there a clear indication of prejudices or gender discrimination from male colleagues and male senior leaders. Therefore, these findings are not consistent with other research, which reports overt and covert discrimination (Akao, 2008, Coleman, 1996, 2002, 2005; Shakeshaft, 1987; Vali, 2010). One may disagree with this point on the basis of this study’s findings, as two husbands were reluctant to do the household chores. Also, it could be argued that the men on the Rector Board were very supportive because they knew the women could not be a threat to their positions. One could also notice one woman’s refusal to answer several questions she considered sensitive and this may imply unfairness but she did not want to take risks. However, these assumptions are not firmly grounded on obvious and sufficient evidence. Although the findings of such a small study like this cannot be generalised, positive changes in male attitudes are pleasing. Importantly, women’s traditional gender roles need to be re-socialized so that they are more confident to pursue their professional roles and can be better represented in an organisational hierarchy.

### **The perception of women as leaders**

The study's findings indicated that the Vietnamese indigenous culture, particularly the traditional gender stereotypes, influenced the women's beliefs and perceptions about leadership. Most of the participants acknowledged particular advantages of being a female leader which were similar to those perceived by their English counterparts (Coleman, 2003). For example, it was easier for them to approach their staff and students and to emotionally share and empathise with them about the difficulties and unhappiness in their family and work. Whilst seeing female attributes, for instance, softness and accessibility, as women's advantages, the female participants in this study believed men to be better leaders because of their innate traits. Assertiveness, emotional toughness and willingness to take risks were among the male characteristics which were considered more appropriate for leadership. Unlike some previous research on female leadership style (Coleman, 2003; Lyman et al., 2009; Shakeshaft, 1987, 1993), this study found no evidence of the argument that women are better educational leaders than men. The women's association of leadership with individual qualities reflects the principles of trait theory, which claims that certain traits should be possessed by leaders (Coleman, 2005).

In this study, women perceived themselves to be easily affected by their emotions and sensitivity in dealing with work, which they saw as not good for leadership. A similar perception is prevalent in Turkey (Celikten, 2005) and also in China (Qiang et al., 2009). Turkish women are seen as inferior to men because they are "naturally emotional, making them unsuitable for leadership positions" (Celikten, 2005, p. 212). Similarly, Chinese women's character images such as "emotional, careful and prudent" do not match the competence that an administrator has to possess and it is believed, therefore, that women cannot adapt as well as men to leadership roles in schools and in higher education (Qiang et al., 2009, p. 98). Although the female participants in this study appreciated male attributes, they did think women had the ability to be good leaders.

One possible explanation for the belief of men's superiority over women is that, the women perceived they were negatively affected by their feelings in tackling problems at work. Caring for subordinates' interests and trying to maintain



relationship harmony were tasks which required them to be very careful, considerate and meticulous. Their leadership experiences indicated that they could not operate contrary to the traditional gendered stereotypes, and trying to meet the cultural norms prescribed to them resulted in conflict and was at times stressful. These women worked in a technical university which is considered a male preserve. With less expertise in the field than many of their male colleagues (most of the participants did not come from technical disciplines) they apparently felt less able and consequently less self-confident. This interpretation is supported by Shakeshaft (1987), Coleman (2002, 2005) and Cubillo (1999), who claim that women's lack of confidence is likely to be the result of their unfamiliarity with a working environment where leadership is expected to belong to men. It would seem there is a need in Vietnam for a stronger representation of female students and women leaders as role models in a male-dominated arena. This is not simple, however, because the ideal model of womanhood which associates women with many heavenly mandates "is used to guide girls in choosing appropriate occupations in society" and "...women also self-consciously plan their lives in accordance with this model" (Truong, 2008, p. 19). Gender equity should be taught and supported in schools so that the impact of the traditional model on women's orientation on their career and lives can be changed.

### **The women's leadership style**

As discussed earlier, gender stereotyping influenced the women's personal beliefs and perceptions of leadership, and this in turn affected their leadership behaviour. This study showed that a democratic and participatory leadership style was adopted by the women. Collaborative decision-making processes and people-orientation are at the core of their leadership. This finding echoes numerous studies on women educational leadership styles (Franzén, 2005; Hall, 1996; Lyman et al., 2009; Morris et al., 1999; Neville, 1988; Ouston, 1993; Shakeshaft, 1993; Stelter, 2002). It is interesting to find the democratic and participatory practice of leadership in a Vietnamese technical university, given the centralised hierarchical structure of the educational system and the highly male-dominated environment. It is the stereotypes which associate women with care and consideration that possibly account for their leadership style. This explanation is supported by Noddings (1984 as cited in Coleman, 2003). It could also be argued

that respect for others is an important cultural value in Vietnam and democracy is a principle underscored in a socialist country so consultative decision-making is emphasised in leadership. Despite cultural differences, similarities in terms of women's leadership styles can be found in the US and Greece (Lyman et al., 2009). Female principals in both countries are people and relationship-oriented, and their commitment to collaborative decision-making process is "an expression of their values, including care and respect for others" (Lyman et al., 2009, p. 123).

The findings also revealed that the women in this study reported they used a transformational leadership style as they encouraged innovation, considered individual needs and emphasised mentoring and coaching their staff members. These leadership behaviours are congruent with the four primary constituents of transformational leadership established by Bass and Avolio (1994): idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. Although this finding needs more supporting evidence, these women were demonstrably proud of their ability to be good leaders. As Lyman et al. (2009) point out, women's common "values of inclusion and connections...are important to leadership", and community concern and care are essential to children's education regardless of leaders' gender (p. 124).

It is interesting to find that though the women in this study regarded masculine attributes as more appropriate for leadership they did not integrate them in their leadership style. This finding does not support many authors who draw scholarly attention to androgyny in their studies (Coleman, 1996, 2000; Cubillo & Brown, 2003; Davis & Johansson, 2005; Hall, 1996; Morris et al., 1999; Oplatka, 2006). It could be argued that the women were locked into the feminine image which was expected to match their gender stereotypes. If they operated contrary to social expectations, they would be negatively evaluated. This supports the claim that leadership is not gender-neutral.

The following section discusses the impact of organisational culture on the women's advancement and aspirations to leadership, including selection process and stereotypical tasks.

## **Organisational culture**

### **Selection process**

It is necessary to reiterate that Vietnam has a highly centralised bureaucratic system so its appointment procedures are very different from those in non-Eastern societies. This system, theoretically, has its selection process based on meritocracy, as in Singapore (Morris et al., 1999), and on democracy. This study found that the selection process was found unproblematic by the majority of the participants. One possible explanation is that these women leaders had not experienced any problems in attaining their positions. For all of them, the path to their career advancement was favourable and involved similar steps. They were offered a vacant position that needed to be filled. If they believed they could undertake the responsibilities and took the offer, an approval meeting with the staff of the department was held and chaired by a senior leader. Those attending voted and the candidate got the position. The procedures they had to go through were quite simple since applications and/or interviews were not required. Moreover, they all believed that they were promoted because of their ability. This finding is in agreement with Akao's (2008) study but inconsistent with many scholars who claim that women face discriminatory attitudes from male authorities in recruitment and appointment (Coleman, 2002, 2005; Evetts, 1994, Hall, 1996; Shakeshaft, 1987).

In spite of the women's positive opinions about the selection process, this study indicated a lack of democracy and transparency in the appointment procedures. In principle, middle management is appointed by senior authorities and the process has to be fair, democratic and must follow formal procedures. It is compulsory that there is a meeting and subsequent voting for the shortlisted candidate. However, though the recruitment criteria for new academics are publicised, the appointment criteria for the post are not announced, but are articulated only in the decisive meeting. This selection process, particularly with the staff participation voting for their prospective leader, demonstrates some democracy but it has shortcomings. For example, whether the candidate is supported or not is likely to depend on how good his/her relationship is with the voters. This is unsurprising, as establishing good relationships with his/her senior authorities and colleagues is

one of the criteria for a leader. Nonetheless, this subjective judgment can result in inappropriate appointments that do not put merit at the centre of the selection process. In addition, as a female participant revealed, the candidate had already been selected so what was done afterwards was simply intended to legitimise the procedures. Therefore, many people just took the candidate for granted as they knew that the voting results could hardly alter the already-made decision. This clearly undemocratic process may well create relationship-based promotions.

The findings of this study also implied that this selection process had a negative impact on the women's career advancement. As the vacant posts were not advertised and applications could not be made, the women could be deprived of the opportunity to access leadership both inside and outside the university. In addition, the process can demotivate those who aspire to leadership because their appointment or promotions are unexpected. This finding is similar to that of research on women's career paths in Bangladesh, where positions are scarce because they are available only "on the retirement or resignation of incumbents" (Sperandio, 2009, p. 148). Almost all the women in this study had been promoted in such circumstances and had not planned their career advancement. Therefore, it can be argued that the women's progress to leadership was "accidental", as in Melanesia (Strachan et al, 2010, p. 68), and to some extent, their achievements were attributed to "luck rather than capability" (Brown, 1997, p. 114).

This appointment process necessitates a change. In October 2010, the first public higher education institution publicised two vacant posts for vice directors (Tien Dung, 2010). The Rector of the Academy explained that this public announcement would both offer the institution more opportunities to make their choice and enhance the image and competitive capacity of the Academy's human resources. There are some precedents for this process in the education sector. The Ministry of Education and Training publically recruited a ministerial deputy. Subsequently, two provincial and one municipal Departments of Education publicised their need for many school principals and vice principal positions. This could pave the way for a more competitive but democratic selection process, especially when educational institutions are autonomous.

However, there is an indication of sex discrimination concerning the age criterion for male and female candidates. The Academy would not accept applicants aged over forty for women and fifty for men. In special cases, the selected person would not be over forty-five years old for women and fifty-five for men. The retirement age policy for women apparently influenced the selection criteria. A ten-year gap means that women are disadvantaged because their potential to contribute to the organisation was considered more limited as they get older. This argument is supported by Qing et al. (2009), who observe that a similar retirement policy makes it difficult for Chinese women over 50 to be promoted because it closes their “access to senior posts in educational leadership...despite the rich working and life experience they now have” (p. 96). This is true of Vietnam as well (Truong, 2008). Nguyen (2010) argues that women’s earlier retirement age is a tremendous waste of labour potential, increases the cost for social insurance [pension] and affects social justice.

In the draft Gender Equality Law, sixty was proposed as the retirement age for both sexes in Vietnam but it was not endorsed (Truong, 2008). There is no doubt that Vietnamese women are doubly disadvantaged with regard to age for their career advancement. On the one hand, appointment opportunities restrict young people because of a culture which respects older people and associates them with knowledge and experience. On the other hand, the unequal retirement age limits older women (Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2009). Moreover, women live longer than men in Vietnam. It could be argued that this policy contributes to persisting sex discrimination in the society and therefore, needs to be altered. Male and female workers should have the same retirement age. Nevertheless, to accommodate individual women’s health and living conditions, female workers should be able to make a decision for themselves to retire from the age of 55 to 60 and this should not affect their pension. Nguyen (2010) suggests taking peculiar features of particular jobs into consideration of retirement age policy; for example, jobs that require good health or affect workers’ health should have earlier retirement age.

The appointment process revealed considerable problems but was considered normal by most of the women participants. The “rules of the game” as an aspect of organisational culture clearly influenced the women’s perceptions: it was “the

way we do things around here” (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1998, p. 129). In addition to the above, stereotypical tasks influenced the women’s self-beliefs about leadership and their aspirations.

### **Stereotypical tasks**

As discussed previously, Vietnamese girls are oriented and socialised to live in accordance with their gender stereotypes and a model of ideal womanhood. Females tend to choose professions that match their stereotypical attributes so that they can employ their strengths. They also prefer jobs that allow them more time for family. Occupational stratification therefore, is persistent. In Vietnam, technical careers are considered as men’s domain and the rarity of female students at the university in this study demonstrated this perception. Consequently, all the women participants insisted that a technical institution had to be led by men. That women occupied only 5% of leadership positions at the university was a very modest figure but was not questioned. Moreover, the fact that women led only the departments which did not have specialised subject teaching, such as administration, the library, the foreign language centre and finance, reinforced the women’s beliefs. Recently, the first woman Dean of a professional faculty had been appointed, and this was seen as groundbreaking. Additionally, this university has only had men on the Rector Board. These features of the organisational culture were taken for granted by the women and lowered their self-confidence and career aspirations. They believed that no woman was able to make an exception and their career advancement to a higher position was virtually impossible. So gender stereotyping had a powerful influence on the women’s self-belief and perceptions of leadership.

The women’s particular view about leadership in a technical university supports Dasgupta and Asgari’s (2004) findings that local environments (that is, their organisational cultures) could powerfully shape “women’s nonconscious beliefs about their ingroup” (p. 642). They assert that the more women are exposed to female leaders, that is “counterstereotypic ingroup members” (p. 655) in their working environment, the more their automatic gender stereotypes are modified, even though they may have no motivation to change such beliefs. Meanwhile, seeing and interpreting female leaders’ success as achievable for themselves and

other women “may further contribute to nonconscious stereotype change” (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004, p. 655). These conclusions once again emphasise the need for female role models.

## **Summary**

The discussion in this chapter was theoretically and practically consistent with much of the literature on women and educational leadership. Specifically, the women leaders’ experiences and career progress were strongly influenced by the selection process, their efforts to balance work and family and their self-perceptions of leadership. As this study viewed women’s leadership from a cultural perspective, its findings offer significant contributions to the existing body of research in the field. First of all, the political system might be similar to other nations, but the culture is unique. Therefore, cultural impact on leadership practice varies in each country. A unique finding in this study was the merit awards that the women tried to achieve. It appears paradoxical in Vietnam that women are disadvantaged in many aspects of life but at the same time they are expected to be superwomen. Women suffer from gender prejudices as a consequence of the feudal ideology and Confucianism. Meanwhile, they were also honoured in the long history of the nation’s resistance to foreign invasion and in the innovation period. Today, Vietnamese women are encouraged to continuously uphold their heroic tradition by achieving the merits. However, the outdated perceptions about gender roles and prevailing norms deep-rooted in the culture prevented their advancement. It is unsurprising that the women in this study had a heavy workload due to the effort involved in balancing family responsibilities with their work.

In a culture that underscores the respect for age, the younger leaders faced obstacles in their practice. When women get older, age once more limited their opportunities for promotion. Although there was no clear evidence of sex discrimination in the woman participants’ experiences, it existed in the selection criteria with regard to male and female applicants’ ages. It is very common in Vietnam that the age requirement for female candidates is lower than that of their male counterparts. A concern raised is whether an age criterion violates the law or

is the employer's right. Also, whether or not it is a result of the retirement age policy needs to be clarified.

This study indicated that the indigenous culture has a very significant impact on the women's beliefs and perceptions about leadership; and this impact was replicated by the organisational culture. The selection process lacked transparency and democracy but appeared unproblematic to most of the women. In addition, gender stereotypes shaped their views on leadership and the way they led. They considered male attributes more appropriate for leadership and thought that only men could lead a technical university. The women's self-confidence and aspirations were doubly lowered as the consequences of the two different levels of the culture. Socio-cultural norms including traditional gender roles together with stereotypical tasks and the male-dominated working environment all influenced the women's leadership practice. These contributed to the under-representation of female academics in leadership position at the university; and this was taken for granted by the women.



## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

### Introduction

This study explored how culture affected the women participants' leadership experiences and shaped their beliefs and perceptions about leadership. A phenomenological theoretical framework underpinned this qualitative research. The six women participants in the study were personally interviewed in Vietnamese. The transcripts were afterwards translated into English and analysed employing the thematic approach. The leadership experiences of these women leaders in higher education in Vietnam showed that culture strongly influenced their beliefs and perceptions about leadership as well as the way they led. Culture also affected their access to leadership roles and career advancement. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings of the study. Next, some recommendations for improving the situation are presented. Further research is suggested after some limitations of the study are considered. The chapter ends with a final conclusion.

Using a cultural lens, this study has uncovered the hidden obstacles that the women in educational leadership faced. First, this research suggests that the small numbers of women in the senior educational hierarchy are a consequence of a patriarchal culture. Leadership is still dominated by men in Vietnam and this dominance is most prominent in the male preserve where the women in this study were working.

Today, women's values are widely recognised and respected in Vietnamese society. Women are constantly exhorted to uphold their traditional qualities in the period of innovation. However, they still suffer from gender inequality and discrimination. Outdated patriarchal attitudes and perceptions about gender continue to be widespread in a considerable proportion of the population, especially men. A preference for men is persistent and deeply embedded stereotypes disadvantage women. Men are considered heads of their households whereas for women the most important role and responsibility is to manage domestic duties and maintain family harmony. Women commonly give priority to family over career. Having entered the public sphere, the women in this study encountered more challenges that required them to put extraordinary effort into meeting social expectations of a good woman and a good leader. The merit

awards they strove for assigned them more responsibilities and made it harder for them to balance their work and the other areas of their lives.

Although Vietnamese society is changing rapidly as a result of socio-economic development and globalisation, cultural shift is much slower. The women in this study were trapped in both the indigenous and organisational cultures. Such ingrained cultural values as respect for age and authority and the emphasis on harmony in relationships considerably affected their leadership practice. The women had been socialised to lead a life that was congruent with their gender stereotyping and this shaped their leadership perceptions and behaviour. Correspondingly, a participatory and transformational leadership was adopted that placed collaboration and care at the centre of their work. As a consequence of the patriarchal culture, the women considered male attributes more suitable than perceived female attributes for leadership. Male dominance in leadership in both the society and in their immediate environment reinforced that belief. That the women took their under-representation in leadership and the appointment process for granted demonstrated the effects of what Shein (2004) calls the tacit assumptions or unspoken rules of the culture prevalent in a given society which cause its members to be acclimated to their existence. This acclimation in turn consolidates the invisibility of the culture practice.

The findings of this study have significant implications for the improvement of women's representation in educational leadership and gender equality.

## **Recommendations**

In order to improve women's representation in educational leadership, great effort must be made in addressing a number of issues. Firstly, women should be encouraged and supported to participate in leadership. A specified quota would help but, more importantly, women should be prepared by being offered leadership preparation and training programmes so that they feel more self-confident and can function effectively once appointed. Also, women should become aware of the difficulties and challenges of the wide socio-cultural context and be ready to meet them.

In addition, mentoring women by providing them with tasks for management practice is of great importance to the preparation and development of a female cadre of leaders. The women in this study were not offered any preparatory or training courses in leadership. Neither did they have an opportunity to join forums or conferences on leadership. Experience alone taught them how to lead. If they wanted to improve their management skills, they had to spend their own time and money taking a course. It is recommended that the Vietnam Women's Union and CEDAW in collaboration with the MOET set up a network of national and international educational leaders to share and exchange knowledge and experiences in leadership as well as undertake joint actions. Vietnam has developed networks of "gender and energy", and gender consultancy cadres (Nguyen, 2007), but it has no network for women leaders.

In a context of change and strong cultural influences where experience alone is inadequate, training is fundamental to leadership (Bandiho, 2009). In order to eliminate the outdated concept of "Old is gold", for example, training and mentoring programmes should be offered to young leaders or leadership aspirants. These programmes will prepare them with the skills they need to cope with the enormous challenges of an increasingly competitive working environment. Additionally, organisational authorities must be open-minded and willing to appoint young female staff who are competent.

Apart from the development of supporting programmes and networks, the internal barriers to women's advancement must be changed. This study found that constraints caused by balancing work and family together with working in a male preserve lowered the women's self-confidence and career aspirations. Stereotypical tasks affect women's career choices. The number of female students at the university where this study was conducted is increasing, albeit slowly. The university has been diversifying its training programmes by offering various non-technical courses such as accounting and business administration. Additionally, advertising and consultancy campaigns before entrance exam season are attracting more female high school students. The increase of female students and the dearth of female academics in this technical institution highlight the need for more role models. In this respect, the university itself plays an important role in fostering and developing a cadre of women leaders. It is necessary that the university

specify this target in its innovation strategy and assesses its achievement regularly, for example, every two years.

Secondly, there is a general belief that gender equality has been achieved in Vietnam. As a result, actions designed to promote gender equity and eliminating sex discrimination are being neglected by many officials and leaders. A significant step would be to disseminate the Law on Gender Equality widely within the country to raise public awareness about gender issues. Women's roles and their contributions in all spheres of life and the barriers to their advancement should be publicised through educational campaigns. These campaigns could bring about change in both male and female attitudes to gender stereotypes. Domestic duties are not the sole responsibility of women and the conventional model of womanhood which confines and orients women's life should be challenged. As discussed above, it is essential to re-socialise gender stereotypes. Education and public media are of great benefit in this process. Families and schools are the most important places where knowledge about gender equity should be taught. Gender issues need to be included in the content of leadership training and mentoring courses. It is important that women's "heavenly mandates" such as childbearing, childrearing and family caring receive proper consideration from state administrative agencies at all levels, in all sectors and in the society as a whole, so that women leaders are evaluated fairly.

Furthermore, the Trade Union should include women's multiple roles in determining merit awards. Assessments of merit for women such as "Good at school tasks, good at household tasks" should not be taken too seriously. As discussed earlier, women are being assigned more and more responsibilities and therefore assessments of merit should be chosen in such a way as to encourage their endeavours.

Thirdly, although the appointment process as described in this study did not indicate sex discrimination, it revealed lack of transparency, and limited women's opportunities for career advancement. To ensure that leaders are appointed in a democratic way on the basis of their merits, it is recommended that available positions be announced and publicly available. There have been a few precedents in the education sector and they received a positive response from the wider community.

## **Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research**

As this is a small-scale study and the research setting represented only one of the institutions of higher education in Vietnam, there are some limitations that need to be taken into account.

Firstly, the university where the research was conducted has campuses in the two biggest cities in Vietnam so the findings cannot automatically be generalised to other universities in different parts of the country. However, they are indicative of the experiences of women in other higher institutions. Further, the context of a technical university, where men are predominant, might not be very similar to that of a non-technical institution and this could result in different experiences for female leaders and their perceptions of leadership. In this study, the lack of aspiration among women for advancing their position was a consequence of their belief that there were no leadership opportunities for individuals, especially women, in non-professional disciplines. It would be interesting to investigate the experiences of female leaders at a university of traditionally female dominated disciplines, such as the social sciences, and then make a comparison.

Secondly, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and then the transcripts were translated into English. Although my translation was the best I could manage, it is possible that some of the participants' ideas were not fully conveyed or were misinterpreted. However, I gave the participants both versions of the transcription to minimise this possibility.

Vietnamese women's direct leadership experiences in education are a largely undocumented phenomenon. The limitations of this study as well as the lack of information on women educational leaders in Vietnam necessitate more research. It is recommended that larger scale studies on the same topic be carried out to provide a clearer and more detailed picture of women leaders' work and life in higher education. A comprehensive understanding would assist authorities and policy makers in adjusting the laws on gender to mitigate the negative impact of culture on women's exercise of leadership in education. Additionally, more

appropriate strategies for empowering women can be developed on the basis of such knowledge.

Research should also be done to assess the influence that female leaders exert in higher educational settings, especially in technical institutions in Vietnam. This could bring about change in social perceptions of women's leadership and strengthen women's belief in their own capacity.

Studies need also to focus on men's participation in household chores and childcare to assess the effectiveness of the educational campaigns on gender equity. Also, it is recommended that researchers investigate women leaders' demands for leadership-supporting programmes and networks. These are beneficial for designing both the content and the mode of operation to best meet women's needs.

The difference in the retirement age for men and women is controversial. Some scholars claim it perpetuates sex discrimination, which is exhibited in the recruitment criterion which favours men in terms of age. According to the chairperson of the Vietnam CEDAW, however, this policy was re-examined and its appropriateness was confirmed by the government. Research should be done to re-assess the retirement age policy and its effects on women, to judge whether any amendments to the current law are necessary.

## **Conclusion**

This study showed that women's practice of leadership in higher education in Vietnam is profoundly influenced by the culture. While culture is an aspect of national identity that needs to be preserved and developed, its negative influences must be challenged and mitigated. As indicated in this study, different levels of the culture are interwoven, resulting in the pressures that were felt by the women leaders. Therefore, in order to change organisational culture, it is crucial that the indigenous culture change. For example, the public announcement of vacant leadership positions in organisations would not be rare and considered unusual if the same procedure were used for higher positions in the National Assembly and the Government. This process of change necessitates the close coordination of the National Assembly and state organisations, such as the Women's Union, Vietnam

CEDAW and the Trade Union, in establishing the laws related to gender. Vietnam's determination to promote gender equity has been translated into specific policies, national objectives and programmes; however, the implementation of these policies and programmes must be monitored regularly and inappropriate points must be amended.

This study has significant implications for promoting gender equality since it has unveiled covert barriers inherent in Vietnamese society. The impact of culture on the women educational leaders in the country's two largest cities raises concerns about gender issues in rural and remote areas where the residents are poorer and more culturally conservative. This study of women's leadership experiences in education paves the way for more research of this kind to empower women. Women's poor representation in educational leadership and gender equity in general, can be improved if the deeply-embedded assumptions about gender which underpin the culture are exposed and addressed.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1 – This information sheet will be translated into Vietnamese

### *Participant Information Sheet*



Dear Participants,

I am studying Master of Educational Leadership at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and this research is part of the degree. The research explores how culture impacts on women's leadership in higher education and I hope that you will be willing to help me.

As you are a female leader in this university, I would like to listen to you talking about your experiences as a leader. I would like you to share your beliefs and perceptions about leadership and how these factors influence your access to leadership roles as well as your career advancement. I will interview you and it should take no longer than an hour. I would like to record the interview with your permission and I will ask you to give consent and sign a written form prior to the interview. The information collected will be used to write a research report for my thesis and an electronic copy of the thesis will become widely available, as Masters theses are required to be lodged in the Australasian Digital Thesis (ADT) database. It is also possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the study. All the information about you and your responses will be kept confidential and only I and my supervisor can access it. The findings will be presented in such a way that you cannot be identified. Also, the university will be anonymous. The notes, documents and recordings will be stored for a period of 5 years before they are destroyed.

If you take part in the study, you have the right to refuse to answer any particular question, to check and make any amendments to the transcripts of your interview. You will be able to withdraw from the research up until the time you agree with your transcript by advising me. You can ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during your participation and you will be given access to a summary of findings from the research when it is concluded.

Please read through this information sheet carefully. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me at [ntl1@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:ntl1@waikato.ac.nz) or contact my supervisor at the address below:

Associate Professor Jane Strachan  
Faculty of Education  
The University of Waikato  
Private Bag 3105  
Hamilton, New Zealand.  
Email: [jane@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:jane@waikato.ac.nz)

Thank you very much for your help!

Ngan Thi Thuy Le

*Consent Form for Participants*



**How does culture impact on women's leadership in higher education? A case study in Vietnam.**

**Consent Form for Participants**

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study before analysis has commenced on the data or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out on the **Participant Information Sheet**.

I agree to participate in the research conducted by Ngan Thi Thuy Le. I also agree for the information to be used for the writing of the thesis, the publication of the articles and conference presentations.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_



Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Consent as Required**

I agree / do not agree to my responses to be tape recorded.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's name and contact information:

Ngan Thi Thuy Le

Tel: 0983329802

Email: [nttl1@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:nttl1@waikato.ac.nz)

Supervisor's name and contact information:

Associate Professor Jane Strachan

Email: [jane@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:jane@waikato.ac.nz)

**APPENDIX 3** - These questions will be translated into Vietnamese.

### **Guiding Questions for the Interviews**

1. Please share with me some of your background information in terms of age, marital status and education.
2. How long have you been working at this university? And how long have you been holding your position?
3. Please tell me how you got this position. What did you think when you decided to take this role?
4. What do you do in your job? What are your responsibilities?
5. What advantages and disadvantages have you experienced as a women leader?
6. What do you think is the biggest challenge you have to face in order to be successful in your job? What have you done to overcome it?
7. Whose support have you got to fulfill your role?
8. In your opinion, what are the qualities of a good leader? What is important to you in your leadership?
9. It is said that leadership is more suitable for men in our culture. What is your point of view about this perception?
10. What do you think about the proportion of women leaders at our university? In your opinion, what are the factors that affect this proportion?
11. How do you find your journey to the current position if now looking back at it?
12. What is your future plan in terms of your career advancement?

*Thank you very much!*

If necessary, there may be a follow up interview for the purposes of clarifying responses and asking for further details.

#### APPENDIX 4: Research timeline

<b>Month/Date</b>	<b>Tasks</b>
April	Writing proposal
June	Ethical application
June	Literature review
July	Methodology
August	Fieldwork
September	Data analysis
October	Findings
November	Discussions and conclusion
December 1st, 2010	First draft
February 25 <sup>th</sup> , 2011	Submit for examination